

Interviewee: ANDY OATES
Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS
Location: Nantucket, Massachusetts
Date: 1 & 2 October 1974
Media: AT2
Interview no.: 110
Transcription: Ellen Dissanayake, April 8-11, 2000; corrected by Mary Emma
Harris, April 20, 2000. Converted from Word Perfect by MEH, May
2015.

[BEGINNING OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

MEH: [LOOKING AT SLIDES] These masks were for-- Were these for Noah?

AO: Yes, these were for Noah. (UNINTELL) I can't remember whether I did anything for this production or not. I think I just did these photographs. They were by whom?

MEH: Who did these?

AO: Oh, god. It'll come to me. I've been trying to remember who did them.

MEH: How were these used in the play? I guess these were the animals on the Ark.

AO: These were the animals on the Ark, and I'm just trying to remember the way the stage was set up. It seemed to me that somehow the stage was rotating, and, of course, it was done in the dining room, which was a large space. You must have seen it when you were there. There were people, you know, just actors dressed in costume but with their own faces, and then these marvelous animals, these masks. The lion was especially wonderful. And the bear.

MEH: I was wondering – the way in the other photograph — Can you go back one?

MALE VOICE: No.

MEH: Anyway, the boards on the wall came through his teeth, in the photograph.

What kind of audience did you have for these plays?

AO: Well, there was, you know, the whole school would go to the production, and usually they were just for one evening. Sometimes we'd do them twice. And occasionally some people would come from Asheville, like to the concerts and to the plays. And from other schools in the area. Maybe a handful of people, like ten or twelve people from outside the community. And that's the lake, with Mae West in the background. I think that must be in the spring. The spring is just the most incredible thing there. I've always wanted to go back just to see that. One, you know, one day it's winter and then suddenly the next day everything is bursting out. Can you focus that a little bit better?

MEH: People who were at the college, like for a summer — not regular students — have said that there was an interest on the part of students especially in landscape and in the foliage at the college.

AO: Yeah. Well, that was very true for me. I was fascinated to me — There were two old apple trees, and I guess they were really very ancient at this point and not in very good health. But this tree, especially, was on the road between the dining room and the Studies Building and I photographed it many times. It just — the most personable kind of tree (LAUGHS). It has a few apples on it, but never very many. [NEW SLIDE] Oh, that's Tommy Jackson's Model A Ford. We used to go on tri — in fact, once Tommy and

Hazel and another girl and myself went to Folly Beach in South Carolina in this, and there were two seats in front and the rumble seat, and I sat in the back with Hazel and we both got terribly sunburned. You know, living in the mountains all summer you didn't realize how hot it was down on the coast. And we just sweltered. And at night we'd sleep in sleeping bags underneath the car. We slept one night in the state forest, and then finally we reached the coast and we slept on the beach. [NEW SLIDE] Oh, that's Madame Goldowski and her dog. That was Natasha Goldowski's mother.

MEH: What was Hazel Larsen's approach to teaching photography?

AO: I think that she was just very willing to see your point of view in what you wanted to do and try to help you promote it in any way possible. I mean she wasn't a disciplinarian in any sense of the word, although she favored not doing any tricks with either printing or manipulating a negative, but printing it straight and trying to compose a frame from the beginning. And we didn't have many – we didn't have much of a source of photographs to look at school. There just weren't — I mean the library didn't contain that many books. But she had the History of Photography by Beaumont Newhall and a book of photographs by Ansel Adams and one of Cartier-Bresson's books, and I especially liked Cartier-Bresson's photographs and the way he used a 35 millimeter camera. And I think that probably [NEW SLIDE] he had the most influence on my photographs at that time. Madame Goldowski feeding the ducks.

MEH: The ducks almost blend with the ice and the shadows. The — Callahan and Siskind felt when they were there that there was a certain mystique associated with photography, and that — I think they were astounded by the lack of a technical approach —

AO: Yes.

MEH: — they were accustomed to an Institute of Design.

AO: Yes. Right. Yeah. I'm sure they enjoyed their summer at Black Mountain, but I think that they were a little mystified by the whole thing. [NEW SLIDE]. Oh, that's Norman Solomon on the (LAUGHS) — and I think that's Merrill Gillespie in the background. Merrill Gillespie came from the same town that Nick Cernovich did in I think up in Iowa, Indiana, or something.

MEH: (INAUDIBLE). What do you remember about Norman Solomon at Black Mountain?

AO: (LAUGHS) Well, he was one of those madmen.

MEH: He still is.

AO: I remember when I had a gallery in Cambridge, he sent me some drawings that he'd done, and there were like five or six drawings. It wasn't complete enough to have a show or even to put them up. But I had a little portfolio and I kept them on the top of one of the print cabinets, and somebody was looking through them one day and said that they'd like to buy one. And he never communicated anything to me about price or anything. (LAUGHS) So I sold one for fifteen dollars — they were little tiny things. They were like wild sketches, you know, very, very, very simple

things, and I sold one. I was so pleased that I wrote to him immediately and sent him a check for the amount, and I got this letter back saying "You sold one of my drawings. For fifteen dollars." (LAUGHS) And then I got this whole series of hate letters from him for the longest time (LAUGHS). I mean, it never amounted to anything, and after a while he started communicating in a more friendly way. (LAUGHS). [NEW SLIDE] Oh, there's Wilma and her baby.

MEH: Very nice photograph.

AO: Yeah. Wilma gave a dance concert a day or two before she had her baby.

MEH: That's incredible.

AO: Yes. And she did this great whirling dance. Everyone was afraid she was going to have it right there. A beautiful costume that she made for herself, sort of like a medieval dress — a long velvet dress. [NEW SLIDE?] My cousin came to visit me once at Black Mountain. I think they were a little astonished by the whole school, and one of his questions was "Why do all the women have such short hair and all of the men have such long hair?" (LAUGHS) He'd never seen anything quite like that.

MEH: Did you conceive of yourself as a college?

AO: That I was — Yes, yeah.

MEH: You felt like you were at college.

AO: Well, I suppose so. I mean I don't think I really thought of it in one way or another.

MEH: (UNINTELL) looks like Willy there.

AO: Yes. It's an incredibly blue photograph, isn't it. [NEW SLIDE] And that's oh dear, why can't I think of his name. He did the masks.

MEH: I can find out from the program. Was he an art student?

AO: Yes, he was. He was a painter.

MEH: It's not Fiore.

AO: No, it's not Joe Fiore.

MALE VOICE: Paul Someone.

AO: It's a Greek name. [NEW SLIDE] People look so young and innocent.

MEH: Is that the same (OVERTALK)

AO: Yes, it is. [NEW SLIDE]

MEH: I really see Black Mountain now as being innocent compared to today.

AO: Yes. I think in a way it was.

MEH: Were there any drugs at Black Mountain at the time you were there?

AO: Not that I was aware of. People used to go to the local bar and drink beer, which was all that anyone could afford. And [NEW SLIDE]

MEH: Is that Victor Kalos?

AO: Victor Kalos, right.

MEH: So beer or alcohol was —

AO: Yeah. I don't think that was terribly important either. (UNINTELL).

MEH: (UNINTELL). [SEVERAL SLIDES IN SUCCESSION]

AO: Yeah, that's the first one I guess. The sheep.

MEH: (UNINTELL)

AO: Yes. And Victor worked on these with I think, if I'm not mistaken, with Donald Alter. Both of them worked on them together. [NEW SLIDE]. Very innocent looking animals, aren't they. [TWO SLIDES] The monkey with the teeth. Yes. [NEW SLIDE]. I'm sure that these were done all in the course of one or two days. I'm sure they didn't spend very much time doing them. [SEVERAL SLIDES IN SUCCESSION].

MEH; Why did you decide to graduate from Black Mountain?

AO; Well, I thought — Well, the real reason I think was that I thought that I would just stay on there forever if I didn't make some kind of a deadline for myself to leave, and it seemed to me that if you graduated that that was the finalization of your education, and then I would have to leave. That's really the way it worked out. My graduation was sort of a nightmare I thought.

MEH: How was that?

MALE VOICE: You were one of the few people who graduated from there.

AO: Well, there weren't very many. Well, you know, first Hazel and I wrote a letter to Albers and asked him if he would consider being my graduation examiner (LAUGHS). And he wrote a letter back to — He wrote a letter to me and to Hazel, and very different kinds of letters. He wrote to me a letter saying, "Dear Oates" (LAUGHS) "I find myself unable to, because of commitments, to return to Black Mountain to be your graduating examiner." A very brief letter, and very polite. And then he wrote a letter to Hazel saying, "Dear Hazel, How could you ask me to return to school.

Don't you realize – ", you know, that was the whole tone of the letter.

(LAUGHS)

MEH: You were students.

AO: Yes, right. So, then I had taken some of Hazel's photographs to Steichen at the Museum of Modern Art, and he said — and he wanted to use some. And they had a poster contest, you know, for the Polio Foundation, and he wanted Hazel to enter the contest, and she did. And he said at the end of my interview with him that, he said, he asked me what I did and I said I was a photographer, and he said, "Well, the next time you come why don't you bring some of your own photographs." So I think I did, and he looked at them and he bought two for the Museum collection, and then later on we wrote to him and asked him if he would come to Black Mountain to be my graduating examiner. And he said he would, because his brother-in-law was Carl Sandburg, and Sandburg lived right near Asheville so it was no difficulty for him actually to do that.

MEH: I had been curious as to whether Sandburg had been the connection. It was actually the Museum of Modern Art that was your connection.

AO: Yes, yes. I don't think at that point we realized that Sandburg was his brother-in-law.

MEH: Did you realize that Sandburg was there?

AO: Yes. In fact, at one point — not while I was there — Sandburg came to the school and did a recitation. But he mainly wanted to come and sing folk

songs, and nobody was interested in folk music at Black Mountain.

(LAUGHS).

MEH: That's right. Do you know when that would have been?

AO: When I graduated? When he —? Well, it was before my time and I don't know how much before my time.

MEH: Your graduation was at the end of the three years.

AO: Yes. Yeah. Right.

MEH: About '51.

AO: I'm going to write these dates down before you leave so I'll be able to tell someone in the future.

MEH: What did your graduation involve?

AO: Well, first there was the examination to be put into the — into what was it called? Well, it was being put into an advanced group, where you then could work on your own graduating project. It was a very formal and academic examination in all fields, and I don't think I did very well on it. I can't imagine that I did, but there were questions in mathematics and in languages and very much the sort of general test that you might get in an ordinary college. I wasn't prepared to do things like that, you know. But this was one of the qualifications to put yourself in the advanced division. I must have made a good enough grade to pass. At least I was allowed to go into the advanced division and work on my graduation project. At that point, you know, then, it wasn't necessary to attend any particular classes or do anything but work on your own project, and I set up as my project an

exhibition of photographs and a class in weaving during the summer session, teaching a class in weaving. And I did both. I think I had four students, four weaving students. One of them was Mary Bishop. Have you met Mary Bishop yet?

MEH: No.

AO: She was in Vermont.

MEH: This is James Bishop's wife?

AO: Yes. Well, they're not married any longer. I think I'm right. And she came to Nantucket last summer. It's the first time I've seen her since they left Black Mountain, and she's still weaving. (LAUGHS) And Judith — one of Ben Shahn's children was in my class, a little tiny girl at that point. I don't remember who the other two were. I remember their faces, but I don't remember their names. But I rather neglected my class, I must say. I was much more interested in taking photographs and making decent prints. I can remember spending hours and hours in Hazel's bathroom, which was the darkroom, printing. Then later we set up a darkroom downstairs and I spent like 24 hours in there one day. At one point I threw a whole batch of bad prints away, you know, that weren't fully fixed and everything, they were beginning to turn brown. And Bob and Sue Rauschenberg had come back to school, and he — I went to breakfast, and when I came back I had had this great wastepaper basket full of bad prints. It was gone, and I couldn't imagine what happened to it. And like years later Bob said, "Do you remember that day you were printing all night?" And he said, "Well,

anyway, I took all those prints out of that basket," he said, "because they were so fantastic, the way they were partly —" You know, they were partly fixed and parts of them were turned very dark brown and other parts you could see part of the photograph, you know, and other parts were completely gone. And he used them in some of his constructions, you know, his paintings.

MEH: You graduated in photography, not painting.

AO: Yeah, in photography. By the skin of my teeth, I think. There was a terrible oral examination in front of the whole faculty, at which — I mean and Steichen attended that, and he sort of saved my neck. All these strange questions coming from various members of the faculty on subjects that I knew nothing about whatsoever, and he forbore this for a while. And then he just kind of took over, and he talked for about an hour and a half without stopping. At one point he said, "Well, it seems to me," he said "that this young man is ready to graduate from school." (LAUGHS) Not approving of formal education anyway.

MEH: But he had taken some of your photographs for the collection.

AO: Yes. Yeah. And he mentioned that to the faculty members. He said that he bought some of my photographs, and he felt that this alone put me into a category where I was no longer a student but a professional. (LAUGHS)

MEH: I don't know if you know, but apparently about a year after that a question arose as to whether you had actually graduated, because he had never actually written the letter to the college necessary to certify this.

AO: Oh really? Oh.

MEH: And that's when these prints came up. He must have graduated you because he bought the prints. So, you were officially entered in their register.

AO: Well I had a certificate of graduation from the school, which wasn't — Now, wait a minute. I can't remember exactly, but it wasn't a qualified graduation. I mean it was a qualified graduation and not a, you know —

[END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1; SIDE 2 TAPE 2 BEGINS:]

AO: — you know, when I was involved in it. It would come over me suddenly how ingrown we all were and how totally involved we were with each other, and to the point where it seemed to me a great relief to go on vacations to New York and to come home. And to get away from that intensity of involvement with one with the other and with the school. And occasionally I can remember, you know — The springs were awfully bad at Black Mountain, as far as actions and there were always arguments in the air, you know — one group against another group and so on. I used to climb up to the pasture, which was quite a hike up the mountain to the summer pasture, and looking down on the school, you know, you had some — Suddenly, it all took its proper proportions.

MEH: It gave you some perspective.

AO: (LAUGHS) Yeah. Because immediately when you went down you got involved in the whole thing again. It didn't help for very long.

MEH: Was it possible to be at the college and just to remain outside of all of these battles?

AO: I wonder. I think that maybe some people did, but I — I think that most people got involved one way or another, and I think it was — I think that there was something about the tremendous explosion of spring there, the actual natural phenomenon of spring there which people reflected in their way, in their human way. Some of the arguments, some of the things that people got involved with, were terribly petty and it was almost like a fight for its own sake. It got to be pretty low, I think.

MEH: Were there any really — Did you feel that there were any educational concepts that everyone held to be true at that time?

AO: I had the feeling that the school was made up of — you know, the philosophy of the school was held by individual teachers, and the individual teachers were so different, one from the other, that there was no general philosophy involved, but the strong personalities that the teachers were. I remember once that when — I was student moderator, and I declared a moratorium on classes, you know, which was one of the things that the student moderator could do. For a week there would be no classes. Flola Shepard, who was in the dining room at that time, got up from her chair and she said, "Well I don't care what you say," she said. "My classes are going on and anyone who is interested can attend them!" (LAUGHS) And she used to have her French classes at something like 7:30 in the morning or quarter to eight, some very ungodly early hour, to

discourage those people who weren't really interested in learning French anyway.

MEH: That should have done it!

AO: Yeah.

MEH: Were there other people, besides Hazel, who were seriously interested in photography when you were there?

AO: I don't think so. Not as totally involved as I was anyway, at that time. Nick Cernovich was interested in photography at one point and Donald Alter and, oh, what's the name — There was another guy who was interested in photography and did a lot of work. Also Tommy Jackson was interested in photography as well. But they were all doing other things besides. Donald was a painter and Tommy was writing and so it wasn't — they weren't as committed to photography as I was. And I think it was partly — I was interested in photography partly because Hazel was teaching photography, and I felt, you know, the power of her personality I think. That was as important as studying photography. We were very close at one time.

MEH: You had studied that first year — You had gone to Black Mountain because of an interest in weaving.

AO: Yes. Yeah. I studied with Anni Albers, and then Trude Guermonprez was there at the same time, and I took classes with both of them. I was going to tell you earlier. I had this one piece of weaving left from my class with Anni, and our first project was to build a loom, a backstrap loom, and to go

on from there. It seemed to take weeks to do this whole thing, and I was getting very discouraged, and finally towards the end of that semester, I think, I finally got something going and I was working on this little tapestry. It got very picky, like little things were happening everywhere in it, and I still have that thing. It just took ages to do it — I don't know why it took so long. Bob and Sue Rauschenberg were in my class at that time too, and they both built a loom. Someone else, but I can't remember who. At that time Bob and Sue and I were inseparable. We couldn't do anything without the three of us there. Used to go into Asheville on Sunday to the Baptist church.

MEH: Seriously?

AO: Well, just very involved with the black people who were — I don't know, it was just a, you know, it was a real experience to go to —

MEH: This was to the black Baptist church.

AO; Black Baptist church, yes. And that was one thing that we did, oh, Sunday after Sunday. And that was, you know, that was marvelous in two respects. I'd never seen anything like that before, never been involved with anything like that before. The other thing was that it took us out of our community, you know. It took us out of Black Mountain and gave us another perspective.

MEH: What was it about the Black Baptist church that attracted you?

AO: Oh just the, the total involvement of the people, you know, in their religion. And it was wonderful to hear the music. And Delores used to go with us too, Delores Freeman [MEH: Fullman].

MEH: Fullman.

AO: Fullman, Fullman, yes. I think I remember Bob doing an enormous painting of Delores, and Susan and I just sit — You know, like at three o'clock in the morning just sitting there waiting for Bob to finish so we could all go to our own bedrooms. But we had to wait for him.

MEH: Do you feel that Anni Albers has had any influence on the work that you do now?

AO: A remote one, I think. I guess with a teacher, you know, I'm always impressed with their personalities, and she was a very strong personality. I'm sure that there's always a lingering influence on your work. Although I must say that, you know, of all the people at Black Mountain, of all the teachers that I had at Black Mountain and probably all the teachers I've had in my life, I think that Albers was the most influential, and I feel that I learned the most from him about anything that I do now. Something that I always consider, you know, when I'm working with color is some of the very basic things that we learned in his class.

MEH: How is this?

AO: Well, you know, the various projects that one did in his class as far as color goes, you know — and color change, and how one color influences another, you know, and I've always felt slightly suspicious of things that

are too exuberant because I feel that there's no discipline involved in doing them, you know. Multicolored fabrics and so on. And that it's possible to do very interesting things using a minimum of colors and types of yarn and so on. Sometimes the more colors and the more types of yarn you use in a fabric, the less interesting it actually is in the end. I think that's partly his influence. I never worked as hard for anyone else as I worked for him in the color class, because I was terrified of not actually doing something for the class.

MEH: But when he left, you stayed at the college.

AO: I stayed, yes. My interest shifted at that time, you know. I became less interested in weaving and more and more interested in photography, and I think that Hazel took over as the teacher at that point, whereas Albers had been the teacher before. We spent an endless amount of time working. We were really working very hard at times, and constantly talking about photographs and other people's work.

MEH: Who were the other people? You say, was it Cartier-Bresson you said you were particularly —

AO: Bresson and some of the early photographers like Julia Margaret Cameron and, you know, some of the really early photographers, the Victorian photographers. And I was very — I, I loved those early photographs. I still do, you know, and their very black and white quality. Oh, I tried and tried to make photographs like that at first, and I never really succeeded. I used to do the long long time exposures, down dark

corridors, you know (LAUGHS), where there was a minimum of light so someone had to pose for like five minutes to get an image of it.

MEH: What kind of camera were you using?

AO: Well we had an old Graflex, and a big old view camera, and then I had a 35 millimeter Leica that belonged to Hazel, which she let me use and finally gave me. When I left Black Mountain, she gave it to me.

MEH: When you left Black Mountain, what did you do?

AO: I went to live in Boston with Paul and Vera Williams, and we lived in a house in the suburbs in Hyde Park, and I took a job for, oh, a few months in a photo lab. I thought that — I had this idea that it would be good discipline for me to work in a professional photo lab. It was a portrait studio, actually, you know, a big portrait studio. I also had the idea that possibly they might let me use the darkroom after hours. Well, after working seven hours in a darkroom printing other people's negatives, that was the last thing in my mind that I wanted to stay there beyond that point and do my own things. I never even asked whether it would be possible or not. But I did take a lot of photographs in Boston, the early days of being in Boston. Then I quit that job and I went to work in a rare book store and I did picture framing there — framing of photographs and working on old prints, restoring old prints and framing them. And got involved in the Brattle Theatre in Cambridge and I would work, I worked part time at the bookstore and then worked from, say, like 1 o'clock until midnight at the theater, for no money. I didn't get any money for doing that. And then I

would drag myself home, you know. It took like an hour and a half to commute back to Hyde Park in the early hours of the morning, and then go to work (LAUGHS). But because of, you know, getting involved with prints and at Goodspeeds I started my own gallery in Cambridge, with the help of Paul and Vera. At one time we were all — All three of us were going to have a gallery in Boston, and we looked around for a likely place for a gallery. By the time — I got more and more interested in it, and I guess they got less and less interested in it, because at that point they thought that they'd go to New York and live for a while instead of live in Boston. But I spent a lot of time hunting around for a place, and they realized that, you know, I was much more serious about it than they were. They said that if I wanted to do it, that they would lend me some money to do it, because I had no money of my own. And so they helped me set up, financially they helped me set up the gallery in Cambridge. And I had that for about five or six years.

MEH: Was that handling prints?

AO: Well, it started with prints and then it went on to drawings and paintings. And I can remember at one time that I'd — this was early on in Bob Rauschenberg's career as a painter, and we talked about the possibility of having a show there, but that never came off. But Ray Johnson had a show at the gallery, and Stan VanDerBeek did and then some Boston people — Steve Trefonides, who's a rather good photographer. He was a painter and then he became more and more interested in photography.

And Edward Avedisian, and Sven Lukin, who are all fairly successful now.

Then virtually — yeah, and they were very young and unknown people at the time, except for Ray. I mean Ray had been working for years.

MEH: What was the name of the gallery?

AO: Well, it was called the Boylston Street Print Gallery, and I kept thinking of changing the name to the Boylston Street Gallery but it was difficult because there was a gallery in Boston, on Boylston Street in Boston, called the Boylston Gallery and I didn't want to get confused.

MEH: After you ended the gallery, what did you do?

AO: Well, that's when I moved to Nantucket. In fact, when I had the gallery the summers were very quiet in Cambridge. Harvard shut down and most of the people who were clients of mine went away from Cambridge for the summer, so I decided to get a job on Nantucket and I did. I worked for a gift shop that was owned by a friend of mine, and she thought it would be a good idea to set up an art supply shop and a gallery on the second floor, which she never used. That's what I did for three summers. And then eventually, you know, I really didn't want — The gallery in Cambridge was never too much of a success, and there wasn't any real need for me to go back there. I decided that maybe I'd try — I met Bill, and Bill was working at the Woodbox, which is a small inn, lovely old inn on Nantucket, and the proprietor of the inn just ran it in the summertime and closed up in the winter, and we thought why don't we try to keep it going for the winter, which would give us a reason for staying, you know, and maybe a living. I

cooked and Bill took care of the front, and we served dinners to the public and took guests. We did that for three winters. Actually it was quite successful after the first winter, which was a little bit of a struggle because no one realized we were open. But after that first winter we were quite successful. Then I got involved with the weaving project and the Nantucket Historical Trust wanted to set up a weaving workshop.

MEH: Do you design the items yourself that are woven in the workshop?

AO: Yes. I'm the designer. And, in fact, I have been — Even when I was working for other people that was my main job. And also being the manager of the people who weave. Bill is the business manager and I have charge of what people do and how much they do and so on.

[END OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1; SIDE 1, TAPE 2 BEGINS]

[IRRELEVANT COMMENTS NOT TRANSCRIBED]

AO: Oh yeah, I'm going to have to take that up somewhere. I can't put my hands on it right away, I don't think. I've seen it and then it disappears and then I see it again.

MEH: Did she really encourage her students to weave professionally?

AO: Anni Albers was a very difficult person, and it was — one had to be very careful when working with her or talking to her and so on. We got along fairly well, although I think she was very disappointed in our whole group because it took us so long to pull ourselves together to do anything, you know. And this whole sort of baffling thing of having to build our own backstrap loom before we started to weave, and although it's not that

difficult — it wouldn't be as difficult for me now to actually go out and build one as it was then. But it just seemed, at that time, it was, it was hard to do, and I thought it was kind of a bad thing to do as the initial thing in her class. Although I'd already had a year of weaving at the Rhode Island School of Design so I didn't feel that, you know, that I was missing out that much. I was, in the meantime, was beginning to enjoy life at Black Mountain very much and I made very close friends with Bob and Sue, and we were doing so many things together, and I think that that's probably why my work in her class suffered a little bit to begin with. Except for that one project, I can't remember very clearly what else we did in that, you know, while we were working with her. Then Trude Guermonprez took over the class at times, and I think that we had some kind of theoretical work in textile design, you know, working on graphs on paper, as I recall. Then she was working on a rather ambitious project — it seemed ambitious at the time — of doing some fabric for upholstery for a house in Asheville, and I think the house was designed by Philip Johnson.

MEH: I think it was the one by Breuer.

AO: Breuer — Marcel Breuer, yeah. Trude left that yardage on the loom half finished, and she asked me, as a project, to finish it for her. I said that I would, and I finally did, but I never in my life had so much difficulty with a loom. Operating that loom was like torture. It was a countermarch loom, which isn't very easy to use in the beginning anyway, and it was a rather complicated threading and treading, and some of the sheds were so poor

that you had to practically put the yarn through with your fingers, you know, because the shuttle was making terrible skips and everything. It took me weeks and weeks to get through that thing, and at one point I got bored with it and left it for a couple of weeks and then the poor woman in Asheville, you know, wanted her fabric and finally I did get it done. It was a nice fabric, but I don't think that it was worth all of that work. By the time I finished it, you know, Trude and Anni Albers had left the school. I worked on my own in the weaving room for a long time after they left, just doing various little projects. But as I said, you know, I got more and more interested in other things, especially photography. While I was working with Anni, I was taking Albers' classes and I felt that I was — those were more rewarding to me than the weaving part. I think also that Anni was slightly distracted because she knew that they were leaving soon. Then there were many things going on at the school which took her attention away from her class.

MEH: You mean political things?

AO: Political things, yeah, yeah.

MEH: Were there —

AO: It struck me that she was always much more bitter than Albers was about the things that were happening to them.

MEH: People have said that once they had decided to leave, some students have said that Albers just seemed totally to relax at that point, and to enjoy the students more in classes.

AO: Yes. Yes. He was marvelous in classes sometimes. You know, he could be — he was sort of a bitchy old man (LAUGHS) at times, and a real, you know, slave driver, but at other times he was very relaxed and it was really enjoyable to sit in his classes. He had so much information to impart, and that was very enjoyable. There was always — In the color class, there was always an assignment to bring to the next class and you absolutely would not show up without having done your assignment because it was an admission to class. If he realized that you hadn't done something, you just would have to leave. He, he played on people and their — I think he was very aware of people's weaknesses and their strengths and how they worked best, and I can remember week after week, you know, just encouraging me and promoting my work, you know. All of the work, all of the assignment went up in front of the class, you know, and we would talk about it and the person whose work was being pointed out would explain what they were trying to do and so on, and week after week he'd build my things up, you know, until I felt really as though I were accomplishing something. And then suddenly (LAUGHS), he put several weeks work together. A lot of the designs, although the color — the color project was different, you know, a lot of the designs were very similar, and he felt that I was cheating, and he just tore me down in that class until I felt like an insect. That bothered me for a long time. He was always doing things like that.

MEH: It must have been necessary that you have some real faith in yourself too to learn from Albers and survive.

AO: Yes. Well, and then eventually, you know, after being terribly hurt by that I really got kind of angry and I felt, you know: "I'll show him what I'm capable of doing," you know. And then I had a big spurt in my work again.
(LAUGHS)

MEH; Was there any interest in the time you were there in the local crafts, the mountain crafts, or the millwork going on in the area?

AO: I think very little, if anything. We weren't aware as students of what was happening around us, and I can't recall whether Anni ever mentioned what was happening. I think she was rather disparaging about the, say the mountain weavers. There was weaving going on at Berea and I think that she was also disparaging about that. One thing that was at Black Mountain and something that I got involved in — in fact, I set up an exhibition, I guess it must have been while they were still there, or it was shortly after they left. There was a wonderful collection of textiles which the Albers collected in Mexico, and some from Peru, I believe. There were trunks of really incredible textiles and rather sloppily catalogued and everything. Anni, I'm sure, knew all about them. In fact, she used to drag out some, you know, and talk about them at great length and what, you know, what was really remarkable about them and how highly technical, how highly skilled those people were, way back in the mountains of Mexico where they were still doing traditional weaving. Then some of the

things were quite ancient. It was very exciting to put that exhibition together, which I did. I guess it was after they left.

MEH: You did an exhibition of the Engelhardt Collection.

AO: Of the Engelhardt Collection, yes. I was trying to think of the name. That's right.

MEH: Do you remember in the summer of '49, Olson did some productions: "Wagadu" and "The Cyclops."

AO: Yes.

MEH: Do you remember anything about these productions?

AO: Very little. I thought in the end that they weren't very impressive.

MEH: Do you remember if there was scenery used, or a cast, or exactly what form they took?

AO: I think that — Was that the summer after Buckminster Fuller had been there?

MEH: It was the summer he was there.

AO: It was the summer that he was there.

MEH: The first summer that the Albers were not there.

AO: Yeah. So then Vashi and Veena, the two Indian dancers, were there and they came on the invitation of Fuller, I think, and Fuller brought some students with him, some Canadian — there were quite a few Canadians in the group, and they built — they built an enormous stage for the center of the dining hall and it was in four parts so that the stage could be — I think it was in four parts, maybe there were three parts. Anyway, it was quite

high off the floor, and very solid, and these pieces — the pieces could be moved and separated. I know that there was an Indian dance recital which was done with the stage all pushed together. And then when Olson's productions — production was done — there were three stages set up, you know, and the audience was scattered around these three stages, and various things happened on each one of the stages. And it's not very clear to me exactly what was going on except that there was — there was sort of like a reading going on one stage and there were various actions going on other stages. And did Nick do the lighting for those? I think he did.

MEH: I'm not sure. I haven't — You know, all I have is the titles for them.

AO: I have the feeling that Nick Cernovich did the lighting for that. But somehow I mean it didn't really — I mean I can't recall anything very vividly from those — from that performance.

MEH: What about other performances that were given while you were there? You might remember, if you remember anything about them. Now one, The Scapegoat, was given.

AO: And that I don't recall at all.

MEH: Noah.

AO: Noah, yes. Wesley Huss was in Noah. In fact, I think he directed Noah.

MEH: I think it was the first thing he did (OVERTALK).

AO: Yes. It was very lively evening. (LAUGHS) It was quite wonderful to look at, and I thought at the time, I don't know, I haven't read it since. I felt the play was rather uninteresting, but I thought that the production was

visually very interesting. I can just barely remember Wesley Huss's Noah, and I thought that he was rather good. And that's my remembrance anyway. Then these wonderful masks of Victor Kalos'.

MEH: Right. What about The Death of Cuchulain?

AO: Yeah. That was — That wasn't done in the dining hall. That was done underneath the Studies Building, and it was done at night and the only lighting that there was from kerosene lanterns, and it was rather a windy, wild night, and it really worked very successfully. (LAUGHS) And I remember that Betty Jennerjahn had a spectacular costume, which was made partly out of cardboard. I did one of the costumes for it, for one of the dancers, and she was — she represented the ghost. I don't know, it's so long ago that I don't recall, except that it was a wild costume that was mostly pinned together from sheer cotton curtains, you know, layers and layers of cotton curtains. (LAUGHS)

MEH: For these performances, did many people come beyond the college?

AO: No. There were very few people who came outside out of the college community, and there were always some sort of performances going on, music recitals and — well I have the catalogue of one summer where there was a — Oops. You know, string quartet, and they did Bartok, Britten, Hindemith, Schoenberg, Villa-Lobos. So there was a lot of music that summer, and I believe that the Bodkys were still there at that point, and Mr. Bodky gave harpsichord and piano recitals in his house. Gave, did the whole series of — whether it was this summer or not, I can't recall. No,

they were gone because the Hetheringtons stayed in the Bodkys' house. But Bodky gave, over a period of maybe a couple of weeks, an hour recital, you know, several days, of the Well-Tempered Klavier, and he did part of the recital on the clavichord and partly on the harpsichord, and even demonstrated how the music sounded on piano as opposed to those other two instruments. He had done a lot of research, apparently, trying to separate the music that was originally designed for the clavichord and the music that was specifically designed for the harpsichord, and he felt that he'd come to an important clue about what music was written for what instrument, and he played the music accordingly. There were various happenings in the dining hall, where the — you know, the dining was transformed into another environment.

MEH: Can you remember like what some might have been?

AO: Oh, they always involved some sort of performance, and then it was like one big party as well, you know. I mean a party was going on at the same time, really. Well, you know, I think of — Well, I did a dance recital at one of the — That wasn't a happening. That was an actual performance, and it was a dance recital by Betty Jennerjahn and various students, and I never did anything with dance at all at Black Mountain, but I had been listening to music one night and while I was listening to music I did all this dance with my hands and my arms, and one afternoon I did it for Betty, and she thought that it was marvelous, and thought that it should be part of the recital and so I did it that night the way I did it for her. There were like four

or five people involved in, say, that recital. I can't recall very vividly what, you know, took place at the happenings although they were rather marvelous and interesting at the time. Vera Williams was very involved in happenings and doing things for happenings, and she probably could tell you a great deal about them.

MEH: Do you remember anything about Marriage of Eiffel Tower?

AO: Well, I did some of the costumes for it, and I thought that that whole production was great fun.

MEH: M.C. directed that, didn't she?

AO: I think so. Yes, I think she did. My involvement was only in doing costumes and watching rehearsals, and you'd think that I would know the play by heart by now because the rehearsals went on forever — to do one evening of performance or two evenings of performance. But there was music involved in it, and it was a lovely thing, as I recall (LAUGHS).

MEH: You didn't make photographs of this.

AO: I did.

MEH: I think M.C. had photographs of a big camera, and I think she said you had made the photographs.

AO: Yeah, I did some photographs, and someone else did photographs.

MEH: Who (OVERTALK) —

AO: I don't know who it was. No, maybe they're all my photographs, unless it was Hazel. Hazel might have taken some photographs.

MEH: If they were your photographs, where are they?

AO: Well, there are some, you know, photographs of Marriage on the Eiffel Tower there. (OVERTALK) And well, there's more than one. There are two. There's one of Joan [?] Rice, with the head in the background, with the clock around her belly, and then there's one of, you know, that person in black waving with the scarf. That's from Marriage on the Eiffel Tower. And remember one night, and I don't know whether it was one of the rehearsals of Marriage on the Eiffel Tower, and I had the flu terribly and I was in bed, and I thought I just had to get up and take some photographs at one of the rehearsals. So, I got up, and I took a lot of photographs and I became very excited and I had the feeling that I was doing some really wonderful photographs, if they indeed came out, you know, because the lighting conditions were rather poor. Suddenly at the end of the, practically the end of the evening, I'd taken, you know, a whole roll and I'd taken them all with my lens cap on the camera. (LAUGHS) And at that point, I thought "It's time to go back to bed!" (LAUGHS) Because obviously I was delirious.

MEH: What about in the couple of years after the Albers left — '49-'50, '50-'51 — a lot of films apparently, you had a film thing going at the college. I think Dreyer's Joan of Arc was shown, and some Chaplin films.

AO: Oh, yes. Yeah. Well Hazel and I got a lot of those films.

MEH: I wondered who organized this.

AO: Yeah, I think that we did mainly. In fact, some of the people weren't very happy with our choices of films. (LAUGHS). But I thought we'd done a very good job. We had Ivan the Terrible and Alexander Nevsky.

MEH: Very good job.

AO: Yeah. And Joan of Arc and a lot of the Griffith films — Orphans of the Storm and one of the other wonderful Gish ones, can't remember what. But we just, I mean some of the people just ate those films up and other people couldn't stand them.

MEH: Who would have been the people who couldn't, who didn't like this sort of thing?

AO: Well, I think, you know, Natasha's whole group were very unhappy about all those films because they wanted more entertainment than they were getting.

MEH: They didn't want art films.

AO: No. When an evening of film was announced, you know, they expected something like going to the movies in Asheville. It was a little bit more difficult to take than that, I guess. I can remember when we got Ivan, we showed it and some of us liked it so much that we, you know, after everyone left we just showed the whole thing all over again. So, that went on for hours and hours. But we rented a lot of them from the Museum of Modern Art, and then from one of the film companies in New York. Often if we liked a film enough, we'd show it twice before we had to send it back, you know, before the rental was up on it.

MEH: Was there any interest in actually making film at the time?

AO: Yeah [AFFIRMATIVE]. I made a, I made some films. I was very excited about the possibility of making some films, and Hazel had a Bolex, and very selfishly I can't remember who else was involved in making films. I did a film of a willow tree, just on the banks of the lake, and the wind blowing. You know, a whole little, you know, how long does a reel run — like ten minutes? It was something like that. And I did a whole ten minutes of just the willow tree. Then I did a film of Tim LaFarge dancing, and a whole part of it was done with him up to his waist in the lake, dancing in the lake. And what else did I — ? I wonder whatever happened to those films. I never — I think Hazel had them. I don't know whether she still does or not. Probably not. They weren't very good.

MEH: She has a few bits of film, but I don't know if she has this or not. You don't have it?

AO: [NEGATIVE]. Not a one. I didn't take them with me when I left, because I had no idea what I'd do with them. I'm trying to think if there was anything else that — I think that Hazel did some film, but I can't recall what. I probably would have been there, but I can't recall what they would be.

MEH: Did you feel at this point, you know, after the Albers and Dreiers and that group had left, that the college had any particular sense of direction?

AO: I think it had on and off. It had in fits and starts, and I know that at board meetings and at faculty meetings there was always a lot of discussion about what direction the college was going to take. It seemed to me that

that was always one of the things that was discussed and never agreed upon, because there were so many different voices and so many differing interests. I mean Natasha was a very strong person and obviously had an idea about what direction the college should go in. M.C. must have been there at that point, and Albert Levi. Nell Rice was always very vociferous about what she thought should happen, and she was like the class historian. She would always talk about what had happened in the past, and it wasn't always pertinent to what was happening at that time, but you did have to go through all that with her at every meeting. And there were a great many arguments at faculty meetings, and splits and factions.

MEH: Olson had not come back as a permanent fixture when you were there, had he?

AO: No. I think what happened: he came back one summer and then he left again, and then he came back like the following year and just established himself at Black Mountain. I felt a terrific letdown when the Albers left and when Trude left and all of their group, because that was mainly the reason that I was there. I suppose I even thought of leaving at that point. There was a definite period of depression for me, and yet I felt that there was enough — It was probably partly inertia. I already at that point had been at the school for a year and I felt that it was a whole way of life being at Black Mountain, and it didn't necessarily involve going to classes, although I always took classes at school — unlike some people. So, in the first place, it would have been difficult to leave because of that feeling, but then I also

became more and more interested in photography, and I could stay because of that and my increasing interest in photography. We had a weaving instructor, Marli Ehrmann, who came from Chicago and my hopes sort of revived in weaving at that point, but she only stayed, I think she only stayed for a short time.

MEH: I think she stayed for the summer maybe.

AO: I think perhaps it was just the summer, and I thought that she was a very nice and interesting person and I guess I did some work in her classes. And then the woman who followed her — Ellen Siegel — I found very disappointing, and she brought out these groups of samples and fabrics that she had made which seemed to have a lot of lurex in them —

[END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 2; SIDE 2, TAPE 2 BEGINS]

MEH: Her husband, Marli Ehrman's husband was a Hebrew scholar?

AO: (OVERTALK) — was a Hebrew scholar and a marvelous man. I just liked him very much, and we often had breakfast together, say, in the morning. Mary Fitton and I had the idea to do a little recital of one of the Psalms. While she read in English, I was going to read a Psalm in Hebrew, and this was going to be a whole little recital. I can recall that when Olson came he was very excited to hear us do this, although I never finished learning the psalm in Hebrew, which was very difficult. Mary and I could never get together because when she reciting it in English I couldn't remember the Hebrew part of it at all. It was a great failure (LAUGHS). But Olson loved

this idea of the two languages going on at the same time, which just became a Babel (babble?) you know. (LAUGHTER)

MEH: Babel One.

AO: And we were scheduled to do it as his evening, and our part of it never came off although other parts of it did. Although it seems to me that Mary did recite — Mary did a reading at one of his, at this evening. I can't remember what it was that she read. She kept a journal all the time that she was at Black Mountain. A daily journal. Her whole writing exercise was just keeping up the journal, and there were times when she read some of it, you know, for an evening of reading. I don't know whether you've come across that in your —

MEH: I've talked to her, but I have a feeling that Mary will publish her journal someday. I think that's in the making. That's just a guess, on my part.

AO: I hope that actually happens. That would be very interesting.

MEH: What do you think now, in retrospect, was the importance of Black Mountain? I mean not only to your work, but as a college in its time.

AO: A very complicated question, and I've often — I've often, you know, thought about that. It constantly reoccurs to me to think about what the importance was to my life, because it changed my whole life. I had done various things before I went to Black Mountain. I was in the Navy, which was an important event in my life, and I was at the Rhode Island School of Design for two years, and made some close friends there and began to work, you know, as an artist in a way. But nothing has been as powerful — no one

single event, you know, has been as powerful as the influence of Black Mountain, and I feel that what I'm doing now is a result of something that happened there. It was some kind of inward explosion, I guess, and there were certainly many times at Black Mountain when I lost that feeling that whatever was happening was very important to me. But, you know, there were periods of depression and elation and so on, but it was such a very definite way of life. I mean going to Black Mountain College wasn't simply like "going to college" at all, or going to any sort of school. It was being totally involved in a living experience, and perhaps — someone said that the faculty at Black Mountain was very uninteresting and the students were the things that were — were the people who were really interesting at Black Mountain. I don't think that's true at all. But certainly the people who were there — students and teachers — were, you know, totally interesting at the time, and have remained an influence in my life. You know, people like M.C., whom I might see once every three or four years are still a very, still live inside me, you know, as — oh, I don't know, examples and as friends, people you can love without having very much contact with, you know. There are whole, you know there's a whole list of people like that, you know, that I could just name off, whom I really, I never see now or hardly ever see and who just accidently come into my life suddenly again and then disappear again. You know, living on an island, it's not so easy to keep contact with people like that, but — Oh, people like Remy Charlip, you know, who come to Nantucket and spend some time

and then gone away again, and Hazel probably, you know, more than any one other person. I spent so much time and I worked so long with her, you know, that — Their whole personality is stamped on me, you know. Olson was not — We got along very — Olson and I got along very well together. I feel, you know, and it was very easy for me to talk to him and everything. I was never very impressed with him (LAUGHS) as a poet somehow. That's a failing on my part, probably, because I realized that he was an important man as far as American poetry goes. But he was so bombastic that I always constantly was putting him down in my mind. (LAUGHS) But a warm man and very, great pleasure to be with always. Albers was so impressive as a person and as a teacher. He certainly was the greatest teacher I ever had or ever hope to have. I'm sure that no teacher could have that much influence on me anymore, but at that time he had tremendous influence on me. It's really difficult to answer that question, you know. It's just — It's very funny, you know, I was thinking last night as I was walking home, several times I've made the slip — I remember once I was in Boston, I was calling a friend on the phone whom I hadn't had a chance to see, and I said — and I was just going to tell him that I was on my way back to Nantucket and I wanted to say hello while I was still there. I said "I'm on my way back to Black Mountain." It just came out of my mouth, and he said "You're what?!" Several times in conversation, and once last night when we were talking, I got mixed up with Black Mountain and Nantucket, and somehow there's something in the atmosphere of

Nantucket, and perhaps it's a closed community in a sense that, you know,
deep down inside I get very mixed.

[END OF RECORDING ON SIDE 2, TAPE 2]

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]