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Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS
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[BEGINNING OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

MEH: [GIVES IDENTIFICATION] Ruth, how did you come to be at Black Mountain College?

RA: I was studying at Milwaukee State Teachers College. I had met Elaine and Betty Schmitt and Pete Jennerjahn. And also Ray Johnson. Because Ray Johnson and Elaine Schmitt had gone to Ox-Bow, Saugatuck, Michigan for a summer, and she met Ray there. Ray came and visited us in Milwaukee – visited her family in Milwaukee. So, then they went to Black Mountain College in 1994 [1944], '95 [45]. Also, several students from Milwaukee State Teachers College were going to summer school at Black Mountain College: Hazel Frieda Larson, Betty, and they were following a teacher, Howard Thomas. Thomas was going to Athens, University of Georgia. He was leaving Milwaukee, and so on the way he was invited by Albers to stop and teach at Black Mountain College. He was a great teacher at Milwaukee and his students were sorry to see him go. So, they followed him. John Reiss was another student who went. And Hazel and Betty. They all went, and when they got to Black Mountain, they discovered Black Mountain. "You must go there." But that 1945 summer, I had decided to go to Mexico City with my sister, who was now at the University of

Wisconsin at Madison. We met, and that summer I didn't go to Black Mountain. I went to Mexico City to the university there. The following year I went to Black Mountain College (1946).

MEH: Tell me what you remember about the Schmitt family and how you had gotten to know them.

RA: Well, I was a freshman. Elaine Schmitt was in my class. We were together at Milwaukee State Teachers College. Betty was a junior or senior at that time. I was really very much alone because it was during the war. When I went to Milwaukee in 1943, we were at war with Japan. It was very difficult for a few of the students who were Japanese to feel at home in Milwaukee. But Elaine took me home to her family home in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, and I met her father and her mother and her grandmother. I think it was at that time they were thinking I might be able to help the grandmother with housework. I went a few times there, and I met the Schmitt family. Her father, Rupert Schmitt, had a brother. They took over the grandfather's stained-glass studio. I was invited to the studio to see their stained-glass studio. That's how we became friends. Elaine and I became very close friends there.

MEH: You had been in an internment camp before you came.

RA: I was in an internment camp in Rohwer, Arkansas. I was a high school senior. I graduated from camp. Recently I was sent three watercolors I had done in camp by the then mayor of Rohwer, Arkansas. I was seventeen when I graduated. They wanted the young people to get out of the camp because they were always making trouble. My sisters and brother had gone to Oskaloosa,

Iowa to a Quaker college, William Penn College. Then, my younger brother went to Scattergood, a high school. I went to Milwaukee. I chose Milwaukee because the tuition was very low. I had sort of hoped – there was an artist who came from Chicago, assisted the art teacher. She thought that the Chicago Art Institute would be a good place. But it was so expensive, and so I chose Milwaukee. I found a family to live with, the John O'Brien family. He was an attorney and she was a school teacher. The way we met was she said that she would be in a blue suit and her daughter would be with her, and she would have Shirley Temple curls, blond. I said I had a Dutch-boy, and I would be obvious. So, I got on the train, the Southern Railway Train in McGee, Arkansas and took the train along with GI soldiers who were traveling from place to place or they were on a furlough. It was a packed train. I sat on a soldier's duffle bag. I got to Chicago and transferred to a Milwaukee train. I met Mrs. O'Brien at the station.

MEH: Did you live with them? Did you – ?

RA: I lived with them for a year, and I was a "school girl." There were jobs from State that were offered, and they were one of the families that paid students to do domestic work. I worked, and I got room and board and a dollar a week for working for them. I did menial chores around the house: set the table, vacuumed, helped with dinner. I did that for a year.

MEH: How were you able to pay tuition?

RA: Well, the Quakers were very good to Japanese families. A woman named Mrs. Thomas Potts from Germantown, Pennsylvania sent me money for tuition. It was only twenty-five dollars a semester. I got room and board, and I got my

tuition paid. I actually think I paid for my own tuition. They, Mrs. Thomas Potts sent me about a hundred dollars for, you know, incidentals.

MEH: You knew you wanted to study art?

RA: Yes, and Milwaukee – I didn't know anything about Milwaukee, but it had very good teachers there. They had teachers who were painters. I studied everything because it was a state teachers college. I was studying a little drawing, a little painting, a little pottery, weaving, and printmaking so that I would be prepared to teach. But at that time I think Asian parents discouraged art. Asian students were not being placed in teaching positions. They had never hired a Japanese for teaching. So, they discouraged me from finishing my degree there. They didn't think that they could place me. Also, they thought it would be dangerous to place me during the war or after the war.

MEH: It would be like for student teaching at that point or –

RA: I went – I was ready to student teach at that time, and they said that they didn't think they could place me and that it would be dangerous to put me in a little town – Sheboygan or Racine or some little town to teach. So, that was the time Elaine and Betty insisted – and Ray Johnson insisted on my coming to Black Mountain. So, that summer I went to Black Mountain College.

MEH: Who was teaching that summer?

RA: That summer. Jean Varda and Jacob Lawrence were visiting with his wife Gwendolyn Knight. Leo Lionni from Container Corporation, and, you know, on the cover of your book, that was the 1946 faculty. Leo Amino was there teaching sculpture. I went primarily to study with Anni because I had just

finished my little weaving class thinking – and Elsa Albright , who was my teacher, would go every year to Berea College to teach and – what is the other place down there that she taught the native – ?

MEH: Would it have been Penland?

RA: No, I think she went to Berea College to teach, and she talked about the South. I thought, well, I love weaving. I love the mechanical part of weaving, so I went to study with Anni. She wouldn't accept me because I was going to only be there for a summer, and she said, "You can't learn anything in a summer." And that I should take her husband's class which was Basic Design and Color. It happened that I then stayed for three years, and I never studied weaving. I took all of Albers classes.

MEH: Do you remember your first impression of the college when you arrived that summer?

RA: I'm trying to think of how I got there. I can't remember. I think somebody came to pick me up, maybe Elaine or Betty. She was Betty. She's now Elizabeth, I think. It seemed like a very nice place to be because it was small. It was in the country. I was raised on the farm, so I loved the natural surroundings of that place. I was amazed at the frankness and the openness of the students. You know, asking questions and being part of the government – of the school government – and having rights that no other student – no other college or university would allow to happen.

MEH: What do you remember about – why don't we talk about that summer before we go to Albers' classes because that will be a long conversation? Did you take any course with Varda or with – ?

RA: Well, I visited his class. Varda was more of an entertainer, a happening. He had students build a Trojan horse. He talked about the Labyrinth and about life and he danced and he had studied ballet so he taught ballet. He taught everything. I had never seen that before, but his students were fascinated by him. But I was interested in Albers class.

MEH: Did you study with Jacob Lawrence at all?

RA: I don't think Jacob Lawrence taught. I think he was like the guest artist like Lippold was. Even Cage and Cunningham were – in 1948 they were guests, and in a way – I just remember him as an artist there. But I didn't even know what he painted like. I didn't know anything about him. Leo Amino taught sculpture. He taught wood sculpture. I didn't take his class, but you sort of knew what was going on, and you walked in and out of classes. It was not like being stuck with one teacher. Eating together with them was an experience, and performances were an experience. The teachers would perform with the students. I had never seen that before. Merv Lane was there. Maybe not that summer, but the fall. But there was such a closeness of the teachers and the students.

MEH: How would you compare what you were experiencing at Black Mountain to what you had experienced at Milwaukee?

RA: Well, Milwaukee was a good school. We learned to draw. We learned to paint. And Robert von Neumann, who was my major teacher in drawing and painting. He was a contemporary of Albers in Germany. He was a realistic painter – painted landscapes.

MEH: I had asked you to compare –

RA: Compare. We were very close to our teachers in Milwaukee also. I remember an artist named Joseph Frieberg, who was a painter. I loved his paintings. He wasn't teaching at that time. I became close to them because they had two young children, and I babysat for them. There was a close-knit group of painters there. I wish I could remember all of their names. It was pretty solid there. Then going to Black Mountain, it was like, not total freedom, but curious questions for all. People were always asking questions, and I couldn't answer because I'd never thought of those things before.

MEH: So, you took Albers class.

RA: [AFFIRMATIVE]

MEH: Was he teaching design that summer?

RA: He taught basic design and basic color. So, we did paper folding and we did lettering and we did his color. It was at that time that he began to think of his Interaction of Color book or portfolio that he put together much later. Ati Gropius was in that class. She was very good. Elaine was very good. Ray Johnson was really – I mean, he understood everything. He also invented things all the way, too. So, Joe Fiore was in that class. I can't remember. Of course, Ted Dreier, Jr. was in the class. He'd go from science to other classes.

MEH: How did Albers conduct his class, the design class?

RA: Well, we each had a study, so we did our work – most of our work – in our study which was a little room, eight by ten room, that each student had. Then we would bring everything that we did – He would give us a problem. He would say, “Now, I want you to figure out how to fold – for example, paper folding – , and then every student would have to come with a solution or another idea. So, he looked at every one, and if you didn’t come with any, he didn’t want you in the class. He was very strict about that. Each student either solved the problem or came up with another problem or didn’t come up with any – I mean, the solutions sometimes had nothing to do with the assignment. So, that Albers would look at everything, and then he’d see something brand new and that would be our problem for the next session. So, you’d see about forty or forty-five students in this tiny, tiny little room where we went through every solution, matière, paper folding, lettering, whatever it was. He’d select maybe five good problems and he’d give that as an assignment to come back with. So that each student was getting the benefit of forty minds. It was great. Then we’d come back with another. The next time we’d come back with another forty solutions for the five problems. Then, we’d go through the whole – and he’d say, “This one, you didn’t get the lesson at all.” You know, he’d eliminate. Then he’d focus on the ones that had the solutions. So, it was very good for us because he wasn’t interested in our own individual expression at all. “You do that on your own time.” That’s why students – maybe several students didn’t approve of Albers because he wasn’t catering to their style of drawing a figure,

you know. When he taught drawing, he wanted you to look at the figure. He didn't care whether you did long, willowy figures. You know, he wanted you to see that one form was in front of the other if the model was lying. He'd want you to see the foreshortening. He would always talk about the grapefruit. He'd grab a breast or buttock of a student and say, "Mggrmh," or "ripe grapefruit," and he wiggled it a little bit. Today he would never get away with it, I don't think. [LAUGHTER] But he made you think that your pencil was on the skin, on the flesh of the student, of the model. He'd say, "Now, you're going to go over that flesh" and you'd try to feel that. But I didn't feel it because I was too young to understand what he was talking about.

MEH: Obviously, that's something that even though you didn't fully understand it then had carried over later.

RA: A lot of what he talked about we didn't understand. We didn't have the foggiest notion of what he was talking about, but, you know, Ray was one of the most talented that ever came out of Black Mountain. He would not go with the flow of New York or any art scene. He was always contradicting them or trying to knock them down from that pedestal that they were being put on. Artists going into this style or that style and Ray wouldn't put up with any of it. So, he was never the big name that he should have been but he was probably more talented than anybody that I have ever known. Elaine Schmitt was like that, too. Elaine was an unusual person and didn't understand it, but she would be working, and then Albers said, "Then look at this. Look at what Elaine is doing." Elaine didn't know what she was doing. She was just doing it. He wanted his

students to get that feeling of what he was trying to say, I think. He'd come in with what was at hand. If it was raining, we'd draw umbrellas and boots that day. If it were spring and daffodils had come up, he'd cut them and bring them and we would draw the daffodils. We were like drawing what was there. I remember, Willie Joseph came in late and he drove his jeep right down next to the classroom. So, we all went out and drew the ellipses of the wheel, the concave-convex shapes. That was our problem in ellipses. Then in his classes he wouldn't let us express ourselves. He said, "You either draw this flower pot correctly or not correctly. I can see whether you understood what the ellipses are." So, we'd go through ellipses. I think that in his own way his approach was similar to the Nicolaides method of "The Natural Way to Draw."

MEH: So, he taught design, and he also taught –

RA: Color and drawing.

MEH: In the drawing class, that's where you would draw like umbrellas or whatever happened to be there.

RA: We'd do watercolors in that class, drawings and paintings. So, he taught us to do watercolors. There are very few people that have really used what he taught. I think Albers was good for me because I was very obedient. I was raised to follow directions, to be obedient, not contradict anybody, not contradict an adult. So, I didn't do that. There were a lot of students who came from New York who were more advanced than me and would challenge him. He was hard to challenge because he had a mind of his own, and he knew what he wanted to teach. Some of the students didn't really listen to him. I think if you listened to

him you would be better off and leave your own opinions at home because there was a lot he was teaching.

MEH: How did he react to students who challenged him?

RA: Well, he would dismiss what they were saying, or he would tell them that they didn't need to come to his class if they didn't want to listen to him or want to stay with him. And some did that. Some came in fear also of what he was saying. I mean, some felt that maybe their own individuality was being challenged. I don't think at any time I felt that. He was teaching you like a farmer would teach you how to plant strawberries, or how to teach planting onions or tomatoes. He was saying, like a farmer would say, "You don't start planting tomatoes in the summer. You'd plant them in March or February or when the frost is gone." In that way he was trying to teach us about art. He wasn't really teaching how to draw. He was teaching you how to see. Eventually you have to learn to draw by drawing – or, by doing it. As we left, we would have a final session with him. He would tell one student that she shouldn't have children. He would say, "Don't have children. These paintings are your children" if he knew that that person couldn't so something other than do their own work. He would advise people in a way that would help them. He would say, "Oh, you should have a lot of children." He would say that because of what I did at school. I took care of people at school. I worked in the laundry room, I made cheese, I worked on the farm, I helped with the milking. I'd get the milking contraption – the milker – up to the farm, and I worked in the silo. I did all these services, and I think that's probably why I was asked to stay, partly

because I was more interested in making the college work than in my own welfare. I wasn't there to express myself and I didn't know what that expression was at that time anyway.

MEH: So, you took his courses. How did you financially – did they give you a scholarship?

RA: I borrowed two hundred dollars from a Church of the Crossroads in Hawaii for the summer session. It was something like two hundred. Then at the end of the summer I had an anonymous donor which I think was Ted and Bobbie Dreier or Albers. They let me stay for the year. They gave me a scholarship. Then each year, they renewed it. So, I was there for two summers and three years. I was there 'til 1949.

MEH: What did you do on the work program at the college?

RA: Work program – I first came and we all had jobs. We had assignments that rotated around dishwashing, serving, cleanup. But I worked when I got there. Mary Phelan – who is now Mary Bowles – said, "I have just the job for you. It was her job. She gave me the making of butter.

[END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1. BEGINNING OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

MEH: You said she gave –

RA: Well, she had the job of making butter from the farm. She would scoop off the cream off and then put it in a crock. There was an electric butter maker, and so I said, "Oh, okay." It was – really wasn't a very popular job. But anyway I had it for a long time. I did butter as part of my work. Then I had buttermilk from that, and I was very popular because I had sweet butter and buttermilk. All the

European faculty love buttermilk and sweet butter. So, I always gave them a little extra butter to take home with them. I did that and I worked in the laundry and I worked on the farm. Every time we had a job to do, I would go and when they were filling the silo with corn, we went inside the silo. I don't know how we got in. I guess there's a ladder to go up in. All this corn was coming down, and we thought we were getting buried in it. Then I helped on the farm, and Mrs. Jalowetz always talked about the mica mine there. And the stories they had about mining the mica to sell to defense department. They got a whole pile of it, and one of the students absconded with it. They lost everything. I don't think that lasted very long. Not knowing anything about making cheese, I decided I would learn how to make some cheese from milk. I took it to the mica mine to age. There was a mica mine on the property, and I got my cottage cheese and I hung it. I didn't know what I was doing. But anyway, we were always experimenting. If we needed a chair, they'd say, "Oh, go and make one," because we didn't have one. Or if you needed a desk or something, they'd say, "Go make it." Or if you were wanting to print, they'd say, "Oh, go print it." That's how the printing studio – that's how they did their printing of poetry with M.C.

MEH: What do you think was the effect of this sort of atmosphere where you had these facilities and – ?

RA: It was very primitive. It was just absolutely primitive. I mean, Molly Gregory ran the wood shop, and she had few tools. She taught the students to make furniture. I think it wasn't that it was so well equipped. We had a Quonset hut for a library. It was a lot of books that Nell Rice, who was the librarian had

there. She ran it. Then Mrs. Jalowetz did bookbinding, and she taught students how to bookbind. She taught voice and she taught bookbinding. It was, I guess, old world craft was in a way what we were doing at the time. We were self-sufficient. We were building, and eating, and growing, and doing some very – not primary work. I think that was very good. We were writing our own plays and doing our own dance and performing for each other. It was isolated so that we had to depend on each other. It we wanted something, if we wanted entertainment, we had to entertain ourselves. If we wanted a play, we had to put it on. If we wanted props, we had to make everything. So, I think that was a very good lesson for each student if they wanted to take advantage of that. You could say we didn't have equipment. You could have talked about what we didn't have, but we did have freedom. Every student had a vote and that made us have an investment in the place. I think that was very good.

MEH: What sort of things did you do for entertainment or recreation?

RA: We hiked. We went hiking with – Max Dehn always had a group go up to Lake Eden [SIC] which was the top of the mountain. Or went swimming or we went backpacking in the Blue Ridge Mountains. We picked wild blueberries. We gathered leaves for Albers' leaf studies. In the fall, in the spring we'd find things around us which we used. We used bark. We used everything that was natural around us. Because we didn't have bought things around us, and I think that was all very new to me although I grew up on a farm, and I knew that we always improvised on the farm. So, I felt very much at home because it came out of necessity rather than having everything in front of us.

MEH: It would seem that your having been reared on a farm – a working farm – grounded you in a way for this sort of experience that some of the people who came from cities or who had never worked.

RA: I think they came from the idea of the Bauhaus and Gropius. They came from another point of view. I came from living on a farm. I think the one thing that I realize now is that I think everyone has to learn how to work. I think that is one element that is missing in education. People don't know how to work. They can talk about poverty and not do anything about it. We were very poor, but I never felt poor. I mean –

MEH: You're talking about your family or at Black Mountain.

RA: At home. You know, we were from the depression, so we worked very hard for a box of tomatoes which we would get a nickel for a whole box of tomatoes. Or we would do things for shipping to the east coast and would never see a penny. Life was very hard on the farm, and in a way Black Mountain was very hard because there was never any money and we were all – I mean, Ted Dreier and Albers were always looking for money to keep the college going. In a way I felt very much at home in that environment because I grew up in that.

MEH: What other courses did you take besides Albers courses?

RA: I took Bimbus' choral group at night. It was when everyone came together, and we sang at night. I didn't really take bookbinding, but I sort of was interested in it. I spent a lot of time with Hazel, you know. There were other people who helped her to move her equipment so that she would find something she wanted to photograph so I would spend a lot of time with her. It was not class

time so much as learning from people who were doing things at the time. I took history with Dave Corkran and I took a class with Charles Olson. He was talking about Aristotle. He loved Aristotle and everything was based on that. He taught an interesting kind of irreverent, reverent class, not irreverent. It was a serious class but a different – a new point-of-view, let's say. I don't even remember what that point of view was, but I knew it wasn't traditional. We weren't studying Plato, Socrates, Aristotle. We weren't talking about the history of it. But he somehow connected Aristotle with – who's the writer who was imprisoned?

MEH: Pound.

RA: Pound. He talked about Ezra Pound. I didn't know who any of these people were, but it was an interesting class. The dialogue was interesting because – it wasn't like a lecture. It was like a conversation. Most of the classes, too, were like a conversation. I never took M.C. Richards' classes, but I knew that the students were interacting with her all the time. Even at dinner, at meal time after dinner. I mean, they would go on and on until everyone was heard. I think that was such an interesting thing about Albers' design class. Every student's work was discussed, and M.C. Richards class where they sat and talked. I took Max Dehn's Mathematics for Artists. I took that class and I would fall asleep in his class because I didn't know what he was talking about. But he said, "Oh, never mind. Let her sleep. Let her sleep." Then he'd go on talking about something. He talked about the arbutus that he discovered or the trillium that he discovered. He knew exactly where it was on a path up to Lake Eden. He said

he didn't care anymore about mathematics. He was now interested in people. Albert will talk to you about that a little bit.

MEH: What was Max Dehn like as a person?

RA: He was a wonderful, wonderful person. Students went and talked to him about the problem at hand. Maybe a relationship or something. He had very few math students. Students did not come to Black Mountain for mathematics. He had discovered something at the turn of the century. There were twenty-two or twenty-three problems that his teacher gave his students and Max Dehn solved one of those problems, and he was well-known in the math world for that. He was very kind. He didn't give us information. He would always ask a question, and then we would give an answer, and he would say, "But." Then he would open it up to another question. Then another student would come with a solution and he would say, "But." So, he was always asking, asking, asking. He wasn't telling us anything. He never told us anything. He was always asking. I think that that process – the teachers at Black Mountain were teaching us a process of discovery or questioning or inquiry. I think that's what the students got from Black Mountain. They didn't get how-to-paint-a-picture. That's one of the things that Albers didn't want, any followers of his work. He would discourage that. So, did Bucky Fuller discourage followers. He'd turn his back on that. When I was leaving, Albers asked, "What do you want to do." And I said, "Well, I want to paint flowers." He said, "Oh, okay. You paint. So long as they are Asawa flowers." He wanted every person to follow their own instincts, I

think. That is the value of what Albers taught, not just color, not just design, but for each student to find his way.

MEH: Do you remember – the advice Albers gave you before he left – do you remember what he told you? You said that he would before a student left, he would like have a conference –

RA: Yes, we each would have to have a conference. My room was always messy, so he'd come in and he'd look at my room. He'd say, "I'll come back when it's clean everything so that he would sit in a clean studio." He was very meticulous, you know. He measured every paint color that he used. So, he thought that I would – then I said, "I want a lot of children." He said, "Good, good. You have –" I said, "I want six." He said, "Good. You bet." Then I said I wanted to paint flowers. He said, "Good, good. You do that." So, he wasn't saying, "Oh, but I've taught how to do abstract paintings, and now you're going to go and do flowers." You know, he didn't say anything like that. He said, "Good, good." You do that. I thought that was really very big of him after teaching us squares and circles.

MEH: How aware were you of his own art work – what he was doing?

RA: His own work. I remember at the time he was trying to show his work in New York at Janis. He had two galleries, Sidney Janis and – I can't remember the other. His paintings were not selling in New York at that time. I liked it when I understood – the color classes I understood what he was trying to teach us. When we finally got our eyes to do what the color was trying to do. He was not talking about the emotions. He was talking about a physical thing happening

with your eyes when you put green and red together or a pink and red together or an orange and pink together. He was telling us that this was actually actual, because your eyes were seeing that. That was very exciting to me. I like the story that Gropius sent Albers to Black Mountain, Moholy-Nagy to the Institute of Design, and, of course, Hans Hofmann was in New York. That kind of German influence. Gropius had spread it out.

MEH: Were Albers paintings that evident in the community? Were they hanging around?

RA: He had exhibits. He had exhibits, but he never showed his work. We never went to his studio, never went to his studio. He was also very interested in photography. He was interested in – you know, Mae West, the mountain there. He was interested in photographing it. I never saw any prints of it. He knew that I woke up early in the morning. So, he asked me if I would knock on his door at six o'clock in the morning when the fog – when Mae West was in fog. He would photograph it until the fog lifted every morning. I don't know how long it went on. But I would wake him up, especially in the fog. There is a season when the fog is stronger and everything is monochromatic. You couldn't see the trees. You couldn't see anything. You'd just see shapes. So, he wanted to photograph that. So, I was waking up early for the farm. I went and woke him up, helped him with his whatever he had. He'd go there. Then he'd go back to his studio. I think everyone that taught at Black Mountain taught you how to be an artist. Not what to do, but how to be an artist. All these were ways that you learned as you experienced it with them. I think, the nice thing about this approach was that the

students and the faculty were treated equally. That it was always a learning experience for each of us. I think that that is important in raising your children and working in an office. It can be applied to anything that you do. It has nothing to do with having an artistic career. I mean, becoming an artist. It had to do with how you deal with people and learn from his color class. He said that color is the most relative medium in the world because it changes, a red changes to something else with an orange or with a purple or with a blue or green. When you think about it, that is sort of how we are. We act differently with the father or the mother or the sister or the brother or the teacher. I mean, we are different people each time we encounter another person. So, I think color is like that and people are like that. I mean, you can be generous with one and stingy with another. I mean, you don't want to give something to one and you want to give everything to another. I think that you have to learn how to be even – equal. I mean, you have to remain a red. If you're a red, you have to remain a red, but you can be a blue-red or an orange-red. I think, if you're a person, you have to be even, and you have to know who you are in the beginning and then move this way or that way. I think that's a very good life lesson, that color class was. His classes were not so much about color. It's more about how to relate. Then you see a yellow glow between the red and the green. You see a vibration. I think, this is what happens to you in relationships.

MEH: Do you think most people were able to understand that he was teaching not just art but principles of living?

RA: I don't think we saw it then. But people who went to Black Mountain who studied with him now see. I mean, they all, in their own way, found a way to do it, like Lucian Marquis. Although he went from Black Mountain and into an institution, he carried some of what he learned there. Or Claude Stoller learned. He carried it into his teaching and also John Swackhamer. They went into large institutions. But they were able to use what they learned at Black Mountain. Also, mainly I think most of them learned how to use it for themselves: how they lived, how they formed their life. I think that's what in the reunion you heard. That no matter what – whether they went into real estate or they went into medicine, that that experience affected them. I think that each person ought to have this experience sometime in their life. Because I think that it shapes the way you live more than anything else.

MEH: I think that people went to Black Mountain because they were looking for something different from the normal course of study, but still generally, it formed their lives, whether they were a professor or, you know, it redirected their lives in terms of their life style and how they've lived in whatever career.

RA: I think so. I think that's what Albers was saying. He wasn't interested in making artists out of us. He was interested in making us see, look. It's hard to define that. It's hard to say what it was that he gave us, but I think it shaped me because, I had endured the internment and the discrimination before when Asians couldn't become citizens and they couldn't own property. I mean, that all happened before the war. Then during the war, we were interned, and we just went like sheep. You know, we followed. We were told to do this, so we did it.

Then, suddenly, you come to a place like Black Mountain, and they say, “What are you thinking.” I said, “I don’t know what I’m thinking.” You know, like M.C. would question Ray Johnson and Elaine Schmitt and me. We never said anything at meetings. We’d go to these meetings, and they thought that we were kind of dumb because we didn’t express ourselves. Everyone was animated, and they were fighting about this and that. I mean, Black Mountain wasn’t an easy place to be. I think, actually it was hard to be because everyone wanted to know what you were thinking. Every moment they were asking. It was very hard. But I think that experience made me understand what to work on. You have to – you can’t work on how you were treated in camp and as a child in the Depression and camp. You have to deal with what is unfair now. You learn that you have to work on what is unfair now. So, I had the choice of going to New York and building a career, making a name for myself, getting an exhibit, getting a gallery, getting all of that. Or I had to decide being a parent what I had to deal with what was at hand.

[End of Tape 1, Side 2. Beginning of Tape 2, Side 1]

MEH: [TECHNICAL COMMENTS NOT TRANSCRIBED]. Let’s go back a little bit. You said you had the choice of becoming a professional artist with galleries –

RA: At the age of forty-two is when your last child gets in the third grade, then a woman normally says, “Now, I have to decide on what my career’s going to be.” Right. Usually, they go back to work or they go back to a studio. Or they build a studio and they start painting. That was a time when I had already three shows with Peridot Gallery when I was twenty-eight, thirty, thirty-two. I had the

experience of New York, and I had offers to get me an *au pair* or a nanny housekeeper so that I could continue to work on designs, designing lamps, designing furniture, designing wallpaper. You know, that was in the fifties period. I decided then that I wanted to raise my own children. I mean, I'm all for child care and I'm all for all of that, but, for me, I wanted to raise my own children. I gave birth to them and I wanted to work with them. So, when Paul was nine, I said, "I can't do both." I couldn't go and build a reputation and do work in the schools. So, I chose working in the schools and starting a program that was similar to what I had at Black Mountain, to bring professional artists in contact with the school children. That direct experience was going to make a difference. That's how I got into this whole thing with schools. We had all the problems of school. We find that we're no farther along now. I mean, today the problems are bigger than they were in 1968 when we started. So, it's thirty years I've been working in schools. I think that was the right choice for me. It could have been a choice because I was a woman. I mean, you could make excuses in every way of why I would work – I was Asian or I was a woman and all of that. And I think those are all legitimate movements, but I would not use them as the reason, and I would never want to be judged because I'm a woman artist. I would want to be judged because I'm an artist. So, I mean, I'm all for women's galleries and American Women's Museum and that, but I don't think in the end it matters very much because I think also racism and discrimination and all that could be used to get jobs or to get promoted or to get affirmative action. I believe in all of those things, but not for me. I don't want it. I don't want to use

those for myself, but I think in the general picture, I'm for that. I'm for abortion. All those women's rights, but not for me.

MEH: How do you remember Ray Johnson at Black Mountain? What was he like?

RA: Well, we laughed a lot. We had good times. We worked very closely with him because he was very close to Elaine. Elaine was there only for a summer. I mean, we crossed only for a summer and then she went off to New York and got married. But Ray was there for many years. I mean, I think as long as I was there. He was a very focused student, I mean, with Albers. I think he respected Albers a lot. What he did with what Albers gave as a problem was always Ray Johnson's solution. He was good in everything that he did. He drew well. He designed well. He did everything. There wasn't anything that he couldn't do. He'd work all the time, every minute of the time he was there, he was always working. He'd get so much work that we would have to go to the dump to have a funeral. He always wanted a funeral, and he taped this box of beautiful things he did. I don't know why I didn't stop him, but he wanted to do it. He burned his work. Then he'd start all over again. I think we did this a couple of times while he was there.

MEH: Did he call it a funeral?

RA: [AFFIRMATIVE] He was going to a funeral and he cremated his work. Whatever he did, he always came up with great costumes and headdresses and he was wonderful.

MEH: How do you remember Johanna Jalowetz?

RA: Oh, she was wonderful, too. I mean, she had her Sunday – I never really went to her Texaco opera – Sunday opera at her house. Or was it Saturday. I can't remember. It was from eleven to two or something. She'd always have her opera from New York – Texaco. I think Texaco was the sponsor then. She was great to talk to. I mean, she was – She had a lot of experience and I think having that experience plus being a very kind person. She was very generous. I think, by and large, the teachers were very generous at Black Mountain College. To think that they would work for five dollars a month – room and board and five dollars a month – year after year was pretty amazing. I think in the end the highest salary was about sixty dollars a month. They worked for almost nothing because they were dedicated to the idea of Black Mountain. You can't find that these days. Today you have to get a lot to even teach. But there are people still who will come and do something because they believe in it. My effort is to get the artist finally paid. So, that was the purpose of – because many of the artists work for two hundred a month in the very beginning. So, my focus now is to get parity for artists so that they're treated like equals to a teacher and the officials or the administrators will finally accept that. I mean, like you pay a policeman. You pay a fireman. You pay an attorney. And now you have to pay the artist because the artist is an important part of education, and you can't teach art, or you shouldn't teach art with only a degree in arts education. No, I don't think that you can really teach something unless you've done it. That's what Black Mountain taught is that you have to – even if you're

young and you're young and you're doing it, I think it's important that you are doing it right along with the students. I think that that's a great way to work.

MEH: Going back to Black Mountain. Did you ever leave the campus to go out into the community?

RA: Thomas Wolfe. We went to see Thomas Wolfe's house and we did a few touristy things like that. But we went to a movie with Black Mountain [College] wasn't segregated but the South was. I think. I'm not sure whether we actually took Delores Fullman, who was from Chicago, to a movie, you know. I'm trying to remember whether we had a rumble seat. Peggy had a rumble seat, and we went occasionally to Peek's Tavern to dance and have a beer. You know, we were old enough to have beer and see the square dancing, the what do you call it? Albert would know. Then we went to – we didn't – I'm trying to think where we went other than those places. We didn't go very – I never went out very much at all because I didn't have a car. People who had a car would go to South Carolina to get their booze because North Carolina was a dry state then, wasn't it?

MEH: Buncombe County was.

RA: Buncombe, right.

MEH: The college was integrated at the time.

RA: That first summer Mary Washington – Mary Parks Washington was there with a student from Chicago. Then the next year Delores Fullman got a Rosenberg grant and came for a year to study voice with Mrs. Jalowetz. Bimbus – Charlotte Schlesinger – used Delores Fullman in the chorus we had. Then,

Jacob Lawrence came that summer of 1946 with Gwendolyn Knight. He was a very young painter at that time. Then Leo Amino was Japanese and I was Japanese and Ike Nakata was. So, in a way it was integrated and especially in the South it was – our cooks were George and Cornelia and Mallory [MEH: the correct spelling is Malrey although students often use the more familiar Mallory.] and they were black. They lived on the campus. They had their own house.

MEH: Having suffered racial discrimination yourself, did you identify with the black students or did you feel that was a separate issue?

RA: No, I thought it was great. I thought it was wonderful that these students were there. I don't know that I thought about it very much. I do remember when we were going to Mexico on the bus – Greyhound Bus – we got to Joplin, Missouri, and my sister and I didn't know whether to go into the "colored" restroom or "white". So, I think we ended up going into the colored one because we figured that we were colored. But I was very happy at Black Mountain that that was happening, that they took black students. They also had Carol Brice there singing one summer. It was the summer before I came. But she sang. She was there for a summer, I think.

MEH: How do you remember Raushenberg at Black Mountain?

RA: He was in Albers class and he'd come from Port Arthur, I think. At the time he was a window display person. He came and he met Sue Weil there [MEH: They had met in Paris.] They became very fast friends. They were working a lot together. He painted and she painted. I can't remember whether it was Sue or

Robert but they did a lot of things together at the time. He was sweet. He was really sweet. We did a dance with Betty – Betty Jennerjahn, Betty Schmitt then. We did a dance called Rites of Spring?

MEH: Stravinsky.

RA: Stravinsky, yes. We had torches and everything, and we ran down the [LAUGHTER] the hill. I mean, the road in front of the dining hall and down into the meadow below that. We did this dance. He and I danced. He just had a loin cloth which I thought was pretty revolutionary. But we danced and a Rites of Spring dance, very primitive. But, anyway, it was a lot of fun. We did a lot of things like that were just fun. But he was not very vocal in the class. I mean, he didn't challenge Albers or speak up or anything like that. I think he was intimidated by Albers. Then in the studio they did these kind of purple figures, and they did a lot. He and Sue were very active.

MEH: What were the purple figures about/

RA: I think there was a nude. I think it was hers or his. I can't remember. It might have been hers. I can't remember anything specific. I just sort of remember their experimenting. Trying things out.

MEH: You stayed for the summer of 1948 when Buckminster Fuller came down. What was he like?

RA: He came from Chicago. Albers invited him. That's one thing about Albers was he invited anybody, not because they shared his point of view. He wanted – he wanted diversity. He invited de Kooning. He invited John Cage. He invited Bucky and no one knew who he was. He came from Chicago. I'm not sure

whether he came from the Institute of Design, he came. He came in his Studebaker and a tiny aluminum trailer that looked just like an egg. He came and he spoke to us. It was the most fascinating lecture that we'd ever had. He threw all these models on the stage. He had a three-foot dome like this globe. He jumped on it and it popped up. He says, "We're going to do this. We're going to make a dome." He'd never made a dome before. So, it happened at Black Mountain. He calculated. He had his class. Everything – and he used – He brought rolls and rolls of Venetian blind – about two or three inches. He calculated – they calculated the red went with the blue and the yellow. They were all color coded. It didn't go up. So, he said, "Well, I miscalculated." So, he went back to the drawing board, and the next year he came with something that worked. That was the beginning of his domes, I think. It was very exciting. He was like a mathematician, magician, engineer, structural engineer, an inventor. All this. He had all of us just mesmerized by it. Kenneth Snelson was there. He was going to study with Albers. Something happened. He went with Bucky. Then in that period while he was working on things, he discovered the tensegrity. It was never clear on who invented it, but, you know, it was like Bucky was there; Kenneth was there. Working together they got it. He carried it in the air, and the air carried and it stayed rigid. That was very exciting at the time.

MEH: Did you – how did Bucky interact with the community?

RA: He was very good. He was friendly. That summer John Cage, Lippold – Richard Lippold –, Merce Cunningham. Arthur Penn was a student then. They decided to do the Erik Satie play which was translated by M.C.

MEH: The Ruse of Medusa.

RA: Helen Livingston was hired to do that but Arthur Penn took it over. Bucky had never acted so Arthur made him the Duke [MEH: Baron] It was a very funny, crazy thing. He made me a barber pole out of aluminum because I was cutting hair. I was the barber at the school. I cut his hair, and then he made this barber pole for me. Richard Lippold made a little radiator cap for Albert's Model-A. It was a wild time, that we were able to be playful like that all the time, although it was all very serious. It was very playful, too.

MEH: In a way, it was learning the way children learn.

RA: We were like – felt like a child learning all these things. Bucky always said the child is born comprehensive. You know, the feeling, touching, mental. Hunger. All these things are together in them. Gradually we separate them and we separate our behavior. Bucky always watches children because he sees how they do things, and he learns a lot from watching them. That's how he thinks comprehensively. That's one of the great things that he was trying to teach us, not to make a dome, but how to think, act and feel at the same time. That's why I think pottery's so good because you have to do all those things in one minute. You have to get your mind up to par, your eyes, your experience, your feeling, and your hands touch, all happening at the same time. That's how you make a

good pot. You don't make it by thinking, "Now this is going to be like the Peruvian." You just do it. He taught us how to just do it.

MEH: Did you study with de Kooning that summer? Was he teaching?

RA: No, I prepared his bed [LAUGHTER] for Elaine and him in one of the cottages behind Albers. The cottages were there and the faculty lived in them. Also, that was when Richard Lippold and his wife Louise and two children. They were there just for the summer, just to be there. They didn't teach anything.

MEH: How would you describe that summer? It seems like it was really a special time at the college.

RA: Well, I remember de Kooning had a show in the dining hall on the walls. We ate on the porch and on the walls were his paintings. There were a few people who thought, "What is this man doing at Black Mountain College – so unlike Albers." But, you know, Albers was very smart. When you think of it, he brought these people together, and the kind of people he brought together was pretty comprehensive, nothing like – He didn't invite people like him, but he invited people who were not like him. I thought it was great. De Kooning, I think they snickered about his paintings, you know. They couldn't understand his paintings. I didn't understand his paintings myself. I still don't understand his paintings. I still don't understand what he's doing, and I don't understand that movement at all. I don't understand Abstract Expressionism, and I never understood any of that. But it's there, and, of course, there's a huge market for it. Rauschenberg and Noland. They all took a direction -- for me it's interesting to watch, but it has nothing to do with me. That was what was great about Black

Mountain. It didn't produce a single direction. You don't know what Black Mountain stood for really.

MEH: There's no Black Mountain style.

RA: There's no style. I'm not sure how you can explain that.

MEH: Did you study with Bolotowsky at all?

RA: I studied with him some that year that Albers was gone on a sabbatical. I was never close to him like Leo Krikorian. Greg Masurovsky and others who went and really studied painting because they were interested in painting. But I was not that interested in painting, but I took it. I don't even know whether I took his class. What did I do? I took American History with Corkran, and I studied drawing with Bolotowsky. He taught drawing. I took his class in drawing.

MEH: What do you think was the basis for the conflict between Albers and Bolotowsky? Was that more of a student competition thing?

RA: I don't think there was anything between them. There was Knute Stiles, who was a real student of Bolotowsky's. I don't think it had anything to do with Albers and Bolotowsky.

[End of Side 1, Tape 2. Beginning of Side 2, Tape 2.]

RA: Probably Bolotowsky wanted more for the students to find a style, and Albers was not interested in a style. I think that was probably the difference between Bolotowsky – Bolotowsky tried to get the students to find a way to paint, and Albers was not interested in that. He was interested in more of a way of seeing. That's why a lot of the students liked Bolotowsky because he was encouraging them to do that. I think most teachers try to do that for their students.

MEH: Were there any painters who were particularly held in esteem at the college?

RA: At the time. Well, Albers always talked about Cezanne. Cezanne was his hero. A lot of – when you look at Cezanne's still lifes you can see how Albers directed his painting classes like that. That painting of Elaine [REFERS TO PORTRAIT OF ASAWA BY ELAINE SCHMITT URBAIN] is the way he taught. It is a little more refined than – I don't mean abstract but abstracted, abstracted from Cezanne. If you look at the way he used the white of paper and Albers made a conscious effort of that. Probably – it was probably subconscious or unconscious when Cezanne did it, but he was trying to see something in a certain way, and Albers was trying to teach it. You see a Pissarro or you see another painter in that period where they did color with pinks and oranges and brought them together. They were actually painting it. Albers tried to abstract it out of their painting – maybe not there painting, but he was trying to abstract it so that you could actually study it. He was giving us the study of it. In a way, he always referred back to Cezanne.

MEH: What about Klee?

RA: Klee was a contemporary of his, and he spoke of Klee with respect, but I don't think that he tried what Klee was doing, because his was pretty personal. Klee's work is almost too personal. It would be difficult to use him as an example. But he always talked about Klee and then he invited Feininger in 1945. I remember Elaine writing to me and saying she thought Albers was great, but greater than Albers is Feininger. She wrote a letter to me saying that. She became very, very close to Feininger that summer and long after that they might have

corresponded. Elaine is such a fascinating person. If you could sort out the things that she has and has done. It's not done – she wouldn't be able to explain it. You would have to see it to understand it. When I went to see her in Ossining… She was in Tarrytown when I went to visit her. She had scraps of paper here, scraps of paper there. All of her notes. She has everything. If you could understand what Black Mountain was, you would find it in her papers. She wasn't there that long. She was there for a year and a summer, but I think she epitomizes Black Mountain in a pure kind of way. I'm not sure what I mean, but she – and even Lorna was another person like that. Lorna and I were very close at Black Mountain College. We had good times together. Lorna, Ray Johnson, Elaine were quite close friends at Black Mountain.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT. END OF INTERVIEW.]