

Interviewee: ROSEMARY RAYMOND LAX STOLLER
Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS
Location: Berkeley, CA
Date: February 23, 1998
Media: Videocassettes 1, Audiocassettes 1
Interview no.: 201
Transcription: Ellen Dissanayake, January 30-31, 2001; corrected by Mary Emma Harris, March 2001. Converted from Word Perfect by MEH, March 2014.

[BEGINNING OF AUDIOCASSETTE 1, SIDE 1]

MEH: Rosemary, when were you at Black Mountain College?

RRS: I think it was 1948 [1949], I had been at Alfred, New York State College of Ceramics, for my first year in art school. That summer I wanted to go to some kind of summer program. I found out about it at the ceramic school library. They advertised somewhere that they had a summer program, so I decided to go there.

MEH: Where are you from?

RRS: I was brought up in Chicago. I went to the University of Chicago when Hutchins was there, so I graduated rather early. Then I never wanted to read another book and I decided I really wanted to go to art school. That's why I chose Alfred. There was a fairly technical program there, but the first two years offered a generalized art background training and some design. I was very excited that first year. I was ready to discover all I could about art. The thing I remember about Black Mountain was getting there from Penn Station in New York. I came in on a Lehigh Railroad train from Alfred and spent the night at Penn Station. That's memorable. I sat across from a very strange old woman

who was riffling through her various parcels. In the morning at about 5:30 the station master came through and pounded on the ends of all the seats. We all woke up and pulled ourselves together. Then I caught my train to North Carolina. I do remember how wonderful it was, the trip up to Black Mountain, the last part of it with the mountain and the train switching back and forth. It was a place that I had never been before.

MEH: Had you ever been in the South before?

RRS: No, at that point I hadn't. I'd been in New England. I'd been in the Midwest. But this was all very new. I think my experience was so different from Claude's because it was a summer program. A lot of the people who were normally there were not. I took a weaving course from Marli Ehrmann, because Anni Albers wasn't there that summer. I think I was the only one in the workshop because I can remember being alone and working at a large loom that I had helped to string and learning the different patterns which she had given me. I guess I was learning what weaving was all about. The other thing I loved was chorus. There was a musician -- I think his name was Robert Mann.

MEH: The name doesn't ring a bell. Singing. Erwin Bodky I don't think would have been teaching singing.

RRS: He wasn't there.

MEH: John Cage could not have been teaching.

RRS: No.

MEH: It may have been a student.

RRS: He was from New York. He may have been there just for the summer. We were an a capella group and I had never done that before. We sang a lot of early music. I learned a lot and loved it. I sat in on some of Buckminster Fuller's talks and classes. They put up a geodesic dome, and I was very aware of that. I liked my roommate, who was one of the Canadians who had come down with Bucky. It was interesting for me to be on my own, to be in a new place. I think that was really what I remember.

MEH: When you read the flyer up at Alfred, did you know who any of these people were? Did you know who Fuller was, or de Kooning, or any of these people?

RRS: I don't remember. I certainly knew who de Kooning was, but I don't remember wanting to go because there were painters there. I wanted to experience another kind of art place. Since I was in a craft/design school, I was drawn to the weaving program. I remember Charles Olson was there. We ate on the porch by the lake, in an eating area with big tables. I remember sitting at his table several times. The other people who were teaching there were very accessible. So there was good conversation.

MEH: I'm not sure I have the right summer. Who was teaching painting? I think it was the summer of '49 that you were there.

RRS: Could be.

MEH: Was someone named Emerson Woelffer teaching painting?

RRS: I don't remember.

MEH: But John Cage and Merce Cunningham weren't there, or (OVERTALK) Bill de Kooning.

RRS: Well, they might have been there.

MEH: You don't remember. Marli Ehrmann was there I think in the summer of '49.

RRS: Well, then that would be the summer.

MEH: Fuller went back that summer, right. It would have been the summer of '49.

RRS: That was it then. I remembered Bucky Fuller more.

MEH: Right. How do you remember Fuller?

RRS: As being a nonstop talker and having a group of disciples around him.

MEH: It was the summer of '49 – from the Institute of Design.

RRS: And the fact that there was always a project going on. I was eager to join any project that was happening and climbing up the mountain to check certain things out at odd times of day (LAUGHS). I felt very curious about a number of things. I do remember drawing. I was not taking a drawing class. I remember going out in the meadow where there were cows and drawing cows and having a wonderful time, figuring out what was happening with their spines and the weight of them sinking into the earth. There was also dance. I remember being part of the dance group. That may have been with an Indian couple, Vashi and Veena.

MEH: Did you ever leave the college to go into the surrounding area?

RRS: I didn't. No, it seems to me I stayed very close. I made a few friends whom I was in touch with for a little while, but it was a summer that was not connected with any other part of my life. It was good in the sense that I learned that I wanted to pursue a career in design and art. It helped me, after my first year at art school at Alfred, to know that I was in the right place. I felt very comfortable,

free to walk around and poke my nose in various classes. But it was definitely a summer -- apart.

MEH: Since you were there such a short time, you really don't have that -- particular memories of classes or events. Are there other things that you've remembered? Images or anecdotes?

RRS: I think mostly it was the physical setting that stimulated me. I felt free to roam around. I felt very comfortable there. There were some social events that were fun. I met a boy who thought I was wonderful, and there was a lot of music. The chorus was a new experience, and when I returned to Alfred, I joined the choir there and kept on singing. After I married and we went to New York, I joined another chorus, The Cantata Singers. Music was an important part of the summer.

MEH: What was Charles Olson like?

RRS: My impression of him was that he was quite amusing. I just saw him at the table when we were eating together with other professors or teachers. (LAUGHS) I remember once when a massive dish of noodles was on the table, I said, "Oh oodles of noodles!" He thought that was (LAUGHS) clever. I was quite wrapped up in myself that summer. I felt very adventurous, but I didn't get totally absorbed in any one pursuit.

MEH: Did you have a study in the Studies Building?

RRS: Since I was in weaving, I didn't. I had the weaving studio practically to myself. I would visit friends who were in the studies, so I know the Studies Building. That may have been where they had a gathering place for parties and things. I

remember we had several -- a costume party and a couple of dances. Much later when I met Claude and we were talking about past histories, the fact that he had gone to Black Mountain intrigued me. Then we started to talk about it.

MEH: I wondered whether – I mean you were there at very different times.

RRS: Very different times.

MEH: Did you meet through other Black Mountain people, or totally unrelated?

RRS: We met through his brother. That was quite a few years later had married other people and had had families. But since he and I have been together, I've been very aware of his Black Mountain friends and the real connection among these friends.

MEH: Did you work on the farm at Black Mountain?

RRS: No, I just drew cows. I don't remember any Work Program that they had.

MEH: When you left, you went back to Alfred?

RRS: Yes.

MEH: At Alfred did you know any of the potters who later went to Black Mountain? Was Robert Turner there then or Karen Karnes or David Weinrib?

RRS: Yes he [TURNER] was a graduate student when I was there, In fact I saw him a couple of summers ago at Haystack when he gave a workshop. Who was the other potter you mentioned?

MEH: David Weinrib or Karen Karnes?

RRS: Yes, Karen was there. They were all there as graduate students. It was a very interesting time at Alfred then, because it was before the new building had been built and it was a very small cohesive school. I was there three years.

MEH: And you've worked as a potter since?

RRS: No. (OVERTALK) My training was in industrial ceramic design and I married a fellow student. We had a design office in New York for a number of years and designed a lot of products for different companies.

MEH: What was the name of the business?

RS: It was Michael Lax Associates. We had a small group of friends from Alfred whom we were very close to for quite a few years. Before I met Claude, I met Ati and Charles Forberg in New York. That was the first connection I had with remembering Black Mountain.

MEH: Now have you continued to work in clay, since you came here?

RRS: I make hand-built garden sculpture from California sewer tile clay. I taught for a while in New York – children's classes at 92nd Street Y and that got me back working with clay. Before that I had been designing products on paper or with plaster models. I also did some textile design for the office so maybe my course in weaving at Black Mountain wasn't a total loss (LAUGHS).

MEH: Do you have other memories of the college? Things we haven't covered or topics you think are of importance?

RRS: No. I think my impressions that summer were that there were all kinds of interesting things going on, and I was perfectly free to join and take part. That was a very nice experience. Also that I had many interests, which was fine. I guess I haven't changed that much, when I think about it now. (LAUGHS)

MEH: Who was your roommate at Black Mountain?

RRS: She was a Canadian girl. I think she was from Toronto.

MEH: Not Joy –

RRS: Joy. Joy Ballon. Have you interviewed her?

MEH: No, I haven't, but she's in Canada still. Her address is on Claude's Black Mountain address list. Do you have any memories of Ken Snelson?

RRS: Oh, I do! Of course. I do remember, because I saw him later.

MEH: How do you remember him at Black Mountain?

RRS: I remember Ken as being earnest. He was at Black Mountain that summer because of Buckminster Fuller. I met him when I went into those classes. I met him again in New York maybe ten years later. He's done some interesting work since then. Is he still living in the Village in New York?

MEH: [IRRELEVANT REMARKS]

RRS: I feel that my experience at Black Mountain was part of a mosaic and important in a personal way, encouraging me to follow my inclinations and make my own decisions.

MEH: Did you take the train back up to Alfred?

RRS: Yes (LAUGHS). I don't remember that trip. I just remember going. I did take the train back. I think it must have been at least two and a half day trip, because Alfred was about an eight hour trip from New York. Alfred was the more formative part of my experience.

MEH: Undoubtedly. You were there what, three years?

RRS: [AFFIRMATIVE]. I met my husband there. You know that was pretty formative.

MEH: You had two daughters?

RRS: Yes. My younger daughter is an artist and in the art business. My older daughter is in film. They're both quite visual. I mean their strengths are visual. I encouraged my younger daughter to go to Alfred, but she went to Bennington. Bennington had a very big work program when she was there. So all of her jobs were in the art business, either in museums or galleries. I think that was formative for her. [PAUSE] I don't think that I have any other memories. I'm thinking of other things that are not connected with Black Mountain.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]