

Interviewee: ALEXANDER ELIOT  
Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS  
Location: Venice, California  
Date: February 8, 1998  
Media: Audio tapes (2) Video tape (1)  
Interview no.: 216  
Transcription: Ellen Dissanayake, February 1999  
Corrected against audio and videotapes by Mary Emma Harris,  
September 1999. Converted from Word Perfect by MEH, February  
2015.

**[BEGINNING OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1]**

[INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS NOT TRANSCRIBED]

[COMMENTS BY JANE ELIOT]

**MEH:** Mr. Eliot, how did you come to be at Black Mountain College?

**AE:** My uncle, Thomas Hopkinson Eliot, who was at that time a Congressman, got to know of the college and he offered to help me get there. I didn't want to go to Harvard, which was the family tradition. My great-grandfather had been president of Harvard. I didn't feel that I was very bright, and I didn't want to face the whole snob side and academic side of the thing. So, I went to my father and said, "I really would rather not go to Harvard." He said, "Fine. I wouldn't want a son of mine to go to a university, the President of which helped to condemn Sacco and Vanzetti."

When he was at Harvard, my father had started the Socialist Club and invited Emma Goldman to speak. So he had that tradition back of him as well as the Harvard tradition. He was something of a rebel himself, so he understood my rebellious nature and offbeat desires.

**MEH:** So you're a New Englander by birth?

**AE:** Oh, yes, born in Cambridge.

**MEH:** But you had not heard about Black Mountain. I think this was in 1936?

**AE:** I guess so. I hadn't heard anything. Uncle Tom, as I say, put me on to it.

**MEH:** What was your uncle's name?

**AE:** Thomas H. Eliot wrote President Roosevelt's the Social Security legislation, and then became a Congressman. Later he served as Chancellor of Washington University in St. Louis, and of the Salzburg Festival. He once came to BMC and gave us a lecture on self-government, which fell on deaf ears. We had no conception of how to govern ourselves. He'd brought along his wonderful bride. I think it was on their honeymoon. Lois is still, still with us – one of the great women of the world.

**MEH:** And your father's name, what was your father's name?

**AE:** Samuel Atkins Eliot.

**MEH:** What did he teach?

**AE:** He founded the drama department at Smith College. He taught play-writing, theater workshop, Shakespeare, Greek drama, and Asiatic drama. He'd been a Little Theater actor and director before coming to Smith.

**MEH:** Had you, had you ever been to the South before?

**AE:** Never. Somebody put me together with a fellow named Everit Herter from California, who had a Ford convertible. He was a rich kid, and we drove down together. I remember we got completely lost at one point, and I said,

"Well, let's stop here and ask in this roadhouse." It was a rural roadhouse. I went in, and everybody was Negro, and they were just aghast to see me. They didn't know what to make of it. I asked wherever I was, and it was like a bad dream. They couldn't tell me. They didn't know or care where I was. They knew where they were. They knew that I didn't belong there. That was my first introduction, and then of course the toilets were separate and all that stuff, and it was horrible.

As you know, John Rice took the position that the only gentlemen left in the South are the blacks, and I felt that in a way. We couldn't have black students because of the local pressures. But we did have black help. We had very little help, because the idea was to, as you know, to do our own housekeeping and farming and so forth and so on.

One of the help was a man named Roy, a — I don't know his last name — a black, and he was put in charge of the farm crew. So I worked under his guidance quite a bit, and he was a real moral force. He was a gentleman. He would guide by example and by looks of shocked disapproval. I respected him at least as much as I did Rice and Albers. I'm afraid his moral teachings didn't take too well with me, but they were there, and I remember them very well. I once fought some other kid on the job and threw him into a ditch. Roy was shocked! I was kinda' proud of myself [LAUGHS], and I was quite surprised to get this reaction.

**MEH:** He was shocked because you had fought?

**AE:** Yes, he was very shocked that I would use any violence. Violence was something that disturbed him very much, and he thought it absolutely inappropriate. Oddly, he himself was jailed for "Disturbing of the peace." They said that he had thrown a boulder — he was a huge, strong man — that he had thrown a boulder into a party, that he was drunk and, and furious about something, and that he had thrown this boulder, and that he had to be put away. There was nothing the college could do about it. So he was sent to the penitentiary, and that was the last we saw of him. That was one of the darker aspects of life at Black Mountain that particular year.

**MEH:** Had you had much connection in the North with black people, or was this your first —

**AE:** Not at all. I'd hardly seen black people except on the, on the train going into New York. You'd see them from the windows of the train in Harlem. That was about it.

**MEH:** What..?

**AE:** No, I take that back. Black musicians. Fats Waller came to Springfield, Massachusetts, right near my home in Northampton. At that point I was dating a girl a good deal older than myself who was something of a knockout. So they let us in. I was really too young to be there, but they let us in, and she requested Blackberry Jam, and Fats' eyebrows lifted — those Romanesque eyes of his opened wide as if to say, "Chicken Brown is not so dumb. Let's give her some!" He did the piece with—as you

remember—that thundering bass and the tinkling right hand, and it was absolutely fabulous. We were at a table right by the pantry door, way in the back. As he came past to get out between sets, to get a smoke outside or whatever, my date put a palm to his paunch and detained him with a smile. And asked for an autograph. He bent over and gave her a big smooch and said, "That's my autograph!" and waddled off, chuckling to himself.

After a moment's embarrassment, I came to with a start, and realized that he'd honored, he'd desegregated my date and, by extension, me. So, that was nice. There were other experiences of that sort. But not many, until after Black Mountain.

Am I too verbose?

**MEH:** No, no. It's wonderful.

[BREAK IN TAPING]

**AE:** It's encouraging to be asked questions. It sort of brings things back.

**MEH:** Yeah. So let's—We'll stay on the issue for a while of your, of your relationship with blacks and being in the South for the first time. Did you ever—Did you ever go into town, into the village of Black Mountain or Asheville?

**AE:** Oh, sure. But as I say, I don't think I have much to offer on that. I had the typical experiences, shocks and surprises and it's certainly extraordinary how quickly one gets used to it, too.

**MEH:** True. So, did you have any idea when you went to Black Mountain what you wanted to study?

**AE:** Oh, yes. I was a natural artist. I'd already had an exhibition at the Smith College Museum of Art, and I'd been shown at the Atheneum at Hartford. I felt that art was my career, and I wanted very much to study with Josef Albers.

**MEH:** What sort of art had you done before Black Mountain? Where had you taken lessons?

**AE:** I hadn't, really. There was a marvelous teacher—Madame Cheruy—at my prep school, Loomis Institute in Windsor, Connecticut. She was a friend, maybe lover, of Edward Hopper and a fine artist of a very limited sort. She did great wash drawings of cathedral interiors. She was a very pious Catholic. She gave me the run of her studio during my years at Loomis. I also had the run of the school's Art Library. It had been stashed away in the powerhouse, because the headmaster felt that it was a little too stimulating for the boys. Unbeknownst to him, I had a key. I learned an awful lot from those books with their reproductions, and also from having the run of Madame's studio. So, yes, I did have an art education — both art history and the practical side — even before I got to Black Mountain. But I wanted to learn what was going on now. I didn't know much about Albers, but it turned out he was an extraordinary teacher.

**MEH:** What do you think made him an extraordinary teacher?

**AE:** Character. The first drawing lesson, he looks at us with contempt and says "I sink none of you can drrrrraw a straight line." [IMITATING GERMAN ACCENT] I wasn't dumb enough to put up my hand, but a couple of the kids did, and he gave his very tight little smile and said, "O.K. Please do ass I do!" He turned to the blackboard and — walking, drew a straight line the entire breadth of the board. Perfectly straight. It wasn't just drawing. It was dancing and drawing at the same time. So, the hands drifted down again, and a low, a deep sign arose from the group. There were ten of us, boys and girls. He said, "Don't worry. In one week, all of you will do this." [LAUGHS]. It was a worry. You know, how on earth could we do that? Well, we did it. He was a terrific disciplinarian.

**MEH:** How did he teach you to do it?

**AE:** Just practice, just do it, do it, do it, do it, do it, and you find you can do it once you've, you know—And then "Okay, now circles." [IMITATING GERMAN ACCENT] I can still draw a perfect circle. And, and then ellipses and then squares and then letters. Freehand. Large, large letters. Not just the lines, but the printed forms of the letters, with the outlines. And then, "Okay, now with the other hand." "Okay, now with your toes." Pencil between your toes. We had these newsprint pads, big pads of newsprint—cheap enough so that we could practice and practice. I think he taught all of us — he certainly taught me — to draw. It's like riding a bicycle, the way he taught it. I asked him once, "What's it all about?" And he said, in his gnomish style, "Control is freedom." That sums it up really.

Then we went on from drawing to color and Werklehre, as you know, effect-making. That was much the toughest.

**MEH:** Werklehre?

**AE:** Werklehre. Oh, terrible, horrible.

**MEH:** How was that?

**AE:** Diaghilev's challenge which was which he gave to Picasso and Stravinsky and others was, "Astonish me!". Albers' challenge was tougher than that. He said, "Astonish your peers." I remember one of my first attempts. I found a boot off the dump, a broken farmer's boot, with the nails sticking out and so forth. I got a shoe polishing set and I polished it and polished it and polished it until you could see your face in it. I brought this in. It passed. It was a fantastic object. Fantastic. It was museum quality. It just barely passed.

**MEH:** What was the boot demonstrating?

**AE:** If you could explain it, then it wouldn't pass. But there was something astonishing about that boot. Another time I brought in a tray of cotton batting, batting. Between two layers of the cotton I'd concealed some little pieces of colored paper so that the cotton seemed to be iridescent. It was greeted with complete silence, by the group. Albers would just sit back. He very seldom spoke at all about these things. But Ev Herter got up and bent over to pick up the top layer of cotton in an investigative mode, and showed what was underneath. So, I kicked his ass, and he fell into the

exhibit. Albers spoke, which he rarely did in those sessions: "Gute, I am convinced by zis!"

I spent only two years at BMC. Toward the end of the second year I told Albers I wanted to go to the Boston Museum School and get some academic training. "It's a mistake," he said. "You won't learn anything new there at all, except cooking." I didn't believe him, but it was true.

**MEH:** Did you do any actual painting at Black Mountain?

**AE:** Very little.

As a graduation exhibit at the Boston Museum School, I did a still life, and I put a lot of sun-thickened linseed oil and varnish on it at the last minute, in order to push it back into the already deep frame, to give a *trompe l'oeil* effect. A few flies gathered around and got stuck overnight. So, I exhibited it with the flies, but they were not quite in the right places. So, that's another story. Nothing to do with Black Mountain.

**MEH:** Well, maybe it was an acceptable *matière* at that point.

**AE:** [LAUGHS]. That was long before anybody thought of such things.

**MEH:** What about color? What do you remember about his color class?

**AE:** I remember I wasn't very good at it. Anni— whose weaving course I should have taken, but I thought it was sissy —told me that I didn't concentrate. She said, "You've got to concentrate harder." That's what Gertrude Stein said to Hemingway. I didn't know what she meant, and I'm still not sure. But I know color is the most— It's the mystery, it's the secret

and sacred mystery of art. I'm still trying to learn something about color.

Back then I didn't really have a clue, even, to the spiritual side of color.

But there were some very brilliant colorists among the students. It was just a question of taking colored papers and pasting them, which Matisse did later on, to considerable effect.

**MEH:** Who were other serious art students, then?

**AE:** Alex Reed. Very serious. I don't think he was very talented, but he was very serious. Dick Andrews. Very talented but not at all serious. His studio was next to mine. Once Albers went in and screamed at him, yelled at him. I couldn't believe it because Albers had never done that with me. Later I asked Dick, "What happened? What on earth did you do to trigger that?" He said, "I don't know. He just wants me to change." Dick wasn't going to change for anybody. I don't know what happened to him. I think he wound up teaching art in some high school. Do you know?

**MEH:** He taught art and painted. I'll tell you later.

**AE:** That's all I can think of offhand.

**MEH:** Where were the art classes held?

**AE:** All over. Mostly down in the big hall.

**MEH:** You mean the main room?

**AE:** The main room, yeah.

**MEH:** Now Xanti Schawinsky was there also when you were there, wasn't he?  
And he was teaching art?

**AE:** Yeah, well, he was teaching theater workshop and some art too. But Albers elbowed him out of the art side pretty fast. So, he concentrated on theater. He lightened us up a lot. He was a very fun guy. I remember at one point he wanted me to mop the floor— to create a performance space which would be relatively clean. I mopped and mopped and mopped, and I couldn't get it clean. So, then I blurred the edges of the circle so that you couldn't really tell how clean it was by contrast to the unwashed part of the floor. Xanti brought the whole class in. He said, "Now that's intelligence. That's the way you've got to think. You've got to think how to do these things." He got us to do like six foot ears and noses and lips and things, and cavort around with them held this way –

**MEH:** Flat panels, not three-dimensional.

**AE:** Yeah, flat panels. To Stravinsky music and stuff. He put on some fantastic shows. Schawinsky also taught us to play bocce. He'd arrived with his bocce balls in a net bag. "You Americans are too serious. It's because you haven't suffered." Which was perfectly true, of course. He hit it right on the nose.

**MEH:** What else do you — Did you take part in any — He did the Light, Sound, Movement workshop production Spectrodrama. Do you remember that performance? Did you take part in it?

**AE:** I don't know what you're referring to. Is that the one with the, the time with the pendulum thing and so forth?

**MEH:** Very possibly, yeah. The people did use the flat panels and wore paper cutouts, people in paper cutouts and various things.

**AE:** That sounds right. Yeah, and he did a sound poem, just nonsense vowels and consonants. [MAKES FACSIMILE] and so forth, with his face in white makeup and spotlight. Dark eyes, big mouth. Yeah. And this red ball is coming down across the whole stage, pendulum style and up again, and the figure is standing there all in black with white gloves behind it. [BEGINNING OF VIDEOTAPE ONLY SECTION] And Schawinsky's voice from the back says, "What time is it?". [END OF VIDEOTAPE ONLY SECTION]

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

**AE:** And the fellow in black says, "We are between the past and the future. Be more precise!" The ball is— [CLAPS HANDS ONCE] He catches it. It's a lovely idea.

**MEH:** What was the— You told me that he taught you to play bocce. Apparently, he was a very spirited man.

**AE:** Very spirited.

**MEH:** Do you have any other recollections about him, just as a person?

**AE:** Well, we became friends. I used to see him, you know, the next twenty years or so I saw him on and off in New York. I have nothing but good memories of Schawinsky.

Oh, one, one funny thing. I painted my studio absolute white which was the sort of Bauhaus rule. No covering colors, no gray in it, just pure

pure calcimine. But I mixed in a can of red, and I didn't stir it. So that parts would sort of blush. And I was very proud of it. Schawinsky comes in, "No. Terrible." "What's terrible about it?" He said, "You should take your red. Put a red square on the ceiling and everything else white."

Albers asked me to bring him drawings every Friday night I think it was. That was a special favor he did me. I'd quite proudly bring him whole sets, and he'd go through them. "No, boy, no. Too sexy." That would be that Friday night. But then he'd say, "Break your habits," and if I was doing everything skinny, he'd suggest "break your habits" and I'd do them all round the next week, and so forth. It was fantastic training.

Then, when Rice wanted to not renew my scholarship, Albers arranged that it was renewed.

**MEH:** Why, why was Rice not willing to renew it?

**AE:** Well, I'd begun in Rice's Plato class and so forth as an eager kid. I wasn't a very admiring sort, though. I was always a little impertinent. Then I had questioned some of his questions. His playing Socrates seemed to me kind of funny, because he was certainly no Socrates. We fell out. He didn't really like me in his class. He was always empire building, of course, just as Albers was. So, he called me into his office near the end of the first year and said, "We're not renewing your scholarship."

**MEH:** Who's we?

**AE:** He was the Rector, but the college was supposed to be a democracy. And I said, "Why not?" And he said, "Well, you'll always be a second-rater, and we don't want you."

So, I said something very rude, which I won't repeat, and trudged up the stairs to Albers' studio and recounted the story. Albers listened, not with any overt sympathy, but just listening. When I finished, he said, "Boy that never happened. It never happened. And you will be back." That was all. He asserted his power at the time, his growing power.

Rice had told me that he'd already written my parents. So, I went right down to the village and sent a telegram saying, "Ignore Black Mountain officials. Stop. Pay nothing." Mother thought I must have knocked up one of the students

**MEH:** What was the relationship at that point between Rice and Albers?

**AE:** Tense. Schawinsky was trying to lighten us all up. We always had a party Saturday night. One Saturday, Schawinsky urged us to all come to dinner in costume. Albers didn't fall for it. He was much too dignified to wear a costume, come in disguise. But Rice blackened his little toothbrush mustache and combed his hair down over his brow, put on a brown shirt and a swastika, and he looked exactly, I mean awfully close. He looked too pudgy, but otherwise a good caricature of Hitler. He came stomping in late and gave us the casual Hitler salute. I happened to be at Albers' table, and I stole a glance at him. His first reaction was utter, utter horror. Utter horror. It was just like, you know, like he was alone in a nightmare of

appearances, he was all by himself, just absolutely devastating, horrible.

Then in a split second, he turned from that to utter contempt

**MEH:** You mean utter contempt for Rice.

**AE:** For Rice. You could see it all, right there. That's where Rice lost it. Of course, he didn't mean any harm. It was a would-be humorous, you-don't-understand me gesture that he was trying to make. He thought everybody would laugh. Incredibly stupid on Rice's part. Incredibly crass. I would say that was the seed of his destruction, his downfall.

Although I sided with Albers at the time, over the years I've come to realize that we all owed Rice a lot. He's the man who did it. He's the man who created that whole thing, and Albers, too. We all owe Rice and always will.

**MEH:** You, you must have taken other classes besides Rice's Plato and Albers' courses.

**AE:** I started out taking everything. Then I realized I couldn't and cut back. I don't think I have much of interest to say about the other classes. I used to go to sleep in some of them.

**MEH:** You had said earlier when you were talking about making your decision not to go to Harvard, and you said you didn't really feel that you were very smart, which obviously isn't the case. Do you think it was because you were more drawn to the arts and non-academic things at that point or — ?

**AE:** I was anti-intellectual, actually. I didn't do too well at school. But, of course, I could if I had to. You know, I'd sit up all night and pass the test. If it came

to that, I could do it. But I had no interest. Basically I had no interest in things except girls and jazz and art and stuff like that.

**MEH:** Was their jazz around at Black Mountain then? What type of music was around?

**AE:** As you know, John Evarts gave us piano every Saturday and stuff, and that was all lovely. His music appreciation course, which I took was great fun. Allan Sly, as you know, was there, too. The pop music was at Roy's Roadhouse — another Roy. Roy's Roadhouse a couple of miles down the way. Between Black Mountain village and Asheville. We didn't really have any community in the college. There was a lot of tension, and enemies, and cliques and so forth. To me, our community was dancing the Big Apple at Roy's Roadhouse. The Big Apple where you form a large circle, and each dancer in turn would improvise, like a jazz riff, in the circle's center. It was sort of like Albers' *Werklehre*. You'd try to astonish your peers, do crazy things dancing. Meanwhile, everybody else would be doing the Suzy Q around, or whatever. Most roadhouses had signs saying "No Big Apple here." It was against the law actually, but Roy let us. Roy was sort of a father figure to some of us.

**MEH:** No one has ever described Roy to me.

**AE:** For heaven's sake. He was extraordinary. To me he seemed like a sage. He'd been around a lot, probably in some pretty nefarious stuff. He drank whiskey and Coca Cola, which I thought was a ghastly mixture. He'd put aspirins on top of that. He was bald, with huge boils.

One night Roy's—He went out to see somebody, and I heard a groan. So, I ran out. Roy had been hit with a brick. He was struggling to his feet with blood pouring from his boiled bald head. His two attackers jumped in their pickup. As the pickup turned and came toward us, one of them leaned out and said, "You done my brother a dirty deed!" As they roared away, Roy yelled, "I'll put you in the penitentiary!" He was like a figure in — a still figure in a world that was all in motion. Roy was Roy.

**MEH:** Why would the Big Apple have been illegal?

**AE:** In those days, jazz was considered very bad. It was corrupting the youth. It was exciting their sexual proclivities and so forth.

**MEH:** What was Roy's like, physically in terms of its layout.

**AE:** Oh, a nice big dance space with booths all around on three sides and a bar on the fourth side. And living quarters and stuff for him and all of that in the back. I think that it was financed by Steve Forbes, who was our Mycaenas among the student body. I think he had set Roy up in business. That's my recollection, although it may be mad.

**MEH:** I know at one point, there was so much conflict with the townspeople that he moved Roy — he financed the building of a building outside the city limits.

**AE:** That's it. That's the one.

**MEH:** That's it. Okay, So, he had already moved Roy's at the point to the new building. He did finance the building. Apparently, there had been a lot of

conflict in the village, because Roy's was initially down by the railroad station.

**AE:** I see, yeah.

**MEH:** Buncombe County was dry then. Did you have beer? Is that what you drank there, or—?

**AE:** Must have been. Of course, there was, there was mountain dew, but I don't think we drank it there. We did drink it a lot.

**MEH:** At the college. Where did you get the mountain dew?

**AE:** I don't know. From a farmer's bush? You know, under a farmer's bush? There were places that you could go.

**MEH:** Did you ever go hiking in the mountains?

**AE:** Every day. I mean I didn't go hiking. But I took a walk up to the top of our mountain almost every day. That was what I loved best.

**MEH:** Did you have any association with Ted Dreier?

**AE:** And Bobbie. Lovely people. They were very dear. [PAUSE].

Getting back to Albers' teaching— it was very straightforward. Yet it kind of awakened the philosophic side of one's thinking. It really turned me from a kid who just wanted to express himself — was full of passion and so forth — to somebody really wondered — was sort of wondering and asking, not just looking.

This is just coming to my mind at this moment, I never thought of it before. He probably opened me up intellectually in a way.

**MEH:** I'm going to come back later to what you did when you left Black Mountain. But going back to Black Mountain for a few minutes, do you have any particular recollections of mealtime.

**AE:** Oh, mealtimes. It made so much sense to do our own waiting on table and everything. The idea of the tables being sort of ruled by different people was good. The time came when I switched from Rice's table to Albers' table, and that was a pretty clear reflection of how the politics were going. And those wonderful breakfasts. The cooking seemed awfully good to me. One of Rice's best ideas was that for serious work on yourself, you need to be well fed.

**MEH:** Do you remember the cooks, Jack and Rubye Lipsey?

**AE:** Of course. Again, the only gentlemen left in the South. They were a dear couple, and also impressive human beings. Even as a kid, I could feel that.

**MEH:** What was so marvelous about the breakfasts?

**AE:** You had your choice of whatever: bacon or eggs, any way you wanted them. And grits and — Just fantastic.

**MEH:** The college was pretty isolated. Do you remember any lecturers who came to the college while you were there? There were people dropping in?

**AE:** Sure. Aldous Huxley and Gerald Heard.

**MEH:** What do you remember about their visits? Do you have any particular recollection?

**AE:** Sure. I gave a party for Huxley. At one point I asked about D.H. Lawrence. He'd just edited Lawrence's letters for a book called Phoenix. He said, "The trouble with Lawrence was —"

I've heard that opening a thousand times since, especially in England. But that was the first time I heard it. And, of course, his legs were all wrapped around each other, they were so long and rubbery, and he stooped like this.

Gerald Heard came with him and gave the lecture. The housekeeper, Mrs. Lounsbury, sat down beside me and said, "Oh, Mr. Huxley is lecturing." I said, "That's not Huxley, that's Gerald Heard." "Oh, that's not the man who slept with Mrs. Huxley." I don't know what kind of a ménage they had going when they stopped with us. I think they were on their way across the country to California.

There was a wonderful dancer who came. I think it may have been, that fellow who later had a fantastic career with Cage.

**MEH:** Cunningham, Merce Cunningham?

**AE:** Merce Cunningham. Do you have any record of his—?

**MEH:** Not of his earlier visit.

**AE:** Because this fellow showed up, sort of solitary, tattered, and came for a few days. And I don't think he'd been invited. I think he just showed. And he was almost I would say maybe just a year or two older than me, but completely self-assured. I've never seen such self-assurance. I showed him, showed him my drawings, and he said, "You've got back problems." I

said, "What? I do?" He said, "Yeah, in the small of the back." "How do you know that?" He said, "I can tell from your figure drawings." I used to wake up at four in the morning, every morning, with a sore back. That was true right up until my fifties, when I started practicing Zazen and that got rid of it. But he could see this from the drawings. And he put on a helmet and danced for us. John Evarts played, and he danced. Just solitary. It was very impressive. I asked him, "Why the helmet?" "Well," he said, "if you don't have something, people look at the features, you know the hair flying and stuff. But with the helmet, they look at the body and that's what I'm expressing." I don't know who he was. I thought maybe Merce Cunningham.

**MEH:** I'll look into it. [INAUDIBLE].

**AE:** There were others. Oh, Gropius, of course. Cold fish, but he came down, gave us some designs, as you know. Moellenhoff. Whatever happened to Moellenhoff?

**MEH:** He went to, on to Chicago eventually and practiced, had a psychiatric practice.

**AE:** He got his license? Albers asked him to look at my drawings at one point. I sort of understood that Albers was worried that I might be — I don't know what. So, Dr. Moellenhoff came in and blew cigar smoke all over them and complimented me on my abilities, and left again. We never talked about it. But that was funny. It comes back now.

As you know, Dick Porter went around trying to borrow a gun and Moellenhoff said, "Give it to him. He's not going to do anything." So, somebody gave him a gun and he killed himself. So, then Moellenhoff called a meeting of the college and told us, "It's very natural to feel guilt at a time like this, but you mustn't,"

**MEH:** How did the college handle that? I mean obviously Moellenhoff spoke. It had to be really traumatic.

**AE:** It was traumatic, but privately so. There was no memorial service. There was no public expression of grief. I don't know. Life went on, as if it hadn't happened, so to speak. The next day was a beautiful day. I was on the roof. I remember playing chess with Xanti, and I don't know what Bobbie Dreier was doing, but she was there, and she said, "What a wonderful day this is!" And I said, "Yeah." And she said, "Sorry Dick isn't here to experience it." That was the only comment that I heard from anybody about it. I did a whole set of drawings of him, sort of tortured drawings. That was my personal catharsis. It was supposed to be a community, and it was the opposite. There was no — I think the main lack was ritual. We really had no rituals at all.

**MEH:** You wouldn't consider the Saturday night parties to be a ritual?

**AE:** That's true. [BEGINNING OF VIDEOTAPE ONLY SECTION] But in general there was no way of signaling anything or — [END OF VIDEOTAPE ONLY SECTION]

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

**MEH:** You said there was really no, no ritual for mourning.

**AE:** Or anything, as far as I remember.

**MEH:** What were the Saturday night parties like? What sort of things did you do?

**AE:** Oh, I guess we had candlelight, I'm not sure, but then John would play and we'd all dance. That was just swell, just a lot of fun. Something to look forward to.

**MEH:** Why do you think it wasn't a community? Why do you think it didn't really jell, in that respect? This was the whole idea in founding the college was it would be a community. A big part of it — one idea.

**AE:** In those days, nobody really thought about spiritual matters. It didn't come in. So, the idea of a community — well, that's a political entity, was the thought. Rice's idea of an academic community where anybody can teach or study whatever they want with no restrictions, and where things are decided by a general vote of students and faculty alike, those are basically political ideas. Marvelous and inspiring, but, of course, it doesn't work. I mean, it didn't work in Athens. A democracy without checks and balances will eat its own leaders alive. And that's just what happened at Black Mountain.

**MEH:** Do you think that checks and balances could have been worked into the plan?

**AE:** I think it's what my Uncle Tom was trying to tell us. When I was there, we had only two rules. The first rule was no boys in girls' rooms and vice versa, alone, with the door closed. The second rule was don't go through

“Don't Disturb” signs. I think I suggested that one in order to abrogate the first rule. And it was accepted. So, it was a love nest in a way, the college. But again, this meant fragmentation. You were couples, not groups really.

In those days there was a good deal of kind of date rape, in cars and stuff, and a good deal of whoring on the part of the boys. There was no temptation of that sort at Black Mountain. Things were set up in such a way that we could experiment and get to know each other intimately, in a relaxed, permissive environment. I think that was an enormous plus for the college. I mean a plus for the students. Our sex education was mutual and gentle and not guilt-ridden at all. So — what do you think? Is that your impression from your history?

**MEH:** That's generally my impression. Are there other aspects of the college that we haven't discussed that you think are really important?

**AE:** No, I think you've drawn me out pretty well.

**MEH:** Let's move on and then we'll come back. You left Black Mountain at the end of the 1938 spring semester.

**AE:** I guess so, yeah.

**MEH:** And went back to Boston?

**AE:** Then I went to the Boston Museum School, yeah.

**MEH:** Still planning to be an artist.

**AE:** Oh, you want some bio? Okay. So, after the Boston Museum School, I set up a studio on Brimmer Street the next summer. I made a trip out West. I was like a hippie before my time, camping with the Indians. At that point,

the Hopis and the Navajos alike were very welcoming. They hadn't yet been overwhelmed by visitors. A stranger just coming and wanting to be with them was okay. So, they were very good to me. That was an inspiring summer. I came back and gave an exhibition of my watercolors.

**MEH:** Was your attraction to this environment the art? Or the landscape?

**AE:** It wasn't really a matter of choice; it was a matter of chance. My mother had been invited to stay in Santa Fe at the Archbishop's Palace and so forth. She was what they used to call a Catholic writer, Catholic author. I drove her out, and then I went on to Navaho country for a couple of months.

**MEH:** You exhibited where?

**AE:** The Grace Horne Gallery in Boston. Then I got married to Anne Dick, who lived around the corner. We set up a gallery together — the Pinckney Street Artists' Alliance. That didn't do too well, so we moved to New York, and I worked with Associated American Artists' Gallery and then for the *March of Time* newsreel, and then for the Office of War Information — films. Because the war was on. After the war, I went to Dana Tasker— one of *Time Magazine's* the top editors and said, "I notice you don't run art every week. You really should. A magazine of this quality ought to have an art section that runs every week." And he said, "Oh, the reason we don't run it is because it's written by a guy who's no good, and I hate him, and I hate his stuff and I kill it. I kill it most weeks. And I'd like you to replace him, I think. But meanwhile I want to start you in sports, because our

sports editor's on vacation. So I cut ass up to the Surrey Netherlands and talk to Larry McPhail. Ask him why he fired McGraw, the manager of the Yankees. Come back and write the story and have it on my desk by midnight."

So, I went up to McPhail's hotel and called him from the front desk. "I'm from Time magazine." "Oh, come on up." I went up, and McPhail said, "Have a drink!" I said, "Fine," had a drink. So, I asked my question, and he said, "Well, off the record, McGraw's a drunk." [LAUGHS] I went back and said to Tasker, "I'm devastated. I have the answer to our question, but it was told to me off the record." He said, "Don't let that bother you. Weasel it. Weasel it." That was a word I hadn't heard before. Of course, it's the essence of journalism, weaseling.

So I found an empty office and wrote a story saying that McGraw had left the Yankees under a cloud closely resembling the DTs. [LAUGHS] Tasker liked the story and said, "Well, okay, you're, you're on." So, I did some more sports for the next couple of weeks, and I said, "Who is the art editor? He said, "Well, it's Walker Evans."

Evans had already had his big show at the Modern Museum, and I revered his work. So, I went up to his office, and said, "I've been hired to replace you. I'm very embarrassed by it, but I thought you ought to know." He said, "Oh, don't worry about it. If you can stand Dana Tasker, good for you. I've got a much better deal. I'm going to Fortune and be their in-house photographer. I'm going to give them one print a month, and they're going to take it. I'm not even giving

them a choice of prints — portraits of tycoons, basically. I've got a heavenly deal there. Come on the Three G's Bar. I'll introduce you to people, show you the ropes and stuff."

We remained friends after that, of course. He was a dear man. So, that's how I got to this wonderful job as art editor of Time. Open Sesame to all the artists. Traveled anywhere I wanted. And that went on for the next fifteen years.

Meanwhile, I married Jane and we wanted to bring the children up abroad. I'd published a book called Three Hundred Years of American Painting, sold three hundred thousand expensive hardcover copies. As a reward I got a year off in Europe. Jane and I went to Spain with the children, and then we flew all over looking at masterpieces, and out of that came another book called Sight and Insight, and the decision to quit Time and live abroad. We wanted children to learn that the world is their garden, that there are various languages and ways of doing things, and that it's all theirs.

I had a literary agent who said, "Yeah, I can get you enough assignments and things," which turned out to be true. So, we spent the next fifteen years abroad. Oh, and I got a Guggenheim Fellowship for studies of Greece and the Middle East as Spiritual Cradles of the Western World. And a Japan Foundation Senior Fellowship for studies of Zen Buddhism which helped.

My last three books are all on mythology, The Timeless Myths, The Global Myths, and The Universal Myths. We both go on with writing, So, that's it, that's the career.

**MEH:** Did you ever get a college degree?

**AE:** No.

**MEH:** Has it ever made a difference?

**AE:** No difference whatsoever. I'm very well educated now. I don't need a degree to prove it. If you live long enough and spend a large part of your life in learning things, that's your college.

**MEH:** What was the basis for your interest in myth?

**AE:** In Greece I sensed the presence of the pagan gods, first on Mount Pendeli and later on Corfu. They began to speak to me and I got deeply into pagan mythology. I offered to do a book on it for *Horizon*. I'd done quite a bit of work for their quarterly. I said, "Why don't you do a series of books on myth, and I can do the classical myths. I'm very well equipped for that." They were bought by McGraw Hill. Then the McGraw Hill people came to see me in London, and said, "We'd like you to do a book on myth in general." So, I did that, it was a big picture book. It's there. Oh, that's the German edition of it. So, that was a big success.

At the London Library in St. James's Square, I began researching world mythology and found a lot of it is the same stories as you get in the Greek. So, then I realized that the thing is a whole—a "mythosphere." This surrounds human consciousness just as the atmosphere surrounds the

globe, and it makes thinking possible in a way. I've been pursuing that study. It's more than a metaphor. It's there, the mythosphere.

**MEH:** Looking back at Black Mountain, one thing I'd thought about relating to Xanti Schawinsky, he did a Danse Macabre the second year there. Do you remember that performance? Were you a part of it?

**AE:** I can't recall. I doubt if I was part of it.

**MEH:** Thinking about the topic of myth, there's a myth around Black Mountain. There's a sense that it was sort of — As one student told me called Camelot — not a Black Mountain student, but a contemporary student. What do you think the significance of Black Mountain college is? I mean I do all this work. Does it have any real importance or significance beyond its existence?

**AE:** Well, it'd better. After all, you've given it a lot of effort, and so you must feel that it does. And, of course, it does. But you're in a position to define that. I'm not. I've never put my mind to it in that sense, as a seed of things. I don't know if I can really contribute in a meaningful way to that question.

The main thing is to experience, first to experience for oneself and second, to think for oneself. It's seldom done. Only a few people actually experience for themselves and think for themselves. Only a few people take it on themselves to be themselves, and I don't think most people even believe in the self. They believe in the body and they're very sick and sad that it's going to disintegrate. But the self is not something they really believe in. Remember Hume's dogma that a person is just a bundle of

perceptions? It rules today. That philosophical concept has seeped down to shape the ignorance of most people. We've lost confidence in our selves. So, I think Black Mountain was helpful—certainly for me, and no doubt for many—in encouraging the kids to experience for themselves and think for themselves. Yeah, very encouraging in that way. That's the best I can come up with right now.

**MEH:** Just a couple of other specifics that I was thinking about to see if it kindles any particular memory. What about community meetings? Do you have any particular memories of community meetings and how they were handled?

**AE:** They weren't handled. They were manipulated. I don't think Rice was any kind of an organizer, but he was an utter charmer and also a bit of a brute and a law unto himself. He dominated meetings, and I remember the night he drove out one of his old colleagues who'd come with him from Rollins.

**MEH:** Who would that have been? Georgia?

**AE:** He kind of led up to it and then, "The trouble with you, Georgia, is that you're really, really stupid." Georgia gets up, staggers to the door, and goes out and slams it. End of Georgia. Yeah. So, that's just demagoguery. The old curse of radical democracy.

**MEH:** How would everyone else have reacted to that sort of situation?

**AE:** Rice led the laughter. So, as Georgia went down the corridor, he must have heard this laughter behind him. I wasn't laughing. I was really shocked — not that I had any particular interest in Georgia or whatever,

but even at that age I could tell that this was a monstrous thing to do to a human being.

So, Rice went on, and what happened? He wrote a book, I Came Out of the Eighteenth Century, which I thought had a certain fun to it. But then what?

**MEH:** I'll tell you later. I don't want to put this over and over on tape. Okay, any other particular memories that you have of the college, anecdotes or observations. Oh, how did the refugees — like the Moellenhoffs and Alberses and the Schawinskys — how did their presence affect the community?

**AE:** I don't think anyone thought of them as alien or strange in any way. I mean, the Northerners were just as strange to the Southerners and vice versa. There were all different sorts of us there. And we were all young. I don't think there was any particular anti-German feeling or whatever, let alone anti-Semitic. I just don't think it came up.

**MEH:** Did the issue of integration ever come up?

**AE:** Integration —

**MEH:** Black-white integration.

**AE:** Oh, Rice told us, "Why aren't there any black students? There aren't any black students because we'd be shut down." It just wasn't possible. Sure. But going back to Roy's Roadhouse, the music there was jukebox. The whole South was dancing to black music already on the jukebox. I remember going to one place where Jimmie Lunceford and his orchestra

came down and played for black dancers. We snuck in, so to speak, as spectators. You couldn't dance. And I was thrilled by that, by the music and by the dancing, and absolutely horrified by the whites' reaction: "Look at the monkeys dancing around," and stuff.

Later on when was at the Boston Museum School, the Honeymoon Lane Dance Hall in Boston had black bands, including Lunceford and Basie and others. They'd have White nights and Black nights. The blacks would come one night, and the whites, the other. I protested. I wanted to come in on black nights, too but I couldn't get in.

**MEH:** Were there any movies around then? Was there a theater that you could go to?

**AE:** There must have been in Asheville. But I don't remember going to the movies ever.

**MEH:** Did you have a car? How did you get around?

**AE:** I didn't have a car, but Ev Herter had his little Ford, yeah. I'd borrow it or go with him, either one.

**MEH:** Black Mountain at that point, of course, this was pretty early, were you really aware of what was happening in Europe? I mean —

**AE:** We assumed that the War was coming. A lot of us thought we'd be killed in the War. It hung over us. So, let's live while we may, enjoy while we may kind of feeling. It gave a certain edge to things, yeah. I remember when King Edward said he was going to give up the throne "for the woman I

love," I heard that speech on the radio. But there was very little outside world, so to speak, very little.

**MEH:** Were there any sports at Black Mountain?

**AE:** Bocce. I used to wrestle, for fun, you know, we'd wrestle. Cracked a fellow's rib, and I felt so awful about it. [BEGINNING OF VIDEOTAPE ONLY SECTION] He became one of the Lincoln Brigade fighters in Spain. An Irish guy, a sweet guy. [END OF VIDEOTAPE ONLY SECTION]

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

**MEH:** What about the farm? Did you work on the farm?

**AE:** Yeah. Farm and road and firewood. I felt that was a swell idea to balance out the day. It made every sense, not only economically — I don't know why it hasn't been adopted everywhere. Kids shouldn't just be sitting at a desk at that age.

**MEH:** What were you producing on the farm at that point?

**AE:** Well, pork. I was with the pigs quite a bit. [LAUGHS] I don't know what was grown. I can't remember.

[OFFMIKE REMARKS NOT TRANSCRIBED]

**AE:** Okay. Well it's nothing to do with Black Mountain, but it's to do with those characters. Sure, I'll tell it.

[IRRELEVANT OFFMIKE REMARKS]

When I was there, it was long before the squares within squares of Albers, and he did various things — various shapes and so forth. And he would ask us to give him titles. "What does it make you think of?" I titled

quite a few of his BMC paintings. Then later on he got to his squares, and I used to visit him at Hampton [Orange, Connecticut], was it? Just outside of New Haven. To me, the squares within squares are meditation things. They're great one at a time. I've never understood why Anni gave groups of them to various museums. Lined up on a wall, they really rob from each other. People just don't have sufficient sensitivity to see one and then another and then another and then another and get anything out of any of them. You've got to be with one for half-an-hour at least, and that alone.

Xanti told me that he went to Hampton [Orange, Connecticut] for a weekend. When he got back, I said, "You're looking pretty peaked." And he said, "Yeah, well I just was visiting Juppi and it was a dreadful experience." I said, "What was the matter?" He said, "Oh, so many squares. Squares. He showed me fifty maybe. I had to say to him, I said, "Juppi, I'm very tired and I can't take any more. I've got to go out. So, I'm out in the garden. I climb up on a wall, I stretch out and go to sleep. The sun was beating down, it was noontime, and I was in a bikini, and I woke up burned and cut because all along the top of the wall there were these glass shards stuck in the cement to prevent people from coming over the wall. So, I was lying on these glass shards. That's how bored I was!"

[LAUGHS]

**MEH:** How aware were you at Black Mountain of the Bauhaus?

**AE:** Albers made no bones about it. He was giving us the foundation course.

So, we were aware in that sense. But there weren't any books about it or anything. We just got it from the horse's mouth.

**MEH:** Was Albers' own painting in evidence? Were you aware of the work, painting, he was doing then?

**AE:** As I say, I titled quite a few of them.

**MEH:** Oh, right.

**AE:** He wasn't shy about his work, at all. He exhibited in the big hall there. Even his early things, which didn't always work. He loaned me one of his glass, sandblasted things. Thought it would do me good, So, I had that in my studio.

**MEH:** What do you think personally was the influence of Black Mountain on your work, or your life? How did that direct or misdirect your life or whatever?

**AE:** Oh, I think I've covered that as best I can. It's too general a question to attack directly.

[BREAK IN TAPING]

**MEH:** What do you mean by "transferable skill"? And first let me just interject your name into the tape now. Okay? You're Mrs. Eliot, and your first name is:

**JE:** Jane. Well transferable skill was all the things they learned, and each student [INAUDIBLE] needn't be applied specifically to a painting or sculpture. And they were — it was an introduction, I think, into America, the idea of conceptualizing into art, not just representing, and not purely

sociological either. So you could take anything that you learned and apply it at any time to your life, and heighten your life thereby. People do this, I presume, semi-asleep. But I think the college did make it – bring it – was really the first place where you're saying, "Let's be conscious about what we're doing," and in those early days, of course, but I think it very directly led into the sixties movement and all that. You take all those things, all those perceptions, and then you're faced with the possibility — In this case somebody called him up — we were living in Rome and he called him up in the middle of the night — I'll let him finish this — but they call him up about one o'clock at night. He gets this call, "Will you do a film on the Vatican?" And Alex was sound asleep, and he says, "No, there's nothing important in the Vatican."

**AE:** Well, I'm going to take — I'll tell this story. [LAUGHTER]. I think it's very interesting what you said, it does spark a good deal. The whole concept of non-objective art, as Albers called it, and that was the word then — not abstract or whatever, but "non-objective." People have wrestled with it. We'll all be wrestling with it in the future, too. What does it really mean — non-objective? But I think for Albers and for me too, eventually, non-objective meant "not the object." Not getting hung up on the object. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, so the spirit — if you take away the object, the spirit will fill it somehow. The object is gone, something remains. In Albers work what remains is color.

You look at the Creation scene on the Sistine Ceiling. The Creator reaches out from his/her cloak of cherubim and almost touches the hand, the forefinger of Adam, who still has Eve inside of him. The Creator empties himself/herself into the Creator. There's that filling and emptying thing, from nonobjective to objective, back and forth.

Anyway, so they called me and wanted to do a show, a television special on the Vatican Collection of art, and they wanted to have Jackie Kennedy, as she then was, do the voice. And I said, "That's a terrible idea." The guy said, "Well, you're missing a good opportunity here. If you change your mind or if you ever want to talk to me, just come on up and maybe we'll do something else together someday." He was very nice about it.

So, in the morning we were at breakfast. I told Jane what had happened, and she said, "Well what would you like to do of that sort?" I said, "Well, if they built a tower sixty feet high in the Sistine Chapel, so you and I could get up on top of the tower, and the tower would be on wheels, and we could let Michelangelo's frescoes of The Creation just flow over us for a few weeks, that would be great." And she said, "Well, propose it."

I said, "Yeah, a film on that would be something. The Ceiling's never been seen close up." There was a still campaign that Life did from forty feet up, but I want to go sixty feet up, within touching distance of the

barrel vault. "We could do a fly-on-the-ceiling kind of a documentary film."

She said, "Well, propose it."

So, on Jane's dare, so to speak, I used our own money — I flew to New York and talked to this guy, and sold him. So, then we did this film: The Secret of Michelangelo. Every man's dream. It was on ABC prime-time and got some prizes. But that's way back, way before the cleaning and all.

Anyway, what Michelangelo was doing was nonobjective. And because of our background—my background partly being Albers—we were able to see what was really there on the ceiling. God the Father is also God the Mother. It's Jehovah and Isis combined. And that's the sort of thing that we were able to see up there, and meditate on.

Yeah, non-objective. That's Jane's point about what Albers did for me. He turned my attention from the objective to the place between objective and subjective. There's a misty place there, but the mist will clear over a period. You can really see something then.

**MEH:** It's interesting talking with you that so many students of that time feel that they had to choose between people. I mean obviously there was a lot of tension between Albers and Schawinsky, and —

**AE:** I don't think "a lot." Not in my experience. Not a lot of tension but —

**MEH:** But, you see, you're able to draw what each had to offer, without selecting one person as a mentor or as a person of value.

**AE:** Oh, sure. I've never had any trouble with that.

**JE:** [OFFMIKE] There was one, two, one other factor, I think, in the approach to art which was one of discovery and one of invention, and one of sort of Columbus going over the horizon. Was he going to fall off or not? In effect. Not that that was really the case. In Alex's life, he did that a lot. One of the times was, for instance, like leaving *Time* right in the middle of the height of his career, he took off with me and our two children and we just went abroad to live. He's right, no particular security in it, or no contract or no long-term situation. No jobs. While we were there and if it works out, it was very easy and seems very secure, and at one point we were fairly low and it was going to take some months before our royalties come in, so we'd just get on a boat that goes from Yugoslavia to Japan and back and we'll take seven months but we'll just get on it, a freighter. It's partly, I think, again, this ability from, the ability of looking at art in this very existential way, that it's a whole, it's a whole activity — it's not just of a painting. Nor is it a representation. It's totally unknown. Well, it turned out this boat was smuggling ammunition and we got into all sorts of trouble. We had to finally jump ship, which we did in Japan again, without any money. We had to jump ship in Japan. Again everything did work out, but I think the ability for an American to be able to do that is much more extraordinary, really, than it is for Europeans who had to do it because of the complete upheaval of World War Two.

**AE:** The ability of the Japanese to accept us was really something too. I went to the best hotel, in Nara and spoke to the proprietor. I said, "I don't have any money, and I have my family here. But I'm a journalist and I will get assignments." He said, "Mr. Eliot, you will not receive a bill until you ask

for it." That's hospitality! I can't imagine it happening anywhere today. So, that got us going again. Then they invited us back with a Japan Foundation Senior Fellowship.

So, life has been very good for us. Our decision to pay no attention to security and every attention to learning new things was fortunate, and I suppose it did start way back there at college.

**AE:** So, then you see that the world is round. This led eventually to my concept of the mythosphere.

**MEH:** My tape is out. I have plenty of more tape.

**[END OF SIDE 2, TAPE 2 AND END OF TRANSCRIPT]**