

Interviewee: ELIZABETH SCHMITT JENNERJAHN  
WARREN PAUL "PETE" JENNERJAHN  
Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS  
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The interviews with Elaine Schmitt Urbain, Pete and Betty Schmitt Jennerjahn, and Ruth Asawa were conducted by telephone. At the time I was trying to determine whether Ray Johnson was at Black Mountain College for the 1946 spring term or whether he was away. The interview with Elaine Urbain is on Side 1 of the audiocassette. The interview with Pete and Betty Jennerjahn continues on Side 1 and overlaps onto Side 2. The interview with Ruth Asawa is on Side 2.

I mistakenly locate the Ox-Bow School in Saginaw, when it was in Saugatuck, Michigan. It was the summer school of the Art Institute of Chicago. Elaine Schmitt Urbain, Betty Schmitt Jennerjahn, Pete Jennerjahn and Ruth Asawa were all students at Milwaukee State Teachers College in Milwaukee. Ray Johnson lived in Detroit and attended Cass Technical High School.

Mary Emma Harris

**[TAPE 1, SIDE 1. FOLLOWS INTERVIEW WITH ELAINE SCHMITT URBAIN.]**

**MEH:** This is Betty Schmitt Jennerjahn. How do you recall Ray's coming to Black Mountain?

**ESJ:** Well, as time goes on I recall less and less. Pete remembers more than I.

**MEH:** I'll talk to him after I talk to you.

**ESJ:** But my impression is that when I was at Black Mountain, I wrote to Elaine. She was at, I guess, Saginaw [MEH: Saugatuck], and that is where Ray and Ruth Asawa and Elaine were, [MEH: Ray and Elaine were at Saugatuck. Ruth was not.] and I wrote this enthusiastic business on Black Mountain. And so, I think that they all came then. Now it could be that someone else would remember that there was another reason for Ray coming but I know— I know that when

we were in San Francisco at the other Black Mountain reunion, and we were at Ruth's house. At one point she said to Albert, she said, "Without the Schmitts, we would never be here." And so she remembers it. From that I take that's because of my letter that she came to Black Mountain.

**WPJ:** Hello, Mary.

**MEH:** Hi. How are you Pete?

**WPJ:** Oh, I'm doing okay.

**MEH:** Good. But I'm glad you all are past your surgeries now.

**WPJ:** Right.

**ESJ:** Anyway and I— I have the impression that Ray came along with that. And someone else could come up with a different memory.

**MEH:** I think that's correct because you were never at Saginaw [MEH: Saugatuck] with them

**WPJ:** No

**ESJ:** No, no, not at all.

**MEH:** Saginaw [MEH: Saugatuck]. Was that an Art Institute of Chicago program? Who sponsored Saginaw [MEH: Saugatuck]? Do you know?

**WPJ:** I wondered if that came out of Cranbrook.

**ESJ:** I think he came out of Cranbrook.

**MEH:** I can check that. I was just curious. Okay. [MEH: The Ox-Bow School in Saugatuck was the summer school of the Art Institute of Chicago.]

**ESJ:** Because Cranbrook was this art center that this sculptor whose name I can't remember. This, you know, American modernistic kind of sculptor at Cranbrook.

There were all of his modernistic kind of large forms around, and I think it was an outgrowth of that that was at Saginaw [MEH: Saugatuck]. But, again, I wasn't even there. I don't know.

**MEH:** Okay.

**ESJ:** Elaine could have some memory of that.

**MEH:** Okay.

**ESJ:** Or Ruth.

**MEH:** I'll check with both of them. I talked with Elaine and she wasn't sure. In fact, she was calling it Saugatuck. [MEH: The laugh is on me. She was correct.] But it was sacked and now. [Laughter]

**ESJ:** That's Elaine

**MEH:** That's Elaine. Right.

**MEH:** But she actually sounded very good. She sounded good. Her voice was very strong, and she sounded better than she sounded for a while to me.

**ESJ:** Has she told you what she's doing?

**MEH:** She's doing this television thing. I know about that.

**ESJ:** Well, she has a television show, a cable television show once a month. And she begins to zero in on it, it seems to me, about three days before it and finally decides what the topic is going to be on, and she rounds up all this research, probably by phone, in these few days, gathers some person who's a real expert in all kinds of fields.

**MEH:** Isn't she amazing?

**ESJ:** It's unbelievable. It's truly unbelievable. So, last night she did this interview with

the Episcopal priest of the White Plains Episcopal Church, Trinity Church, talking on how terrible Giuliani is for what he's doing with, you know, welfare people. And she was totally outraged on the whole thing. She has so much energy.

**MEH:** She really is amazing.

**ESJ:** I mean, it's totally fantastic. So—It's true that she doesn't comprehend sort of basic facts of my life, Pete's life.

**MEH:** Anybody's.

**ESJ:** Things like that, but when she gets on a topic, is fantastic.

**MEH:** She's incredible.

**ESJ:** Right.

**MEH:** Okay, now. So I think that was—I'm going to call Ruth and confirm this, too.

Okay. Do you remember— Another thing I need to clear up is, according to my notes— I'm not sure just where I got this from— Ray came for that summer of '45, which was the summer Feininger was there, and then he stayed for the fall quarter, but he left for the winter and spring and came back the next summer. Do you have any recollection of that?

**WPJ:** Why I can— I can give you one milestone and that is, we arrived the summer of '48.

**MEH:** Right.

**WPJ:** Ray was there.

**MEH:** He was there then. Right.

**WPJ:** And that was my first face-to-face acquaintance with Ray Johnson, and I can

remember exactly how it occurred.

**MEH:** How was that?

**WPJ:** Well, we arrived during the day just around noon. And it was the time when the practice was that people sort of had lunches, and they took them out and ate outdoors. And—

**ESJ:** So, that was a Sunday.

**WPJ:** Yeah.

**MEH:** Right.

**ESJ:** That was a Sunday and there was—Ray was—They had a blanket spread out and there was Ray and some other person or two who had already collected when we appeared. And that was when I was introduced to Ray.

**MEH:** What was your first impression of him?

**WPJ:** Well, he seemed congenial and friendly.

**MEH:** You knew that he was Elaine's friend? You had heard about him from Elaine.

**WPJ:** Yeah. Right. I mean— so he was already a known factor with Elizabeth — Betty — and Elaine so this is someone I'd heard about already. So, this was my first real contact with him.

**MEH:** What was he like at Black Mountain?

**WPJ:** I don't remember too much particularly of anything especially where he stood out. He was not involved in the dance. And he did not and our Light, Sound, Movement Workshop.

**MEH:** That would have come a bit later. Do you remember his being in Albers' class at all?

**WPJ:** I don't. I mean, there are other people that I do remember, but I don't remember Ray.

**ESJ:** And I don't either. Basically, I had the impression that Ray was sort of a part of the furniture. I mean, I was around Ray. He was a friend and all, but I didn't have—it must be that close contact with Ray, you know, the way Elaine did. And then for me in the years after, I remember Ray saying things, you know, joking about my particular personality and character, that I would do these seven different things while driving—riding on the train from Asheville to New York, you know, weaving and doing, who knows what else I was doing, and he thought that was very funny and, you know. Confirmed it all and enjoyed it all but—So, he was really just part of the general furniture. And as years went on and he got into this Correspondence School, you know, and I'd get a card, "Dear Betty, today I brought an umbrella. Love, Ray." And, well, you know, I threw all that stuff out, you know. And we kept getting all this stuff. Caroline Kennedy's swimming suit. And all that stuff. As time went on it just looked trashier and trashier to me. And so, we just threw everything out. We just didn't want it around. But then when we were getting ready to move we—I don't know if we had a show in Long Island or what, we called Ray and invited him over, and he was so lovely. He was so charming. And he was so responsive and appreciative of our artwork. And that was so surprising after getting all of the stuff in the mail. You know, we wondered where in the world was he. And he was so respectful of our work. And when we would put it— You know, we'd show him something and then put it back in the racks, and he was always

rushing there to be sure we didn't harm anything. And that again was so surprising. And then another thing, when we were here, and we had a show— It must be the show at the Sedona Museum which was just three years ago, I think. And we sent him an announcement, and he called and was just marvelous in response to that. He was supportive and interested and just what a wonderful thing that an artist friend would do. And that, of course, meant a lot because all of this was canceling out these other things.

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

**MEH:** You're talking about the exhibit on Long Island.

**ESJ:** And at some Long Island museum.

**MEH:** Yeah. I remember. I have the catalogue. I have the one you're talking about.

**ESJ:** And so, I don't remember the art work at all. Maybe Pete would. But what I remember is that at some point—well, first of all, Ray wasn't there.

**MEH:** Right.

**ESJ:** And at a certain point, he came sort of bubbling down this curved stairway with—what was it—a fake snake, Pete.

**WPJ:** Well, it was one of these old magic trick things where it looked like the jar of jam, and when a person would take the cover off to use this jam or to smell it or whatever, there was this compressed fake snake inside of there which shot out as soon as the cover was taken off. And Ray was making one of his grand appearances and he was—he started out by letting this snake fly out over—on to the crowd and so forth. And I imagine he had envisioned that people would shrink back and scream and holler and stampede and so forth, but somehow it

just fell flat. He did it about three or four times and some people just sort of—they stepped over this snake and went on talking and looking at stuff and all that. And people were just unmoved by the whole thing. So, that was one of his ventures of kind of a happening kind of thing that he pulled off and it just fell flat and I could sort of—I knew what he was driving at, and I sort of felt sorry for him when it didn't work.

**MEH:** Right.

**ESJ:** And we had heard that he had spent most of the evening up in a tree or something.

**MEH:** Yeah, I seem to remember that.

**ESJ:** Right.

**MEH:** Okay. I'm going to call Ruth now and confirm the Saginaw [MEH: Saugatuck] thing.

**WPJ:** And you can give Ruth our greetings and [UNINTEL WORD]—

**MEH:** I'll do that. It's good to hear you sounding so well.

**WPJ:** Oh, we're fine.

**MEH:** Good.

**WPJ:** And how about you.

**MEH:** I'm good. I'm very good. I'm not doing —

**[END OF INTERVIEW. INTERVIEW WITH RUTH ASAWA FOLLOWS.]**



