

Interviewee: JOHN URBAIN
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MEH: [GIVES IDENTIFICATION]. John, how did you come to be at Black Mountain College?

JU: It was after the War. I went to visit – I was working. I wanted to do one – some school, either – Moholy-Nagy had a school in Chicago and Kepes and Chermayeff, the father, I mean the older, at Brooklyn College. So, I visited both places, and then I was visiting Mariel [PH] Davis. She was my high school teacher way back in Detroit. I told her what I was doing. She said, "What about Black Mountain?" I said, "What about it?" She said "Well, there's a young man, one of the students in the other room, Ray Johnson." So she said, "Just a minute, I'll see if he's still here," and she went out and got him and I asked him some questions. It sounded pretty good. He said, "Well, send in your work," or letter, or whatever, which I did. They asked me to come down. So I guess at that time there didn't have too many students either. There was a GI – What?

MEH: You were saying "At that time –"

JU: Well, there weren't too many students there. The GI from the – you know, the GI Bill had been accepted, and I remember coming down on the train with Oli Sihvonen.

MEH: You were coming from where?

JU: I was coming from Detroit. I don't know where he was coming from. Because we changed trains at some point. Here was that little train from Black Mountain – where did that stop? Anyhow, ended up getting off the train, and there was a car after that, maybe a truck probably, to take us to the school. I was a little overwhelmed because I thought all these young students were like little geniuses. I don't know where I got that idea. So – I liked it immediately, just the visuals, people. I remember the first night it was like a little informal orientation. Rondthaler and his wife, what was her name? Anyhow –

MEH: Alice?

JU: Yeah. Something like that. And met the other students, some that were just new. I remember there was one – what's his name? Oh – Paul Williams was there, too, as a GI – Then [STATIC, THEN CLEARER RECORDING] I liked it immediately. Then I remember I was put into this big building where they had a lot of rooms and beds and cots. I was in with Harry Weitzer. Harry? Yeah. Anyhow, right away we hit it off with Paul Williams, and I loved Dehn's course.

MEH: Let's come back. Let's go back, and then we'll come back to the classes you took. You grew up in Detroit?

JU: Yes. Of course, I came from Belgium when I was about two, with my parents, and they landed in Detroit. I'm watching – My aunt and uncle were already in Detroit. It was, you know – it was that time, 19-, I guess it was about 1922 because I was two years old, and Father, of course, had to work in a factory because of his lingual – lack of English, Mother also. It was a typical immigrant family coming. I remember I didn't speak English until I started playing with the

kids, other kids, in kindergarten. We were in Detroit, Michigan till I went to the third grade. Then we moved to Bloomfield Hills where my mother and father were caretakers for this rather nice family, the Nichols. They had a son who was my age and three girls. My grandmother and grandfather were working there. My grandmother was a French governess because she couldn't speak English, and the Nichols kids learned how. I remember, Nichols had – sort of a gentleman farmer. He had a couple of cows and my dad would take care of them. There were a lot of horses. I was lucky. I could learn how to ride. Also had an indoor swimming pool. I mean, this is 1928, just before the Depression. It was a wonderful time for me, really, because, you know, did everybody ride horses? But the Nichols were very nice. I mean they included me in the swimming lessons at the pool. [IRRELEVANT REMARKS] [INTERRUPTION]

MEH: Okay, we were talking about the Nichols.

JU: Yeah. When the Depression came, they had to cut back, including salary which was very little to begin with. So, then my mother and father just couldn't afford it, so we went back to Detroit and I did not look forward to that, I remember.

MEH: About how old were you?

JU: I was going to be in the eighth grade. In fact, when we came to Detroit, that's where I started. Eighth grade. I went back to Detroit and lived in this house that my uncle owned. They lived downstairs and we lived upstairs – just two bedrooms. I remember being very aware of the Depression then, because, you know, food stamps, things like that, I remember. My family had to go on welfare. They were so ashamed. They would take food stamps to another store, not in

the neighborhood, things like that. I remember going down to get some shoes and shorts and stuff like that. I had a little wagon that we took to this center where you got your clothes or, you know. I started the eighth grade and then my – Well, yes, just one year in this one school, and then U's go to I think it was called Barber Intermediate for a couple years, and then you went to high school. That's when I found out about Cass Tech. The school was fantastic. They had special say educational things for – well, they had classes in metallurgy. They had all sorts of automotive things, aeronautics. Then they also had music, so-called classical and not classical. Then they even had pre-architecture. The art department was broken up into – you could take textile design, fashion design, jewelry design, graphic arts. It included – I was in the graphic arts – and in one of the courses that you had to take was setting type on the stick, you know? That was just one term but it was required. It made sense. Made a lot of friends that I continued to see later on after high school. I was going to wait for a scholarship, and so the teacher said, "Well, hold out on one subject," otherwise you have to pay like postgraduate work, and I did, Then a job came up. She said "John, I think you ought to look into this. It's better than any – It's just as good as any scholarship, if not better." It was a unit, a little firm called Evans, Winter, and Hebb [Evans-Winter-Hebb], and Mr. Hebb knew people like Gaudi, you know, the type man who designed the type, and they printed the Buick magazine and I think it was Today's Home, a little house organ for the gas companies. The big prestige was Cartier, you know, the jewelry people. I remember they had an art department which consisted of

design, designing and laying out and so forth. That is the mechanicals be made, or so-called more creative stuff was done in another department. There were only four people in each department, but they worked well together. The plant had its own offset presses, made their own plates. They also had a letterpress. They had their own typography. Well, eight or ten people probably worked just in that, setting type. So it – I ran the photostat machine. I was – just turned sixteen, I guess. I would have graduated later. But holding out on that subject meant I had to do it at home, which the teacher agreed. All I had to do was turn in this notebook and little assignments on, say, it was history of art. One course I'd finished was the history of architecture. The school had designed its program. Say, there was geometry for artists or musicians.

[LAUGHS]

MEH: This was at Cass Tech.

JU: Yeah. See they designed everything to fit, and it's still going on from what I gather, you know. The teachers were, well, rather unusual. I mean, they taught art it was – as I said before, you learned textile and jewelry or some kind of special courses. I think the same thing probably applied to the other departments, you know, certainly automotive and aeronautics. I mean what high school would have all these facilities! I enjoyed it. It was the Depression years, because I graduated in '38, 1938.

MEH: From high school.

JU: Yeah, from high school. Then when I was there, every winter it had – so I got promoted from the photostat machine because there was an opening in the

design department. I remember staying there late at night learning how to cast type, you know – It was a good education. Then I did night school, take courses at Society of Arts and Crafts. It was a very good school, art school. I remember seeing my first Paul Klee. I didn't know who it was, you know, and other painters of that caliber, that kind of, well, what would you call it? Where it was going on.

MEH: So you were working and taking courses at night at Society of Arts and Crafts.

JU: (OVERTALK) Yeah, right. Took an advertising course, which was very good, at Wayne University. It was all sort of, you know, technical but not – Well, it wasn't very interesting, partly because I was in a large class and it was just – and the teachers weren't – But the Society of Arts and Crafts had some good people. Well, before that, when I was in grade school in Bloomfield Hills, I went to Cranbrook, Saturday morning classes.

MEH: [INTERRUPTION]

JU: Cranbrook. Don't forget, this was about the seventh – well before Detroit, the seventh grade, and to have Sepeshy, who was a well-known painter, at Cranbrook, and then Karl Milles. Milles wasn't there, but he designed the fountains and the sculpture that – and Saarinen was the architect. Well, this is, you know, in the middle of – well, it's not suburbs. It was more country. Of course, the Nichols, I remember Nick was going to Cranbrook, to private school. Nick Nichols, my mother and father worked for these people, and the girls went to Kingswood. Well, I was just very fortunate all along. Father, even though he was working in a factory, he would – I don't know how he did it. He

just went around, asked questions, and – Oh, and then went back to Evans, Winter, and Hebb, the draft came about, because this is 1939, 1940, and '42 on, and I was of course inducted and went to Fort Custer.

MEH: What branch were you in?

JU: Well, at the beginning just the induction center. There was a man by the name of Seelye (PH), a civilian. But he was doing was it propaganda? [LAUGHS] He was getting a hold of a lot of the artists and setting them up with working spaces about army art. I have a book with some of our work in it. He was able to keep the people who were inducted there for a short period of time, like a few months or something, and then eventually I had to go get some basic training. I said, "Well, Seelye, get me in the Air Corps," and well he got me in the anti-aircraft. See, he was in, working with the army at the camp, and whenever an artist would come up, he singled them out. He had that power or whatever you want to call it. I continued to do art work, and do painting, and painting stuff that was going on around . Oh, we reproduced in Art News. I have, you know, the paper in the New York Times, was on the front page of the – it was like the Book Review. It was called army art. Then there was this show that traveled – Seelye got together a lot of artists' work, you know, soldiers' art, and it was in the Museum of Modern Art and then it traveled all over. I have two pieces, I think – three out of the many pieces I did. The Army has them someplace, or had them someplace. I remember doing – when I was in the anti-aircraft getting basic training, I started to do some drawing, and then this one captain or lieutenant said, "Well, can you do some blow-ups?" The Army had a manual

and it showed, say, a soldier holding a rifle. You had to hold it a certain way. Well, we did it on a chart, a flip chart. Some general was doing an inspection and saw this, and was impressed. He said something about, "It's the alpha and omega in training." I thought, "Oh boy!" So he wanted me to do a mural. So it was a 400 square foot mural, and it was like eight panels, or four – 4x8 pieces of plywood that I coated and did like in gesso. Well, I was supplied with all the materials and given a spot. It wasn't luxurious, but it seemed so compared to the others. So, then they had a place in Camp Davis where they did training aids. Some guy I knew in basic training wrote to me and said would I be interested in coming there because they're looking for more artists. So, I said, "Certainly, but I have to finish a mural." So I wasn't in a rush to do – to finish the murals at the beginning. Then I finished them and was transferred to Camp Davis which is in Wilmington, North Carolina. It was near Beaufort, a wonderful area. I remember you'd go down to the Inland Waterway and get steamed oysters and stuff. But that continued – there were about forty, thirty or forty guys. We had our own barracks. I mean forty guys who were artists. What was I going to say? Oh, then things started to get a little rough in Europe, and so they decided to replace a lot of the artists with what they call WACs, the women in, you know – I don't know, what's the WACs? W-A-C. Anyhow, they – We had a choice of going to Officers Training School in the infantry or going direct into the infantry. Well, I chose to try the army – Officers Training School. But I didn't make it. It was too – It'd had been about two and a half years since I handled a rifle. The rifle changed from what they called a Springfield, a bolt action, to an

automa-, semi-automatic. What the hell was the name of it? I've forgotten – the rifle. But mostly the other soldiers who were taking the basic training – the officer training had been on the cadre in the infantry and they knew it, you know, backwards, forwards, and they had trained soldiers. So, physically I was doing fine, but the technical stuff was too much. I'd never heard of the M1 rifle, and, you know. Anyhow, then I was transferred to basic training, another basic training of infantry – after I left the officers training school – and shipped overseas. It was I think in February, January or February, I ended up in France, which I'm lucky. I didn't want to, you know – I was hoping I wouldn't go to the Pacific. We were in the Black Forest. There was a big push on at that time – it was after the Bulge, and I think it was February, January or February, I was wounded. One of our guys sat on an anti-tank grenade, and it hit me in the left leg. Everybody was saying, "You lucky son-of-a-bitch," you know, you're going to go get blankets and sheets. At first I didn't know I was hit, you know. Just – Then the medics came around and they put you on a stretcher, and this was in the Black Forest. It was like in MASH, you know, they take you from – after you're wounded they take you to the first unit and see if you – what they're going to do with you, and then push back, and I remember – Then they took out the shrapnel. Of course, you're doped up. It's just before you give, you're knocked out. They have sodium pentothal, and you'd wake up and you were kind of happy [LAUGHS]. But I remember just before going under and I looked down and I see all these tables with guys on them, you know. Probably only about eight or ten in this unit, but it seemed like a lot more. Then I continued to

do art work. In fact, I have one I did, a self portrait about one of the GI soldiers – it's in the catalogue – where he's dead, and he's in this position, lying down. He had had a rifle in his hand, and he had had shoes, but the Germans took them away. He had hit and burned by a napalm or whatever it was called at the time. Well, anyhow, I did a little painting of that. But it was interesting because when they decided to do this big push near the end, it was a beautiful day, you know. Birds were singing and all that stuff, and the sun's out. It's hard to believe that there would be some kind of action going on. Gee, some of the guys coming back. I remember this one. It was a big tough sergeant was smoking a cigar on a stretcher and they were saying "You lucky son of a bitch," you know. They had half a leg blown off or something. But then, so it was March I guess when I was wounded. [INTERRUPTION] Well, when the War in Europe ended, remember when Roosevelt –

MEH: I want to ask you question. After you were wounded, did you stay in Europe, or did they send you home?

JU: Well, no, we stayed in Europe until I think it was May when they started shipping us back. I came back on a hospital ship along with a lot of others. I mean, I was ambulatory. I had a cane and, you know. I don't think I needed crutches. It was a hospital ship that came back to the States. Before I got to that – I mean it was, you know, a big reorganization. You can imagine. I remember this big hospital unit, and it was some building taken over by the American army, you know. There was a big German prisoner-of-war camp. There was a guy there, American, who was a civilian. He was a little bit like this

guy Seelye, in Special Services, you know. He asked me if I wanted to tour the German camp. I said, "Sure," you know. So we walked by there. They were fairly well organized. I was impressed by that. Then, let's see, we were – no, we were out of – we weren't in hospital garb. We were in uniforms, regular uniform, because, you know, we didn't require – we were just waiting to be shipped back, either home or the Pacific. So – no, and then I'd hear stories about some of the Russian soldiers, who were very nice, I mean, but I remember getting the feeling they were like peasants and farmers. One of them caught one of the German prisoners, because they were using German prisoners to do bedpans or beds or whatever, and one of the Russians caught this German stealing a candy bar, because we'd be given candy bar – sometimes we'd been given a bottle of beer or, you know, goodies. So the Russians took this guy out in back and just shot him, and I'm sure nothing was done about it, you know, just – But the Russians, they didn't have to feel – they didn't fool around. Bang, you know, for a candy bar. Oh, I have a friend, a couple of friends I knew in the army at Camp Davis, one of them was Jack van Court, who's dead now, who was the head of the art department at the University of Wisconsin, and when he was in the army, he was the – became head of this – he was in officer training school but didn't make it. So he was the head of the art department at Camp Davis where we did training aids. The other, Lester Atwell, who's still alive. He's 92 or 3. I just spoke to him the other day, living in Cary, North Carolina. Does that make sense? It's near Chapel Hill, I mean fairly near. Lester wrote a book called Private, and it's probably, kind of on the same level as Red Badge of

Courage. It's that good. There were scenes in there – He wrote it as a journal, and it's just fascinating. It's out of print. Well, I'm digressing here a little.

MEH: Let's – I want us to move more toward Black Mountain. So you were sent back to the States, not to the Pacific.

JU: Right.

MEH: You got lucky.

JU: Back to Fort Custer, where I was inducted. There again they had a little art department set up. It would be like therapy, so I was able to do a little teaching because some of the guys had never – you know, they were there because they didn't want to go to motorcycle school. I met this man who knew Kepes's work. That's where got, started to get interested in it. I knew I could go back and get a job in several places. I wanted to do a free lance until I could find a school, because I thought that, you know, is the best thing. When I got out of the army, I got out from – I was released from Fort Custer. Oh, yes, because then the war in Japan was over in August. I remember being in Milwaukee visiting this guy I knew who was the head of the art department at the University of Wisconsin and got to know his mother and father kind of. I had a girlfriend who was going to Milwaukee-Downer College. It's interesting because a lot of people came from Milwaukee to Black Mountain but at the time, you know, I was still in the army. That's interesting.

MEH: So did you go back to Detroit after you were discharged?

JU: Oh, yes. Yeah, because my mother and father, of course, were there and we had a little house. It had a big house and a little house on the same piece of

property. We lived in the little one. My father fixed it up, because it originally was a shop, and we'd rent out the other house. That paid for the mortgage. So – where were we?

MEH: So you went back to Detroit and what –

JU: Oh, yeah. I got a job right away. I forgot, five dollars an hour or something, but it was a design job. I remember doing some stuff for Reuther, the automobile man union man, you know. It was a little firm. Kleb Studios, I think it was called – No, that was in New York. Anyhow, I knew it was going to be temporary until I could investigate the schools. I told you about, the thing about the incident going back to Cass.

MEH: Why don't you repeat that now so it will more be in sequence. You went back to visit?

JU: Yeah. I went back to visit Mariel Davis (PH) and Miss Green (PH), and that's when I talked to Miss Green about Moholy-Nagy's school. I've forgotten what it was called – I think Wolff took over after Moholy died. But then went to Brooklyn College, that's where Kepes and Chermayeff – Then went back to Cass Tech and talked to Mariel Davis. She said, "Well why don't you look into Black Mountain." I said, "What's that? Where is that?" She said. "Well there's somebody in the other room, one of the students, Ray Johnson." So, he came in and we talked a little bit, and he had some – I think he had some literature on Black Mountain. There wasn't much at the time, you know. Then I applied and was accepted and went down by train. It took quite awhile too. Sleep on that

train. It was a coach, of course, and I think I told you about meeting the students and Rondthaler and –

MEH: Was this a trip to visit, or did you just go directly there and stay?

JU: No, I went directly there. I was accepted without having to go down there. There was already Paul Williams and some other people. This is in, I'm trying to think, 1945, I guess.

MEH: Yeah, did you enter in the fall or did – I'm trying to remember – or did you enter in the winter session?

JU: No, in the fall.

MEH: It would have been, I think, '45. Maybe '46.

JU: No, '45, yeah. Because, well, see by that time I was what, 25, because I was inducted at 21. So, I was 25 and there were a few other GIs who were in the same age group, and the young women were – It was a good time to go down.

MEH: If you had been interested in design in Chicago and in Brooklyn College, why did you select Black Mountain of the three?

JU: Well, because I was also interested in fine arts. I mean, even when I was at Evans, Winter, and Hebb, I'd go to night school for life drawing. Oh, that's another thing. Back in Detroit, when I was in the high school, my father found a place where I could draw from the model, and I was like fourteen years old. Well, that was kind of exciting! But luckily he was able to find one. I can still see some of the – in my mind, you know – some of the drawings I did. They were quite good. So Black Mountain had – That was the other thing, I wanted not just

commercial art. I wanted to get some English. Not math but, you know, some
what do you call it?

MEH: General studies.

JU: Right, right. Because I figured it's very important, because you're just not
painting pictures. You're dealing with other things.

MEH: So, you arrived at Black Mountain. Josef Albers was there then?

JU: Yes. Yeah.

MEH: Why don't we sort of start by going through the courses you took with him. You
took his – basic design course?

JU: Right.

MEH: What do you remember about that course?

JU: Well, let's say there's drawing, painting, and design. Yeah. I was, you know, of
course, very impressed by the man, because he basically was – or not just he
was teaching us how to "see" – in the big sense of the word. You know, not to
accept things just for what they seemed to be. I remember the mat~~h~~re studies.
They were fascinating, because people would bring in these projects, especially
the ones that had been there before, you know, in Albers's (?) classes. I
remember them – I can see the one with the asparagus, the way – somebody
brought in a drawing board or something and he had covered it – or she had
covered it – with a wet cloth, or a wet white cloth, and picked it up and you
could not tell what it was because he had tak- – Say he takes asparagus and
put it all together. I'm just thinking – where'd he get asparagus! [LAUGHS] He
cut some of the tops – all of the tops off but at different levels, and you looked

at it more straight down, at a little angle, but it was fascinating, the color, the texture, everything. Elaine, you know, you could see her – I guess I, I kind of nicknamed her Matière Mommy – Matière Mama, Matière Mama. Because she would bring in these fantastic things and she'd be – I don't know, she did something, I wasn't there at the time, she got horsehair from the tail of the horse and made some sort of a matière out of that. But it was kind of a challenge to see if you could find something. Of course, that was just a part of the design course. He was very interested in, oh, paper constructions. Then, of course, the color studies. That was – the color class was separate from the – The watercolor class. When you had them in your book, it was just, I mean it was a wonderful, it was wonderful the way you could show the things in the book. That's the way it was, you know.

MEH: So, let's, going back to the design class. He did the matière studies, okay. What was the purpose of the matière studies?

JU: To be able to see – see, period. To go beyond what it seems to be. Just sort of waken you up to, you know – because it's another – It's the senses. I mean the things that are visual are not just visual. I mean when you look at an orange you think of the juice, you know, and the color of course. Then, of course, well, the design. The skin and everything. There's nothing ugly about an orange.

MEH: And you did this with – What were some other types of exercises that you did in design, besides the matière?

JU: I'd have to get out my (OVERTALK). I've got copies of my, you know, notes. But there would be – Like he was interested in topography, especially the Bodoni

typeface. Frankly, it's not that great [LAUGHS]. So [BACKGROUND NOISE] I guess it was design. Say he would have you write your name. Then he'd have you draw your name. In other words, copy it, and then the relationships of the lines. He introduced all sorts of things through just very basic almost elementary – Figure-background was important, at least I remember it – It suddenly hit me: "Of course," you know. Nothing exists by itself. It's all relative. It's all relationships.

MEH: Did you – How did he conduct his class?

JU: Well, it'd depend on the class. He'd give a little demonstration on the board. I mean, there was chalk, and he might – Oh, do you know Jay Hambidge's work, Dynamic Symmetry? It was very popular way back. Euclid. You'd take your square and take the diagonal of the square, drop it down, and then construct a rectangle. It becomes progress- – I had a course in it in Detroit with some teacher. But anyhow, back to Albers. He would, you know, lead you on slowly and then Bang! It suddenly would hit you what he was trying to show. Now this didn't happen all the time, but many times. He was very careful – I mean he was, nothing was fuzzy about Albers! He was clear. I remember coming into the design class with – in fact, it had to do with some squares and rectangles and shapes, and I did a rather elaborate painting with colors. He completely ignored it, because he wasn't interested in showing paintings. You know, it was a problem that we were experiencing. He talked about somebody's work who – it was just a very simple [LAUGHS] pencil drawing. Well, he did it to just stick to – to bring out the basic facts or ideas behind the particular assignment, let's say.

But I remember feeling "What the – ", you know. I remember Oli Sihvonen drawing some model. We had a model. The model would be one of us, with shorts on, you know, or a bathing suit or something, and what the hell was I going to say?

MEH: You were saying that – was it Oli who was drawing the model?

JU: Oh, yes, I'm sorry, yes. He had studied with Corbino. He was a painter, popular in the, during the Depression really, Art Students League, and I remember Albers says "Stop drawing a bunch of Corbino rear ends," or bott – asses, because it was typical. This Corbino was a very voluptuous kind of – they all looked alike. Albers wasn't interested in that. He was interested in getting you to see. So, Oli dropped that pretty quick. But we were all, you know, we were trying to show off a little bit and let him and others know that we knew a thing or two, you know.

MEH: A lot of the GIs really had trouble with studying with Albers. They felt that he was, you know, too dictatorial, too rigid, whatever. (OVERTALK) You came with a lot of art training. Did you have a problem with that?

JU: No. No, because the man knew what he was doing. He wasn't just being authoritative for the sake of being authoritative. He was, you know – see something, or discover something. You've met with him, and you've met with Molly McGregor [Gregory]. Now the two would just went along so well.

MEH: You had, you lived in one of the dormitories, and you had your own study?

JU: Yes. Yeah, I was lucky. Yeah. Well, at first – The first couple of months I was sharing a study with Harold – He wasn't there too long. He was a writer. No, it

wasn't Harold. Jack? Anyhow, but it was hard because they were small, and being a writer, he could go to the library, if he wanted to work. Yeah.

MEH: But you shared a study. What do you think was the effect at the college of having the studies? Your own little study?

JU: (OVERTALK) Privacy. I mean, it's kind of hard to have privacy if you're in any college. I mean, you're surrounded by people, teachers, students. There are very few times when you can be alone, you know. I don't mean at Black Mountain. I mean any place. God, this city. You'd do anything to be alone because there are so many people. But back to – No, the study gave you – gave you time to think and feel. Before that, when I think back, I was in the army – never alone. Even when I was living in Detroit, I didn't have my own apartment. People didn't have them in those days. I was living with my mother and father.

MEH: At Black Mountain, you lived in the dorm. You had your own study. You took classes other than Albers's. Did you say you took a class with Max Dehn?

JU: Oh, yes!

MEH: What do you remember about the class? What was he like, and how did he conduct his class?

JU: [LAUGHS] He was so rare. Well, his classes were rather large. You always felt comfortable. You never felt it like a class or, you know – Exciting. I remember one of the things – Oh, what was it? Ethics, and there were a couple of things. One was talking about being superstitious, and everybody – "Raise your hand if you are superstitious." And, you know, nobody was superstitious. [LAUGHS]

Then he said, "Okay," he says – I remember there was this young girl. He said "Say 'I wish my brother were dead.'" Oh wow! She said it and then broke out in tears, so upset. Everybody was superstitious. But he knew how to do that. For some reason, Paul Williams and Harry Weitzer and I going to work on a project together. Your light is flashing off and on, is that all right?

MEH: [IRRELEVANT TECHNICAL REMARKS] We'll go a little further.

JU: We decided to do a paper on marriage, and Dehn let us do it, you know. Then what we discovered about that was none of us – none of the three were ever married. What the hell! Doing a paper on – Then, of course, he loved his hikes and he loved his, you know, nature, you know – flowers, and the orchids, I guess.

MEH: Did you take his class in Mathematics for Artists?

JU: Oh yes, yeah. That was a riot.

MEH: What do you remember about it?

JU: Well, it was – Dehn was way off – We'd always say, "Dehn, come back, come back. Let's go from here." No, it was reproducing mostly things that had to do with geometry, because that's what, you know, (UNINTEL). What was – I thought of about – Well, he got along so well with Albers, I mean, you know, because Albers knew enough about math and then Dehn knew enough about art so that they could – and also both coming from Germany, so – Wonderful man. I remember visiting his wife in Chicago, when I was married to Elaine, and we were in Chicago and we looked up Mrs. Dehn. She was, she was a graphic arts – not graphic arts, but – No, he was a very unusual man. Elaine has a

wonderful drawing of him in your book. I think it's the typo was all about Ray Johnson and it was –

MEH: Oh right. They missed it and put the wrong label on it, (OVERTALK). Definitely Dehn. Was there – Actually, while we're there, what was Ray Johnson like?

JU: Ray?

MEH: [AFFIRMATIVE] He was there when you were there.

JU: Yeah, right. I thought he was very young, and I didn't know him that well. We'd meet in classes and at lunch or dinner or whatever. I remember he was beginning with his male art I think it was. No, I thought he was very young. I mean, I didn't – I liked him. You know, I was more friendly with more of the guys my age, I guess, you know, like Larry Fox. It's funny I should – He called me the other day. He's had an operation on his – in connection with a prostate but he's doing fine I guess.

MEH: Good. Yeah, I knew he was getting that.

JU: But he – He went about it the right way. He did a lot of research, you know. He still sees a couple of the girls [LAUGHS]. Who's the one he's seeing now. Somebody up on the Cape.

[END OF DV CASSETTE; BEGINNING OF DV CASSETTE 2]

MEH: Where were we? We'd been talking about Max Dehn's class.

JU: Oh, M.C. I liked, I loved M.C.'s class.

MEH: What did you take with her?

JU: It was mostly Shakespeare. To me she was very exciting as a teacher. Exciting, I don't mean in a loud way [LAUGHS], but she had a wonderful voice.

MEH: How did she conduct her class?

JU: Well, it was with a group. Sometimes, I guess she worked with two or three, but this was rather a large group and it was primarily Shakespeare. I think we read some of the plays with a script, I mean with the book. It was more to – I mean, say if you just read Shakespeare, that's one thing, but if you have the play, if you have people acting, then you get closer to what it's all about. I think that's – she was very aware of that. Who was the other – I took a writing course, almost like a one-to-one. I can't think of the man's name.

MEH: Corkran, maybe? Or Rondthaler.

JU: No.

MEH: Zabriskie? I think he had left.

JU: No. Oh, that's right. You weren't there. I'm still amazed that you –

MEH: It seems like I was there. [LAUGHS]

JU: And how! More than any other student.

MEH: For twenty-four years.

JU: She may not know what day it is, but [LAUGHS].

MEH: What did you do on the Work Program?

JU: Oh, that. I did not want to do dishes. Boy that was one thing – I did it a couple of times, but boy – after the army. I remember in the army I developed a couple of sores and stuff on the – But what I chose to do was – there was an area where there'd been some build-, an abandoned building, and there was a bunch of lumber but it needed cutting up and woodchopping and stuff like that. That I could do, and choose my time and so forth, because they had a lot of

wood stoves and fireplaces, I guess. I certainly did not want to shovel coal, and to me I thought it was, you know – these kids – they'd never done anything like this before in their life. They just thought it was fun. I thought there's [LAUGHS] very little fun in that! God! They were kind of proud, you know, having soot all over them. I remember – What was great about, one of the things that was great about Black Mountain was we created our own Saturday night parties or get togethers. We didn't have to go to town to drink beer. As a matter of fact, I remember – since I had some money from the GI Bill, I could buy a case of Italian – you know, the wine, Italian Swiss Colony? You know it? It was like 65 cents a bottle. I'd get a case of it, and I would sell it, not for a profit, but just to people who wanted it so they wouldn't have to go to town just to get a bottle of wine. I remember we used to cool it in the wonderful stream next to the Studies Building. Willie Joseph, there was – there were some wonderful, I was going to say, characters. I guess they were. For entertainment around here?

MEH: So for entertainment, you really provided your own.

JU: Yeah. Oh sure! I remember a party that Varda started – the Greek party.

MEH: Do you remember how you dressed for that party?

JU: Yeah, I was Mephistopheles. From Goethe's Faust. I remember Leo Lionni? He came as Varda! Oh, God. It just – I can still see Varda's face when Leo walked in. Do you know the story? He powdered his hair white, which is Varda's. He wore – he gotten ahold of one of Varda's sweaters. He didn't have too many, because he wore the same one all the time. Varda had a Model-A Ford, a convert-, a little roadster, you know? With a little rumble seat in the back? He

had painted it purple and blue and all sorts of – things that, you know, kids do today. But then you didn't do it to a car. But he did. Leo made a little car, like a replica, and he was pulling it on a string, walking into the – that was this entrance to the Studies Hall – not Studies Hall, the Dining Room. Oh, my god. Poor Varda. Varda had a wonderful ego, you know, and that – this poor guy just deflated.

MEH: What was your costume? How did you dress?

JU: Sort of a red and black – I guess black pants and a red shirt or something, but the Mephistopheles – I had something in my, like the devil. What did he have? A pitchfork or something? This wasn't sharp. It was just wooden.

MEH: Do you remember other costumes?

JU: No, not too well. I was thinking of Judd Woldin, you know? He used to play "Begin the Beguine" a lot and other things. But Leo Leoni thought he had composed it. Leo Leoni, you know, was European basically, I mean. Didn't know that much about jazz, I guess, or he would have known that Judd – Who did write "Begin the Beguine"? Something like Irving Berlin or something. I don't know. Artie Shaw, I think, made it popular.

MEH: And what was the song?

JU: "Begin the Beguine." We never lacked for music.

MEH: Did you have any interest, I mean particularly, in the music?

JU: I was a monotone. Or I was told I was a monotone in probably the fifth grade. The damn teacher ruined it for me. [LAUGHS] "John, don't sing. You're a monotone." No, but I loved it.

MEH: Do you recall other parties at the college? Other decorations?

JU: No. No. There were sometimes private parties. The little cliques and stuff.

Lorna – what's her last name now?

MEH: Halper?

JU: Yeah, Halper. Blaine at the time. She was wonderful. I liked her mother, too. I remember meeting her in New York. But Lorna would come down with a couple of suitcases and no clothes. They were just bottles [LAUGHS]. I remember Albers coming to a party – let's say it was a private party. He had quite a bit to drink. So, I think it was Paul Williams and Larry and I – Harry – had to sort of walk him home, and we came up to the house. I mean he – Albers was quite alert and stuff. We got up to the house, and he just lay down on the porch and looked up at the stars and I don't know what he said. It was something was wonderful. Life, I guess.

MEH; Did you ever leave Lake Eden to go into the surrounding area? To Black Mountain or Asheville, or into the mountains?

JU: On a project?

MEH: Just to go for any reason?

JU: Well, dentist. [LAUGHS] I remember once with – I can't think of his name, the first guy I shared a study with. He was even older than I was. He'd been in Alaska. Oh, I'm trying to think of his name. Anyhow, he and I decided to leave the college, just get away from it, and we went to – hitchhiked most of the way – to South Carolina. What's the town right on the water? Charleston? Yeah. We were glad to get back. The other – The experience was too much like being in

the army when you were in camp and you went to town. I remember we had a bottle of wine or something and something to eat, but it wasn't, but it wasn't – it was no fun. The people were uninteresting and dull, and I remember coming back and meeting Jene Markoff. We were pretty close. I remember, you know, saying "Jene," you know, "John!" Like in the movies? That was fun. She was great. She was really great. Larry was in touch with her, Larry Fox. But oh, there was one party. Dehn went with us. We all got in a truck, and it was like between Black Mountain, the town, and the school. It was really "down south" – what's a nice word for hillbilly?

MEH: Hillbilly. [LAUGHTER]

JU: Hillbilly. (UNINTEL). Anyhow, it was kind of dancing going on, lousy little orchestra or little – somebody playing, maybe records. They were drinking beer. Dehn was sitting across from me, and all of a sudden a shot goes off. A gun. Jesus! There was a sort of rumble or a fight or something, and Dehn and I were just looking at each other and said, "Well, that's life." It was so dumb. Like I'm pretty sure: "Well that's life!" "Yeah." He had just turned so funny. It was like a scene in a movie that somebody had planned. But when you think about it, you know, when we're down there, students – Of course, most of us were a little older than – Not most of us. Some of us were a little older than the others, so – Then, there was a wonderful black girl that was a singer.

MEH: Delores Fullman? [TECHNICAL REMARKS] Delores Fullman? There was another person – I can't think of her name.

JU: Yeah. Whenever she went to town, we always – somebody was with her, one of us.

MEH: The college was integrated, at least a little bit, at the time?

JU: Yeah, right, right, right. The college was, but the town wasn't, see. That's –

MEH: Do you have any other particular memories of the college? Anecdotes? You met Elaine at the college?

JU: [AFFIRMATIVE]. Yeah. Mat~~is~~re Mama. Joan Stack – what's her name now? I don't even know.

MEH: Sewell.

JU: How's she doing? Do you know?

MEH: I saw her at an opening about a couple of months ago. She looked fine.

JU: She working?

MEH: I think she's retired. We won't put that on tape. [IRRELEVANT REMARK]

JU: No, I've been working, drawing, because – Well, she and Elaine were always drawing, and then she – Joan stopped, when she, I think when she ended up at the Metropolitan. I think it would have been interesting if I or anybody could have been at the college at different times, I mean actually going there, you know. The wonderful – it was after the college, at your book opening at Bard, that was wonderful, you know. That funny place, where we had a reunion, near Wood- – Was it Woodstock?

MEH: Yeah. A long time – That was before my – I became involved. I think Larry organized that, maybe.

JU; Yeah. It wasn't big, but –

MEH: Why did you leave the college? You were there on the GI Bill?

JU: Yeah. Yeah, I had a couple of years left. But I wanted to get back and work. Leo Lionni said he'd be glad to look at my samples, or interview me, or come up to N.W. Ayer, which is a very good advertising agency, and I thought well, it's time. Then I was seeing Elaine at the time, going with her, whatever you call it. When I got the job, I called her up and asked her to marry me.

MEH: Was she in New York then?

JU: She was, yeah. She was already – She was in New York City. The way we could communicate was phone because she was staying at some dumb little – God, that was weird! In Queens or someplace. The room was five beds in it, you know, where people were living, and she was working. You know, she couldn't get – Stack got a job at, with Will Burtin at Fortune magazine. Elaine went back to Milwaukee, and I remember visiting her and the family. Then I went back to Black Mountain, she was staying in Milwaukee. I've forgot, it's kind of fuzzy there.

MEH: So you came –

JU: I mean, somebody could say, "Well why did the school stop?" I say, "Well it didn't have enough money." "Why couldn't it happen again?" "Well, it's a different time." You could have a different school. God knows there's a need for it now, starting – Oh, I was just thinking of Ruth Asawa. Now she did something with school. Boy!

MEH: What was she like at Black Mountain?

JU: Ruth? Shy. Shy. Shy, funny little girl. She surely changed [LAUGHS]. Well, she was very young. I mean, she – coming from a concentration camp. Then she was – It was through Betty and Elaine that she came to Black Mountain, mostly Betty. I mean –

MEH: So, you left and you came back to New York, and did –

JU: No! I left and came back to Philadelphia. Or came to Philadelphia.

MEH: It that where Will Burtin was?

JU: No, he was in New York. Leo Lionni was living in Philadelphia and at – N.W. Ayer was just one of the best advertising agencies. I got a job there, and then I got married in Milwaukee, and then landed, I remember, with this big trunk full of our stuff, looking for an apartment in Philadelphia. We moved twice in Philadelphia. I remember one time Dehn stopped off on his way to New York. I was very pleased to see him. Just like for lunch. He was catching the next train or something to New York.

MEH: So, you stayed with Ayer in Philadelphia, working there?

JU: Oh, yes, yeah. Well, then I developed some good friendships there. N.W. Ayer – all the art directors painted, and there was one who was very good, up and coming illustrator. He got stuff in the Saturday Evening Post. Anyhow, he and I were talking about the GI Bill, and I said, "I've still got a couple of years." "Why don't we go to Europe?" I said, "Gee, maybe that's a good idea." Elaine and I went but Isa Barnett did not. But, oh, back to N.W. Ayer. After N.W. Ayer, I had a chance to be assistant art director at Ladies Home Journal, which was a big mistake. Oh, I hated it. It's the only time in my life I was fired. Fink (PH), what

was his first name? What an asshole! [LAUGHS] I remember Leo meeting him – Fink had been a lettering man up in New York and was very polished. He was right out of a movie. You know, the art director type for Ladies Home Journal. I was just so bored. I remember the Goulds (?) were the editors. The Goulds (?) were only speaking to God, you know. That's Robert Lowell. The Cabots speak to the Lowells and the Lowells only speak to God. Did you ever hear that?

MEH: I seem to remember it, yeah.

JU: [LAUGHS] Anyway, the Goulds – a good example, at Christmas they sent all the employees a photograph of their house, with the snow. Like Who Cares! I thought "My, God. Don't do anything."

MEH: So – you were fired from there and then you (OVERTALK)

JU: Yeah, then I – Leo quit N.W. Ayer. He went on a sabbatical to Italy, and when he came back, he started his own design firm. I was the other part of the firm. But he was wonderful to work with. Brilliant. Oh God, that guy is – I can hear him laugh.

MEH: What was the name of the firm then?

JU: Leo Lionni. [LAUGHTER] Then Fortune magazine got ahold of and wanted him to be art director there, and he took it with the idea that only work three days a week and – two days a week or something, three I guess – and he did a good job of that. Because he had ideas! God, guy was brilliant. Did you talk to him?

MEH: No. Unfortunately no. So what did you do then?

JU: Oh, I was his assistant. I took care of whatever the assistant takes care of.

MEH: Did you go to Fortune with him?

JU: No, no. I stayed in Philly. I know, he had the CIBA Pharmaceutical account. That was one of the things. He just sort of handed it over to me, and then I worked with another guy – I used his firm – his studio – and I was sort of freelancing and then working. I still had CIBA, part of CIBA. Then talking to Isa Barnett (PH) and that's when we talked about going to Europe, and to France, specifically Paris. Then Betty and Pete came over, and Ray Obermeyer (PH) – you didn't know him. He didn't go to Black Mountain. Ray Obermeyer. Then came back to New York, and started a freelance –

MEH: Where did you study in France?

JU: The Academie Grand Chamière, Academie Julien.

MEH: What was the relationship between those two? Were they totally separate?

JU: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I went to one – Académie Grand Chamière [TECHNICAL INTERRUPTION] But the schools, you know, weren't very good. After Black Mountain, my God. We pretty much dictated what we would do. That's the way most of the GIs did. We decided we would do this. We'd go away on a week trip and come back, and sign in. They didn't want to give us away, because then they would lose their jobs – like the Veterans Administration, you know, International. But we worked. I mean we, you know, painted. I was trying to think who else was there at the time, from Black Mountain. Betty and Pete. Oh, yeah, the guy who used to wear a derby. Oh – Claire – He was married to Claire. He died.

MEH: So you came back and you freelanced for awhile?

JU: Yeah. Then got a job as promotion director, Every Woman's magazine. Like the Family Circle, you know? That was kind of fun. I mean, it was a job. Then it folded – it had merged with one of the other supermarket magazines and I was freelancing. That's what you do when you're out of work. You freelance [LAUGHS]. Then got a call from a headhunter, as they're called, and they asked me a bunch of questions and saw my por- – Oh, I was recommended by somebody who had seen my advertising book. I saw it just the other day, because Michael wanted to see it. There are some good ideas in there. But anyhow – Oh, I was interviewed and I had to take a psychological test. I remember one of the questions: "What would you do if you knew you only had six months to live?" I said, "Well, probably get a lot of life insurance." I said, "Really it's a ridiculous question. How would one know unless one's really faced with that?" You know. So I got – Oh, then met George Weisman (PH). I finally met the people that I was going to work for if I got employed, and George Weisman was chairman – well not chairman of the board, but he knew Leo Lionni. He was also like Leo, you know, with ideas and stuff, and we got along fine so – I was there twenty-five years.

MEH: Now this was at Philip Morris that you were?

JU: Yeah.

MEH: As art director?

JU: Yeah. It had nothing to do directly with the advertising agencies. It was more in-house stuff – annual reports, and later on I turned it into the art projects. I mean, Mary Lanier – did you ever meet her?

MEH: [NEGATIVE]

JU: God! You'd like her. She's terrific. She and her husband. She's an art adviser, but is doing less of it now. She – She wrote my catalogue.

MEH: So, your meeting Leo Lionni at Black Mountain in the summer of 1946 definitely was fortuitous in terms of your career later.

JU: Yeah, yeah.

MEH: Did you take his class? At Black Mountain?

JU: Oh, yeah, of course, yeah. It was good. I remember his coming into my study. I had tacked up an ad I'd created. He said "What have you got that up there for?" I said, "Well, I don't know. To impress you or – " I forgot what I told him. He said, "Don't put that up there. Put up a painting." I mean, you've got painting – You know the other teacher who was very good and had a tough time at the beginning, I thought – Bolotowsky. I mean, you know, to fill Joe, Jos, Juppi's footsteps or whatever – shoes? He was good. I remember he came into my study and looked at my work. You know, it was one of those things that, you know, he was doing it, visiting other people's studies of their work. He says, "Do you worry about what people think?" I said, "Well, no." Well, that a lie! But I said, "Well, why? What do you mean?" "Well," he says, "Your drawings." I knew just what he meant. The same thing with Leo back to that ad or whatever I'd created and put on my bulletin board. I remember after he left, he just had knocked all the props from under me, which is great, you know.

MEH: So you studied with both Albers and Bolotowsky?

JU: Yeah, yeah.

MEH: [INTERRUPTION] Okay.

JU: I think that one of the things, being twenty-five years old – and there were others, but there were also, there was also the younger people. Well, like Ray and some of the girls whose names – Remember Bingo? Did you ever interview her? I called her Bingo.

MEH: Oh, Bingo.

JU: What's her real name? Janet.

MEH: Janet Aley.

JU: Yeah. I liked her son. Catherine went with him for awhile. There were young people who were there who were kind of lost. I mean, they would have been lost anyplace, I think, you know. I don't think Black Mountain was just for anybody.

MEH: Well, certainly a big difference, disparity in age after the War. There were the GIs and then kids who hadn't even finished high school.

JU: Yeah. Because before that, the group that was there before the GIs, I'd say, before that period – before the War – I don't know what – I guess there were a few. I'm thinking M.C. was there. Dehn was there, I guess.

MEH: Did you study with either Jacob Lawrence or Varda?

JU: Varda, yeah I took Varda's class.

MEH: What was that like?

JU: Wild! [LAUGHS] And full of "feeeeling." You know. Enthusiasm. He did a lot of collages when we were there. He was like a big boy. I'm a little prejudiced, too. I thought he was kind of a phony, but I was a student and he was the teacher. He

was keen on Elaine, and I guess I was a little jealous. I put him down
[LAUGHS]. Looking back on his real value, though, I think he was full of
enthusiasm. Entirely different teaching than Albers, you know, more excited.
Will Burtin. Of course, that was a summer thing. I'm trying to think of some
other teachers. Oh – John, the psychiatrist.

MEH: Wallen. John Wallen.

JU: Yeah.

MEH: You were there the summer that Burton and Lionni were there, but you didn't
stay, you weren't there the summer that Cage and Cunningham and de
Kooning were there?

JU: No, no.

MEH: You had left.

JU: Yeah. I wish I had been.

MEH: You took John Wallen's class?

JU: Yeah. But it was more – had – I remember it had more to do with – I did do
much reading for his class. It had more to do with psychological factors, you
know. I think he – Well, it was Jung (young?), as I remem- – That's my
impression. I was not overly enthusiastic. I preferred Dehn's approach to life.

MEH: Comparing your studying at Cass and taking some classes at Cranbrook and at
Society of Arts and Crafts and other places with studying at Black Mountain,
and studying in France, how would you compare the experience of learning at
Black Mountain to these other places – both positive or negative.

JU: Oh positive. [STATIC]

MEH: In what way?

JU: It just opened up all sorts of avenues or ideas and exposed you to people, other people that had ideas. Sometimes I was self-conscious about being in some of the classes. I don't want to use the word "inferior," but, you know, it's a little bit of that kind of connotation that – I've much more confidence now than I did then, of course. A lot more sure of myself. That's an awful thing – being sure of yourself. Being comfortable with, I guess. More tolerant. I was just thinking of, say, the art world today. I'm just curious how you feel about it. What's happening today. I saw the Sol LeWitt show, and I enjoyed most of it, and I could see – I loved his early stuff, and I love the black and white. The color studies, you know, painting a wall – and he's a terrific guy, helped a lot of the young ar- – I have one of his paintings, one of the – I'll show it to you. It's a real dark one that's on that wall. Anyhow, somebody had two of his paintings and wanted one of mine so we traded. But back to what's happening in the art world, it's a lot of hype. It's not – It's not what I think was going on at Black Mountain at all. I mean, there was a development. Here there's too many of their shows, they make a statement and they want to go on from there and they want it, expect, you know – you can't do that. You can't do that.

MEH: What do you think was the importance to the college of its being so isolated? How do you think that affected it? Unlike these other schools, which had been really in metropolitan areas.

JU: Yeah, well, they'd been established a long time, whereas Black Mountain was in a constant state of development and growing – not from here to there, but in

different directions. I don't know if that's clear, but – Maybe it's something I'm reading into it. But it does seem to be more – less academic. That's why a group broke away from – was it Rollins? Because they wanted to be more, you know, be more alive and be more involved in things. The thing about Duberman, he was talking about the "community." I suddenly saw (?) (UNINTEL) I thought it wasn't a community integrated with the community down there. It was far removed from the thing. It had nothing to do. I wasn't crazy about his book. I think that the best book is yours, of course. Who's the other one?

MEH: Merv Lane's?

JU: Yeah. I liked that. It was a different kind –

MEH: Very different. All of them are different, which is good.

JU: Yeah.

[INTERRUPTION IN TAPING]

[CAMERA SPANS JOHN URBAIN'S STUDIO. NO, SOUND BRIEFLY WHEN INTERVIEW CONTINUES. COMMENTS ABOUT DATE NOT TRANSCRIBED.]

JU: In order to get some free buildings from the government – they were surplus – you had to submit a blueprint of the area, what they call a plan. There was none that was existing. I don't know how that happened but Dehn was able to do the surveying. Harry Weitzer and I just wrote down whatever he told us to write down, like good little boys. Then to take all these figures – it was to get elevations. Have you ever seen a blueprint with the contour lines? I was designated to do the drawings with Dr. Dehn's help. Of course, Harry – I think

Paul Williams was involved, too. So, we did that and submitted it, and Dehn – I forget what – he was on the – but they had to have a school engineer so they made me an honorary school engineer. Of course, they [never?] honorary degree or whatever. But it worked and when they got the building shipped in pieces. But it was the sort of thing that I think happened at Black Mountain. I can't imagine it happening at another school. So that was kind of interesting and fun.

MEH: This was for the government issue buildings after the war.

JU: Right. Because they had a surplus. It's like you go down to Canal Street and get these surplus things. I think they manufacture a surplus so they can sell it.

MEH: A couple of other things and then we will look at the Albers study. Did you ever – do you have any memories of the Dreiers?

JU: I didn't know them that well. Ted – they weren't there all the time that I was there. I mean, they'd come and visit. I know they were sort of a backbone for us and were a very important part of Black Mountain. It was just when they'd come down once in a while, talk to them at lunch or dinner.

MEH: What about Albers? Were there any particular painters that he talked to you about in class? Any particular people that he admired?

JU: The Renaissance – the Flemish painters. He'd talk about. And the famous Van der Weyden or the Van Eyck – the Triptych. Anyhow, the reason I mention it is he'd talk about the masters. I don't think he talked very much about contemporary painters other than – I remember he made remarks about this

“spittonist.” Those would be like Pollock – like Jackson Pollock and so forth. He didn’t have regard for them at all.

MEH: What about painters from the Bauhaus? Did he ever talk about the Bauhaus or about those paintings?

JU: Oh, yes. Albers. Not Albers. I mean, Paul Klee, and Feininger when he came down. Elaine took some classes with him. In fact, they exchanged Christmas cards later on. She would send him a stained glass cookie, and he would send a little woodcut. She actually had a letter too from him about – well, let her talk about that because she is very proud of, very fond of him – We visited him – Elaine and Joan Stack (I keep calling her that) when Feininger lived in this apartment house in New York City here. I think it was in the twenties. It was a typical New York apartment except for what was on the walls. Like Tobey and friends. Feininger – I mean, Paul Klee. I’m trying to think of some others. Back to your question.

MEH: Did he ever talk about Kandinsky?

JU: No, I don’t remember. Isn’t that interesting? Yeah. I’m trying to think about the painters or artists or architects he talked about.

MEH: When you were there, was that the time the Architect’s Collaborative was involved in designing buildings for the college?

JU: No, I remember there was some building going on or there was going to be some building going on. Paul Williams was involved in that because he was – wanted to be an architect. Of course, there were no architectural programs on

at the time. Don Page and a couple of others were involved in designing a building. And, of course, Molly.

MEH: I think they may have been working then on the farm house – raising the roof on the farm house.

JU: I never –

MEH: You didn't have any part of that –

JU: No. I wasn't against it. There other thinks I found I had rather do. It was a good experience. I had had some say "country" experiences when I was in Bloomfield Hills because Mr. and Mrs. Nichols had horses and cows. My grandfather, of course, was a great gardener and knew about things on the farm. I have some wonderful pictures of my grandfather with his – We wore – we didn't have blue jeans per se. They were jackin [PH], overalls, coveralls. Standing – I have a picture of him standing with a kind of a shovel or a broom, which has nothing to do with Black Mountain.

[INTERRUPTION

IN TAPING]

JU: This is a little cut out I did of Carina, because it's her birthday. If you notice, there's a little 6 there because she will be six. I've just had more fun doing it and finding things that will work, you know, with the materials and the – Also it has to do with found objects. Carina wants to be a garbage artist. So instead of a garbage can, I suggested

she maybe get a dumpster. It has a little more room. I never asked her, "What do you mean by a garbage artist." I just assumed she meant found objects, you know. She wants to be an artist. Of course, she's got her mother who has done a lot of art work. And her grandmother. So, it was kind of fun to do. I don't know how she will react it to it in the sense of – She might say, "That's nice. What does it do or what shall I do with it?" Because I'm always finding little things for her doll house. And, of course, giving her art supplies. We'll see what happens. It was kind of fun.

MEH: In a sense, this is a mat~~is~~ure.

JU: Yes.

[INTERRUPTION IN TAPING]

MEH: This is a color study by John Urbain from
Albers's class. John, why don't you tell
me what you were doing there?

JU: Actually, the – I think he called them vibrat-
– no, I don't know what he called – but I
always referred to it as vibration

colors. If you take, say, a color – now another thing: he never liked us to use the words cool color or warm color. Interesting, he said it had to do with relationships. But what happened is, say, you take an olive green square – can I put my finger on it? – like that. If that's the same value as this, you get a vibration, especially here. It's also a complementary color. In other words, it's sort of blue-green with this red. The fact that they're both the same value, it has a tendency to vibrate. It's an optical phenomena. Mainly why he was doing it I think is to show the complementary colors and also emphasizing that each color has a value and when you work on something like this, you try to get, well, the colors the same value, the opposite in terms of the complementary. Like red and green are complementary colors. Blue and orange are complementary. At the same time each color has a value. I don't know if you know what I mean by value. It's like from dark to light. Say, when you do a value scale, you have white and you have black and you try to get what is the middle grey between the two. Then you take the middle grey and the white and try to find the middle value between them. It's a very basic thing. But so many students do not

realize that every color has a value. Say yellow would be on the high scale of the value scale and then you try to mix a yellow with adding white or black to have it match the value. I'm not being very clear. Actually, you almost have to demonstrate it with the value scale because – Exactly, that's it. You can't talk about as well as you can demonstrate it with the actual mixing of the colors. I remember when I first came across it. Before Albers's class I was studying painting in Detroit, and I remember this teacher was waiting for that expression, "Oh, I see what you mean." You really – it's only by doing the exercise. I'm sorry I'm at a loss for words because I really want to do it with the actual mixing of the color and the values. But in this case, all of the values, even though they may not – even if you close your eyes it's almost – this is lighter than the red but it's not. Now these colors are I think all construction paper, the very inexpensive thing the kids use in school, and of course if this is not kept in the dark, all the colors would become light. Sensitive to light.

MEH: In color class you didn't use paint at all to mix – ?

JU: Oh, well –

MEH: That's a question.

JU: I'm trying to think. Yeah, he used paper mostly. That's right. Because to mix a color, it has another problem. It's again difficult to talk about. You have to show it. But it took me a while to – Oh, I have a chart. It's not from Albers's class. A man by the name of Joyce Fabian [PH], long since dead. Private lessons I was getting then. He was – developed a color scale in values. No, he used mostly paper because again, as I said, mixing colors becomes another problem. First,

you have to be aware of what the – the things that color does. I'd have to demonstrate. I'm sorry.

MEH: That will do for now. [INSTRUCTIONS NOT TRANSCRIBED] [VIEWING OF STUDENT NOTES]

[END OF DV CASSETTE 2,
OF DV CASSETTE 3]

BEGINNING

JU: [NOTES FROM CLASS OF JEAN
VARDA] Of course, Varda is
quite different in his approach to
teaching as compared to Albers.

But at the same time, he talked a lot about the "master beam," he called it. The – really the structure, say the backbone. In this particular case – and also when he was in Greece, he helped build boats, and he referred to the beams on the boat. For instance, in this case, if you look at it, you'll see the shape of a boat, like a floor plan, you know, looking down on it. In this one, it's – the thicker part is in the top, and then just turned it around. I don't know if you can see it very well, but it's like a man's figure – the head and the arms. Here is a woman's figure, with the dress part or the beam and the wire part of this particular object. What he was mainly – What he was trying to do, I think, was make you conscious of form and structure. Of course, he later on gets into this –let me just turn, what's this say? Three –

MEH: That says "Three Figures With Variations."

JU: Which is quite different than this in shapes and forms. I mean it's a much – It's almost like automatic drawing.
(OVERTALK) A stream of
consciousness kind of drawing,
and just letting the pencil go
wherever it wants to. Then from
that he would use examples
like Braque. He knew Braque
evidently in early life, and some of his stuff has Braque-like – I thought –
Braque-like shapes and tones. But it's a contrast here, this very loose free form
as compared to the structure. Then he would demonstrate with, oh, a pointer or
the chalk on the blackboard. He was kind of – It was pretty exciting. It was good
for young people just starting out, because he would, you know, just get
excited. Of course, his accent – sort of cultivated. But it added to his charm. He
had a lot of enthusiasm. I remember he had this Model A – what we called a
roadster in those days, you know, with a rumble seat, and it was painted purple
and red and yellow and all that sort. Don't forget, this was back in 1946.

MEH: Okay, do you want to –

JU: Here's a I'll say a little study, and he
wanted to point out – See, this is a
checkerboard. Every square is the
same. Now if you just take different
cards (?) and make them lighter or smaller, as is in here, it becomes much
more interesting as a painting and less dull. Just, again, to make you realize
how important the relationships of shapes to each other –

MEH: And then the figure above? Your caption for that was “God forever
geometrizes.”.

JU: I think that was his quote. As
you pointed out, Albers would
agree with him. But I've used
this principle in teaching,
when I've taught a few times –
in workshops, especially
good working with collage, to
get a student to realize, "Hey, this is dull, monotonous, uninteresting, as
compared to this." This is like, say, Mondrian and this is Nobian.

MEH: Okay.

JU: He used the guitar shape a lot,
in his own work, and I never heard
him play but he probably
could. Anyway, this pointed out
– it's a guitar shape, but a very rigid, formal and symmetric. Here he's taken the
– what did he call – the axis, and curved it. Here it's straight. So it gives, well, a
different feeling. It's softer, and I've forgotten what.

MEH: Less rigid?

JU; Yeah, less rigid. This is more formal and more rigid. Actually you think about
what Braque and Picasso did with the beginning of what do you call it, the
Cubists. You know, breaking down the rigid forms into something else.

MEH: What is with the next Night,
Twilight, Day image?

JU: I don't know. [LAUGHTER]
Because this doesn't look like day.
This looks like night. I think it was
just doing these shapes, and
then filling them in with values.
It's the same thing that happened with the like checkerboard, you get, you
know, you fill in every other one.

MEH: Why don't we go on to some of the Leo Lionni things. Okay.

JU: This is from Leo Lionni's class, which I found very exciting technically, or theoretically. We thought he was going to talk about graphic art, and advertising and that sort of thing, which he wasn't as interested in as he was in quote "art." Fine art. But anyhow, he dealt mostly with ideas, which I found exciting. It wasn't just drawing pictures or layouts. Here's one where he quotes Steig, the cartoonist, looking down – a man looking down his nose. He illustrated with an eye right in the nose. I mean, as you can see, it's kind of bizarre. But Leo would always have you thinking rather than drawing or making layouts, because then once you get an idea, then the visuals just flow, you know. He wanted to make us more aware – Here, yeah okay, I got it. Leo was always interested in images – in ideas, and using images to become a part of the idea. The way he sort of made us aware of pictures and the content is by, was by – an example here of taking things from a magazine. For instance, here are three horses. Now you assume if the horse is lying down, he's dead or maybe he's just resting. Or visa versa. But

otherwise they just say "Oh it's a picture of three horses." He was always trying to get you to become specific in trying to express an idea. There's one here, of a – What is this? Stokowski. Where is the soda jerk?

MEH: Two over.

JU: Okay. Here it is. This is a picture. I chose it. In fact, all these things just to give ideas or examples of changing the context. If you look at this one, this is a soda jerk. If you take this out, this hat is so much like an army, you know, cap or hat, and even here this could be a little, oh what do you call it? When you're released from the army, they give you a little badge just to indicate you were discharged. But that changes it. Suddenly the soda jerk becomes a soldier, and he's just been discharged. What's it say there?

MEH: It says "Changed Context" and then you say "Could be a soldier."

JU; Yeah, okay. Oh, this is a good one. Here we have a man with a gun. If you just use it as just a man with, you know – half a man, he can be anything. Now it's a man – Now it's just, it's not a man, just a man, it's more of a gun, emphasis on the gun. It could be a soldier. It could be a – well, obviously at that time, it was right after the War. But he was a very enthusiastic person, and I can hear him laughing now. He had a wonderful

laugh, just his own. He had wonderful ideas because he – He said today was a disposable – Like the paperbacks. He says, "Why would anybody want to save a paperback?" You know, "They're disposable." He said. "You have underwear that's disposable. Why do we have to keep washing the same shorts or underwear?" Just throw it away after – Eventually it will become – It already has. The Kleenex. Who needs a handkerchief, you know? I mean this is the way he thought. It just woke you up. That's about it. [INTERRUPTION]

MEH: This is a collage by John Urbain. Does it have a title, John?

JU: I'll have to look on the back. You'll have to look on the –

MEH: We'll do that later. (OVERTALK)

JU: This has to do with Catherine [SP] Urbain.

MEH: Your daughter.

JU: Yes. If you look real close, they're blue jeans. Catherine was wearing some blue jeans and she had holes, so she kept patching them, patching the holes with other materials. You can see this is corduroy. This is the original bluejean, but I painted on the bluejean itself. I wanted – Here [POINTING], a real blue blue and this is closer to the bluejean – Anyhow, if you look up here, there's a shaft for the belt. She would wear the blue jeans, and then if there was a hole developed, she'd patch it. One day I said "Don't ever throw those away. When you're through with them let me have

them." She gave me the blue jeans and I just glued it down and added some color and added some of my own color, besides the patch. But I think it's rather successful as a collage. Good catch. [SOMETHING DROPS]

MEH: So, this really is a collaboration between you and your daughter in a sense.
[LAUGHTER]

JU: In fact, my son Michael is a carpenter and a painter, and he was wearing some khaki pants, and he was painting a house or something, I've forgotten which. But there again, he had a lot of different paint marks from working, and I was able – I don't have the collage. I sold it, as a matter of fact. It was – is, you know, a painter's, a housepainter's pants. I was able to take it and mount it down and then add some – a few other colors. Not many. It was kind of fun.

MEH: Okay, let's look at another collage. [INTERRUPTION]

JU: This is a collage I did in
1978. In fact, it's part of a
series, and I rather like it.
If you look closely, you'll
see it's done on a book. I
find old book covers. I
have some here I'm going to hold up right next to it. See there, that's leather.
This is one that's all leather. Sometimes I'll soak them in a pan of water, and I'm
able to lift, lift this paper off and use it as part of the collage. There's probably
some materials in here from a book. It's taking old book covers and util- –
having them become something else.

MEH: How, John, would you relate this to Josef Albers classes?

JU: Well, I suppose materials are. I mean, see I feel that with the materials I use, to try and reproduce them in paint is, would be impossible because so much depends upon the color, that is, the texture and the color are inseparable. You can try to paint the texture, but why do it if you can actually use the texture itself? There's something about color in – on materials or in materials, that you can't really duplicate. Well, with a camera you can come close, but it's not the same. It becomes more than just utilizing different materials. Sometimes in my later work – I can't point anything out here because – but later on I use old photographs of my family or of friends and you can hardly see them unless you look very close. It's sort of a little, well, what is it? a secret? It's like making a memory. I don't know if I can explain it very well, but it's – With the book covers, there's something about them that fascinates me. I don't know always what it is.

MEH: One thing, I want to make a note before we go on to the next one, is that the camera is recording on the screen here the colors totally wrong. It's recording the central figure as being blue instead of brown. So I hope it's just this camera and that it'll be okay when I put it on a screen. [IRRELEVANT REMARKS] No the color is still off. I hope it's just this and not the – Okay, but here again the color is off on the screen, but it may be fine on the tele – It may just be the screen. [IRRELEVANT]

JU: [IRRELEVANT REMARKS]

MEH: The central figure there should really be a deep, almost blue-black, is that correct?

JU: Right. Yeah. I use a lot of – Some of my paintings – blue, and it's cobalt blue and black. I can't show them all to you now, but –

MEH: Yeah, the color here is a little better now, but it's still off. Okay, do you want to look at the next one? Do you want to get the title of this again?

JU: " P and L," abbreviations
for Prosper and Lucy, my parents.
You won't be able to see it with my
camera but here's my father, and my
mother's in here someplace.
It's just their head. I take the
photograph and I get a – like a
photostat or a Xerox. Well I call it a Xerox, a copy, and I can then color it a little
bit. It's there, but it doesn't stand out. Here's a case where I utilize a book.
Instead of making the painting on the book, or with the book, the book is part of
the painting but in a different way. This area in here, I don't know if you can see
it but there's a kind of an A, that was underneath the book. In other words, I
peel that off. I soaked it. It would be like taking this off, and this is what's
underneath. I did not make this marking. Somebody was binding the book or
whatever.

MEH: So here again a collage is a collaboration with people you don't even know.

JU: Right. This is a piece of rusted metal. It sounds crazy, but it works.

MEH: Okay, do you want to look at another one? Okay.

JU: This is a sort of a series I did, that are like landscapes. Of course a lot like Block Island. I call them summer huts or beach huts, they're like little houses, and sometimes there's a suggestion of a figure there. I love this in here. This isn't as good an example of this period. Most of mine are under glass, I guess, or on Block Island.

MEH: We'll try one under glass in a minute.
Go ahead.

JU: I like what happens with the
suggestion of a beach – the light
there. The figure. Sometimes –
Some of them I put, say, a head, a
photograph of a head, one of the
family, Michael, Catherine, or Corina, or my mother and father, and – actually, I
sold quite a few on Block. Because there's a feel of the beach – the shore. I
may work on this area here some more. I'm not completely satisfied. I have
others that are better examples.

MEH: Why don't you bring one John. [IRRELEVANT REMARKS] Okay.

JU: This is a really good example of
a book cover. You can see there's
sort of a cut here. I started to
cut it and I peeled back and saw
what was happening and so I left it. It's like a curtain. I'm not sure. It's called
"Hem" (?). I have to look on the back. I did like a series of this kind of thing I like
very much. Real subtle colors. You don't know it's a book cover at all. I want to
look at the back. I'll look at the back after. [INTERRUPTION]

MEH: The title of this is "Thackeray
Pope"?

JU: Yeah. Because I had this – used part
of this book, (UNINTEL) Alexander
Pope – can you see it? – In Verse and
Prose. It's not valuable, because it's
old. I'm looking at the – 1806. I just kept it in an envelope, on the back of a
painting. It adds a little something, a little history or something.

MEH: I'm just going to do a quick –

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]

[INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ON TAPE 1 TRANSCRIBED AS ADDENDUM]

MEH: This is John Urbain and we are in New York City. John, this is Thursday, not
Friday. Our appointment was Friday. But I arrived a day early and John was

gracious enough to offer his tea he had made for himself. The date – I dare not even guess at the date – is it January – ?

JU: Well, tomorrow is going to be the 19th [LAUGHING]. The 19th, so today may be the 18th [OVERTALK].

MEH: The year I'm sure is 2001.

JU: That's right. I'm so glad because writing out that 2000. I'm a little apprehensive when it's abbreviated.

MEH: It was writing out those two "00s."

JU: That's right. Double nothing.

MEH: At least that little "1" on the end is reassuring.

[END OF ADDENDUM]

JOHN URBAIN FOR
RELEASED WITHOUT
RECTIONS BY MEH.

ABOVE ARE IMAGES FROM THE STUDIO OF JOHN URBAIN