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Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS
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[BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW. BEGINNING OF TRANSCRIPT.]

MEH: [GIVES IDENTIFICATION]. Peter, how did you hear first about Black Mountain College?

PO: That's relatively easy to answer. I heard it from Walter Gropius, who simply insisted that I would spend a summer, in '46 I guess, at Black Mountain. I had no idea what it was, or why, and it was all very exotic because I was on a student visa at Harvard and therefore had to go back to Canada in May, and I had no money for any extra activities. In addition, I had to make money during the summer in order to come back for the second year at Harvard. One day Gropius came into the studio and recruited both Seidler and me and decided that we were going to go to Black Mountain the following week. I explained the reality of life, and he said, "We will look after it," and he did. He extended my student visa, he produced money for the summer, and I became a Wheelwright Fellow for the next term so I had no further excuses. And within a week I was in Black Mountain.

MEH: So you were a student at Harvard at the time?

PO: That's right.

MEH: Were you graduate? Were you in architecture? Were you undergraduate?

PO: No, we were in the Graduate School of Design, which meant we were there for a master's degree, and I was there for a Master of City Planning.

MEH: Do you remember how you first traveled physically to the college?

PO: Sure. By train, which was itself an eye-opener, and I'll never forget that.

MEH: How was that? What do you remember?

PO: Because I met for the first time the reality of the South—that there were people who couldn't sit next to where I was sitting and that I had to use washrooms designated as "White," and that all was exotic to me. So, my first induction into the reality of the South was a bit of a shock. The railway station that we got off had the same identifications that I have discovered were usual south of Washington D.C. So the train trip was memorable.

MEH: Did you travel down with Harry Seidler?

PO: Yes. That's right.

MEH: You went together. Where are you from? Originally.

PO: What question is that?

MEH: You're a Canadian, originally.

PO: I am indeed, yes.

MEH: Why had you chosen Harvard to study design?

PO: Well, for two obvious reasons. One was Walter Gropius, and the other was that they offered me a scholarship. Pretty good reasons. No, obviously the reputation of GSD was already then well-established.

MEH: Do you remember your first impression of the college, on your arrival at Black Mountain?

PO: I'm not sure I remember that too vividly. The lake, obviously, and the building which we were in the process, ultimately, of building. That wonderful white box sitting on the edge of the lake. I think it was that image, more than anything else, that I remember. It had a great terrace at the end, and that's probably all the most sort of visible image I remember. And the fact that we got almost immediately involved in all kinds of activities. There were lots of other like-minded and equally surprised graduates and undergraduates. So, we got deeply involved quickly. Of course, the next day we met Albers, and that was, that was it.

MEH: You had not studied with Albers at Harvard at that point.

PO: Albers was never at Harvard.

MEH: Well, he was there, especially in the late '30s and early '40s. During the summers he would go at times. He taught seminars, but he was never a professor there. But this was after that period. This was '46. Okay.

PO: If he was, I certainly didn't remember that.

MEH: What do you remember about Albers? What was he like?

PO: [LAUGHS] Well, Albers was an extraordinary charismatic person, for obvious reasons, and so was Anni. I mean, they were quite a pair. They were the most dedicated teachers I can imagine, certainly the most articulate teacher I've had until then. He was able to communicate what he really believed in—not just what he knew—in very unequivocal terms. And he expected you to respond. That was not a kind of play school. This was meant to be both productive and commitment to the range of activities which were about twenty hours a day. You

know, we lived there, we worked there, we ate together, we walked and dreamt together. So basically this was a very continuing immersion into a kind of culture which was quite exotic, quite extraordinary, and Albers was definitely the marshal of the organization. Both he and Anni were really quite remarkable people.

MEH: How would you describe this community—this strange civilization you were in?

PO: It wasn't so much strange as it was a kind of combination of summer camp and university. Summer camp because it was very informal, and in fact everybody was deeply involved in washing dishes or cleaning various parts of the building or in fact building it, or painting, or sculpting, or doing whatever had to be done. So it was really a living, working community rather than either just a camp for people who had nothing else to do or a university or a college where there was a rigid timetable. So, it was a quite unique combination of a sort of summer camp and university, but really all based around that very magical kind of person who was Josef Albers.

MEH: You took his classes?

PO: Oh, yeah, sure.

MEH: What was he teaching that summer?

PO: Well, what was he teaching there. Perhaps the best—I'm not sure what it was called. I don't remember, but it was basically the Bauhaus Werklehre course. It was the first, the basic course of color, of texture, of drawing, of learning really the fundamentals of design in the best sense of the word. It was clearly the Bauhaus basic course.

MEH: And this design class, or Werklehre, what do you remember about the class?

PO: Well, Professor Albers was a very articulate teacher, considering that German was his first language and English his second. His command of the English language was absolutely remarkable and highly descriptive. I mean he would teach and talk in terms of symbolic language, linguistic articulate language, so he was very persuasive. He thought clearly, obviously, and had experimented with color, which was his strongest point, and we experimented with him. The most obvious issue was context. It was there that we discovered that blue was only relatively blue if it was in a white or yellow context, and if it was red, it was not blue anymore, so the whole question was learning by doing. And he was the master of letting you experiment, but for a purpose—not random experiments.

MEH: So he gave like a problem or an assignment.

PO: Yes. We had daily assignments, and in the afternoon he would criticize what we'd done. So, it was learning by doing and then responding to the criticisms that he produced and others. There were all kinds of other people around, but he was certainly the central point.

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

PO: Yes. Yes. That's right, yeah. Yeah.

MEH: What do you think was—Well, first, I'm sure that at Harvard you must have had other classes based in some measure on the Werklehre, the basic design course at the Bauhaus. How would you compare Albers's class to your experience in other design classes?

PO: Well, actually I didn't have the design classes at Harvard because I took the Planning program. So, my teachers were Martin Wagner, who you probably don't

remember, and Perkins, and Gropius. So, that was of a different level. So I did not have the basic Werklehre. I had some before at McGill, but that's a different matter. So the Harvard comparison was quite different because there we had a very rigorous, systematic, academic, intellectually-demanding program. It was in no way comparable. Solving problems, rather than learning how to do certain things. That was the important thing about Black Mountain, that it was different. It taught me things that I would never have learned otherwise.

MEH: Can you be more specific?

PO: Sure. The typical academic program was to solve certain specific—site-specific technical problems—like building a building or a segment of a town or a combination of building components, and you didn't "design"—in the abstract sense, like lines on paper. You solved a problem. By solving a problem, I mean how to get from A to B, access to the entrance of that building, and how to get from Floor 1 to Floor 14, and how to make sure that the plumbing would work, and that ultimately the building would stand up, and it wouldn't leak. I mean these are site-specific solving problem issues, which you learn if you're going to be an urban planner or even an architect. Basic design was something that certainly at that time was not fundamental to architectural education. In fact, just to make it very simple, you may not recall but up until 1940, roughly, '41-'42, the typical training of an architect was based on the curriculum of the École des Beaux-Arts, which was a matter of copying all the Renaissance images and making sure that you had enough of them to clutter up all the buildings. So,

we're dealing a very important moment, namely the introduction of what the Bauhaus was all about to North America.

MEH: Do you remember specific exercises from Albers' design classes that you did? Particular problems that you worked on?

PO: Sure. I mean, it's quite standard stuff today. To be able to really understand color and its relationship to each other, color to color, you cannot rely on paint because paint is variable, and while it also depends on context, by the very nature of applying—either oil paint or watercolor or pastel—the nature of that surface changes. Therefore the only way to really understand color is to use colored paper, and with exercises of cutting up colored paper and producing patterns which would reflect certain demands—reciprocity or balance or contrast—and that would be the task. So you would have a bunch of building paper material which you would cut up and try to match and/or distinguish one from the other, usually in triangular or octagonal shapes. That in itself was important, the shaping. So, basically we were operating with as clear a direct color relationship as possible, based on, you know, historic stuff. I mean this is not the first time it happened. It's just that it was never taught systematically.

MEH: Did you do *matière* studies that summer, do you recall?

PO: No. I did sculpture, and we then built furniture. That was the next big thing.

MEH: That was with Molly Gregory?

PO: That's right. Yeah, exactly, yeah.

MEH: What do you recall about her class?

PO: (LAUGHS) It was fun, and I still have, I think, several things. I used lathes and learned how to turn a plate, which I still have, I think, somewhere. Then we built—yeah—Harry and I built three chairs, actually. I think he still has one. He was more fastidious about keeping it than I did. And then I did some quite nice wood sculpture.

MEH: Do you still have the sculpture?

PO: No. No, that's gone.

MEH: Photographs of the sculpture? Any record?

PO: No.

MEH: So, why did you take Molly Gregory's class? What attracted you to that?

PO: I was interested in woodworking, in making things and doing things that I otherwise wouldn't do or couldn't do. And the facilities were there.

MEH: What was Molly like?

PO: She was very patient and supportive and enthusiastic person, but mostly very patient with us, because certainly our skills were zero. I mean, mechanical skills. I didn't grow up on a workbench so I didn't know how to operate these things. But I learned.

MEH: What about—I think Leo Amino was there that summer, right?

PO: Yes, indeed.

MEH: Did you take his sculpture class?

PO: Yes, that's correct. Yeah. Yeah, you're well-informed. You're quite right. And it was fun. It was out in the open, and that was another attraction to be actually—to do this on this sort of terrace on the second floor of the building.

MEH: And he was doing that—he was doing sculpting with wood?

PO: Yes. That's right. Exactly.

MEH: What about Varda? Did you take his class?

PO: Varda? [LAUGHS] Varda and Harry and I went on a memorable trip. I don't know, have you ever seen, you know, his car?

MEH: Describe it.

PO: It was a convertible Ford and had a very elegant spectrum of colors applied to it, which in a sense reflected Albers's color theory. We drove through Tennessee with him, Harry and I, because I particularly wanted to see TVA. I mean, that was really my major interest there. So we caught the TVA as well. That's right.

MEH: What was Varda like?

PO: Well [LAUGHS]. Well, a very spirited, highly-exotic kind of person. Certainly not somebody with a shirt and a tie, you know. He was very much already then a kind of avant garde person, trying to be and exist with a kind of bohemian spirit. And he was good.

MEH: Do you recall a Greek party that he had?

PO: Oh, God, possible. I remember many parties, but I don't remember I think a Greek party. Was it a dress-up party?

MEH: [AFFIRMATIVE]

PO: Yeah, I think that's right.

MEH: Everyone came dressed—

PO: Toga, a white sheet toga. Is that right?

MEH: In fact, I'm not sure but I think somebody told me that you and Harry Seidler and someone else came dressed with on your heads Greek capitals or something like that?

PO: Oh, that's right. Yeah. I had forgotten that.

MEH: Okay. Tell me what you remember.

PO: I think that's right. I think what we—Well, we were still—let's see if I can remember this. I remember the toga and the sort of sheet that we used for that purpose, and then the other thing was that we would try to make fun of the Greek—of the Greek orders. You know, the Doric column, Ionic column, Corinthian column. I think we managed to manufacture a couple of them, but I don't remember. Harry will remember better. His memory is better than that. We then actually the following year, Harry and I got involved in a fête charette (?) at Harvard and that was a big operation, and that was also a kind of Greek-themed process. We had one costume for three people. But I don't remember much else about this, but I do remember that Varda organized this party. Yeah, it's probably correct that we had a papier maché column head. [LAUGHS] And Harry may actually have some photographs.

MEH: What—Gropius came down that summer.

PO: Oh, yes. Yes. He came down there, and we had several things that were quite important at the time. In fact— Have you ever met him? Did you ever meet him?

MEH: No.

PO: We became good friends for a number of reasons and one was that during that summer my father came to visit me down there, and he and Gropius became

friends. That sort of continued to spark this. But he came down and, first of all, he wanted to make sure that Harry and I were working hard, and, secondly, that we would come back for September. Harry had already finished, and Harry decided to work for Breuer but I did come back, and he did one project with us down there.

MEH: At Black Mountain?

PO: Yeah.

MEH: What did you do?

PO: I would have to—I think something to do with Albers, I'm sure. It may be something to do with Black Mountain, actually, some kind of proposal, some sort of project for Black Mountain, but I don't remember anymore. I think we actually built a model. That's what we did, but what it was I couldn't tell you.

MEH: They were interested in—you know, the GIs were coming back then and they were very short of space, and they were involved with the Architects Collaborative at that point on some plans that were never constructed.

PO: I think that was—Not with the Architects Collaborative. That came later. But I think there was some relationship to housing the veterans. I think that's, that's probably exactly what it was. But I know it was some exercise that Grop felt was productive for the college, and I think it was kind of a spec situation, trying to raise the money for it. I think that's exactly what it was, yeah. But this is like, you know, fifty-five years ago.

MEH: That's why, you know, if the interview is sort of slow or—I find that sometimes it's sort of a matter of my trying to trigger memories and so things will sort of float

back and forth. I'm asking you to remember things that happened when I was wee child. [LAUGHS]

PO: I have very fond memories of Albers and Anni, and of Grop that year. But some of other details kind of escape. Have you talked to Ruth Asawa by the way?

MEH: Oh, many times.

PO: Good, good. Well she's certainly a remarkable source, yeah.

MEH: Right. Was Ruth there that summer?

PO: Yes.

MEH: What was Ruth like then?

PO: [LAUGHS] Well, she hasn't changed. I mean she's still as vital and exciting and enthusiastic and entrepreneurial as she is today. Sure. Yeah. Actually the person I talked to lately—well, not lately, a year or so ago—was Rauschenberg because he was there for a while, during that time. Well, there are lots of other people. What else can we reminisce?

MEH: What about—what do you remember about the landscape?

PO: The landscape was pretty lush, from my experience. You know, just sort of everything was very green and everything was hanging into the lake, and the trees were in full leaf. It was hot and sort of southern, obviously. You know, it was the first time I've been south of Washington, basically, so I felt it was pretty hot and humid and lush, luscious.

MEH: Are there other students besides Ruth that you recall?

PO: I looked through the book that I have—a couple of books—and I was trying to remember the names and as I read them I remembered the names and the

faces, but I've forgotten now who they are. John Page. Have you talked to John Page?

MEH: Don Page.

PO: Don Page. Sorry, right, yeah.

MEH: Did you know him at Black Mountain or at Harvard?

PO: No, no, at Black Mountain.

MEH: Was he there?

PO: Oh yeah, yeah. Leo Amino. My god. All right, well let's see. Who else is here? Mary Gregory, yes. Reed. Varda. [LAUGHS] Leo Amino. Will Burton. Leo Lionni.

MEH: Did you study with Lionni or Burton?

PO: With Lionni. Yeah. And they were—Oh Chuck Forberg, of course. And his first wife, Grop's—Ati, yeah, that's right, yeah. That's right. Chuck and—

MEH: Was Chuck—was Charles Forberg at Harvard when you were there?

PO: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. My goodness. [LAUGHS] Well there's Ruth Asawa, sure. Harold Altman. Yes, I remember him well. Claire Florsheim, my gosh. Lore Kadden.

MEH: She does very fine weaving, very nice weaving.

PO: Yeah, yeah. I think—didn't she come to that reunion in San Francisco? I seem to remember that, yes.

MEH: [AFFIRMATIVE]

PO: I must say Beate Eveline Gropius was never a recognizable name! [LAUGHS]
But you're right.

MEH: Ati. I interviewed her recently.

PO: Did you? How is she?

MEH: She's well. Yeah.

PO: I saw her I guess three years ago. About three years ago. Barbara Stein. Stepner. Well, I'm impressed by your research here. Ah, Hannelore Hahn. Another one. Sure.

MEH: She's in New York.

PO: Yes, I know.

MEH: You know. [LAUGHTER] Okay. That sounds intriguing.

PO: I do indeed. Yeah, sure. Who else? Well, there you are. Frances Zena Prager. Another one. Okay. Very interesting.

MEH: Does this trigger any particular memories? How would you compare studying in an environment such as Black Mountain where, as you say, you know, it was a twenty hour a day experience, to studying at a place like Harvard, where it probably was twenty hours a day also, in many ways.

PO: Yeah, but this is really no comparison. I mean, first of all, we lived together, we ate together, we worked together, we studied together, and it was in a sense a summer camp atmosphere. It was temporary—you know, for a couple of months or three months or whatever it was. And it didn't expect to be as rigorous or as rigid a process. And it was not a degree program. You know, the normal regime of progress just wasn't there. It was fun. It was very rich and very instructive. I mean we learned a hell of a lot. We learned as much from each other as we learned from many of the instructors. And Albers and Anni had a tremendous

little regime of having us for tea or involving us in their live—their lives, so that was very what it was about. So it's really no comparison. Harvard was a serious, quite competitive environment with some very—particularly, in those days, we had some really star students. And this is the time, of course, when the GI came back, so these were senior people who had spent two, three, or four years going through hell. So it wasn't a lighthearted atmosphere, whereas Black Mountain very much was fun and games. We had as much fun with each other as by ourselves. I'm reminded of a wonderful exhibition of photographs at the Metropolitan. Have you seen that? Called "Dancing on the Roof"? A collection of photographs of the Bauhaus.

MEH: Is it there now?

PO: There now, yeah. Which of course describes the Bauhaus in the Twenties, but the atmosphere is basically the same thing.

MEH: [INTERRUPTION] Okay, you were talking about the comparison about Harvard and Black Mountain.

PO: Well, as I say, it's hard to compare because Harvard was an established formal program, curriculum, which led to a degree and therefore demanded a lot of things in a routine sort of fashion. The instruction was very rigorous, and the criticism was serious, and the students were serious because these were all returned veterans who had spent three, four, five, years either in the army or in war work or in miserable conditions in Europe. So, this was not a moment of frivolity, and they all were in a hurry. We all wanted to get out there. We didn't want to linger. Black Mountain was a wonderful interlude which was both fun and

game and did teach. So, we learned by doing, and learned from each other, and learned from some wonderful teachers, particularly Albers and the others who kind of supported him. So the atmosphere was quite different, and the process was different, and the expectation was different.

MEH: What did you think was the impact on your later work of your having studied with Albers?

PO: A great deal. There's no question about it. The impact was really twofold. One was in my professional career, but more particularly in my kind of aesthetic life, the fun that I get out of paintings and sculptures and art galleries and museums, and the fact that I have over the years been able to collect a few things of interest to me, and I live with them. So, basically it has had a tremendous impact on my ability to enjoy, observe, and sort of respond to art—graphic art, design—and that's probably the most important aspect of it. I learned to see and not just to look. That was always Albers' great idea, so that we decided to see and not look and understand and not just observe. And that we are consciously examining the circumstances while enjoying its effect. In addition, of course, it led to some continuing wonderful friendships, including Albers, over many many years. And Albers, like Ruth Asawa, Don Page, and Rauschenberg, and several others—Hannalore Hahn. What's her name, Kadden, Lore Kadden.

MEH: Lore Lindenfeld now.

PO: That's right. So this is part of it, sure. Continuing friendship. Let me say this, in conclusion. I'm really very happy with your project because it's worth doing—whether it's me or not. I hope that you get all the others, because there's

lots of other people there, and the sad part is that it came to a conclusion. Because to me the Black Mountain idea is still one of the great educational concepts that allows people who otherwise have a pretty routine education to learn something quite different and, in a sense, learn something about themselves so that they can enjoy life more—not just practice architecture or planning or whatever it is, and that's really Albers' and Anni's legacy—that they all, and Leo Leoni and Varda [LAUGHS] enriched our life, not just our professional skills. So thanks very much. And if we have a chance, I'm happy to do it again.

[END OF INTERVIEW; END OF TRANSCRIPT]