

Interviewee: KNUTE STILES
Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS
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Landscape images at beginning of tape. Image taped initially during setup. No sound recorded until interview begins.

[BEGINNING OF TAPE 1]

[The interview begins during setup with Stiles speculating on the death of Ilya Bolotowsky.]

KS: – both gate and door were closed.

MEH: Were closed?

KS: Yeah. So, he had to have been shoved, by somebody. Now he could have confronted a burglar. He was an old man, after all, and they might very well push him down the shaft.

MEH: Yeah, or he could have had a stroke or something like that.

KS: [OVERTALK] But the door was shut!

MEH: You mean somebody closed it behind him?

KS: Yes.

MEH: Oh! Well. That I didn't know.

KS: Yeah. You see, that makes it –

MEH: So somebody. – Yeah, that is –

KS: Somebody did it on purpose, see. It wasn't an accident. Well, you see, his father, Julio (?) Bolotowsky, was the legal person for the Tolstoy Foundation. They had imported hundreds of Russian refugees, and I think Ilya was probably still on some kind of terms with the Countess Tolstoy. Of course, you see, Ilya's mother was a first cousin of Trotsky.

MEH: I didn't know that. Complicated family.

KS: Yeah, sure enough. His grandmother on his father's side was a Georgian princess – M'Giovanni [PH]. So it was a very complicated family. [LAUGHS]

MEH: Anything could have happened.

KS: Yeah.

MEH: [GIVES IDENTIFICATION] Knute, how did you come to be at Black Mountain College?

KS: Well, about the time I was ready to get out of the Army Air Force and World War Two, I was thinking about various places that were into art. I think at that time I was more conscious of geometric art than of Abstract Expressionism. I think that was the place – I had a couple of other possibilities in mind, like Moholy-Nagy's school in Chicago. So, I looked it up and found that article by Eric Bentley. What else? Another article by I can't remember who now.

MEH: Eric Bentley had written – The article he wrote, he wrote right after he left the college, and he was very angry. It was definitely a negative article.

KS: Yes, that's true. It was a negative article. As a matter of fact, I know Eric Bentley, and he's a very negative person. [LAUGHS] A very critical person.

MEH: Where did you grow up? Where were you reared?

KS: I was born in Wisconsin in 1923, and we lost the farm in the '29 Crash. My grandfather had invested heavily in insurance, became an officer of the insurance company, and in the crash the company was not solvent, and they picked up the estates of the officers. So, he lost a farm that had been in the family since 1839. We always lived, oh, within twenty miles of that farm until my parents died. My oldest brother died a year ago.

MEH: So this was in Wisconsin?

KS: Well, after we lost the farm we moved to Minnesota, across the river.

MEH: And how old were you then?

KS: When?

MEH: I guess it doesn't really matter. You just moved across the river. What did your father – He was a farmer?

KS: Yes, he was a farmer. He was an educated farmer. That is to say he studied agronomy at the University of Wisconsin, and he stayed on and worked as a research person – not in Madison but at the Ag campus at Menominee.

MEH: Do you remember anything about the application process? For Black Mountain?

KS: Yes. I sent in my application when I was a fisherman in Alaska, and they wanted a photograph. I was in the wilderness. I couldn't give them a photograph. [LAUGHS] What else. Oh, they accepted me right away, I think.

MEH: Now, was this right after graduation from high school?

KS: No, I was in the army for three years. Also I'd gone to the St. Paul Gallery School of Art after high school – in St. Paul, Minnesota. For six months – before I was drafted.

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

KS: Let's see. I flew from Alaska to Seattle. I don't know how I got to Minnesota, but I may have flown or I may have gone by train. I can't remember. I did go by train to Black Mountain – I arrived by train.

MEH: That was a long trip.

KS: Well, I made that trip all the time. I was constantly – I would spend Christmas in New York and Minnesota and go back to Black Mountain. Then I would go to Alaska. I was an Alaskan fisherman for eight years, while I was going to school.

MEH: While you were going to school –

KS: At Black Mountain, and at the California School of Fine Arts, and at the New School for Social Research.

MEH: You arrived at Black Mountain. Do you remember your first impression of the college or reaction to it?

KS: Well, I think I thought it was fine. I mean, I don't know what I expected. Bentley had described the college. I mean he didn't –he wasn't nice about it or anything of that sort. He said it was a dump. I thought that was all right. [LAUGHS]

MEH: So with whom did you take classes?

KS: Well, actually I arrived late.

MEH: This was in 1946.

KS: Yeah, in 1946. I worked in a Filipino crew in Alaska that first year, and I was what's called the "delegate" – that's that union's word for shop steward. I was very popular with the Filipinos because I called a wildcat strike and won. [LAUGHS] But on the

other hand, the – So actually when I got to Seattle, I was elected by the membership the chairman of the Plans Committee, so I had to stay in Seattle and work with the Plans Committee for a couple weeks after the fishing. I called them up and they thought that was very good that I was active in the union. They liked that idea. I was quite active in the unions in Alaska – Alaskan Fishermen's Union, too, later.

MEH: So you arrived a little bit late for the semester.

KS: Yes.

MEH: And what did you – Albers was not there. Was Albers –

KS: No, Albers was on sabbatical in Mexico at that time, and Bolotowsky had just arrived. He and I got on famously immediately. We had both spent time in Alaska, you see, and both of us were interested in geometric painting and so forth.

MEH: So, you took his class?

KS: Yeah. Both his painting and drawing classes.

MEH: Do you have any particular memories of the class and how he conducted it?

KS: Well, with the drawing class he would find somebody to model. In the painting class he usually set up a still life. As a matter of fact, he very often had me set up the still life, and sometimes I would have to seek the model. I was kind of a monitor for him. You might say I was teacher's pet. I think he was in my studio probably every day at least once. [LAUGHS] We were close, in other words.

MEH: So, who were other students who were serious art students at that time?

KS: Kenneth Noland was my closest buddy. Gregory Masurovsky arrived the second year. He wasn't there the first year that I was there, and he became a close friend. Jerry

Levy – was not an art student, but I mean, he was knowledgeable about the art world because his father was a dealer. Let's see now, there was a guy who lived in Santa Barbara at that time. What was his name? I'm losing names.

MEH: Oh – At that time – Well Merv Lane lived there later, but I don't know who was living there then.

KS: Well, no, this guy was originally from Santa Barbara. As a matter of fact, he was from the Haciendero [?] family. I've forgotten what the family is. Oh, his name was Hebel. He had a German name.

MEH: Stanley.

KS: Stanley Hebel. Right. Who else was there? Well, I knew Merv Lane, of course. Merv used to pose for us quite a bit in the class, and so did Herb Cable, who had a good athletic body. Who else? Oh everybody posed, you know. Dick Sherman and Alice Jackson. I was a good friend of Alice Jackson. She was my girlfriend for awhile. She later committed suicide in New York.

MEH: I'm not sure that it was suicide.

KS: You're not?

MEH: No. I've talked to her stepmother, Wanda Jackson, and – we won't put this all on tape. I would have to check the facts, but I think she that she had something like a congenital heart defect or something like that. Because I had heard and always assumed it was suicide. She said, "No." But I can check it out. I can check that information.

KS: Ohh. I had that from her girlfriend – that it was suicide.

MEH: Yeah, well, in doing Black Mountain research, there's – I find so much of this sort of lore, some of which is true and some of which is not. But it was only in talking to Wanda Jackson, who had been married to Alice's father, that I brought that up and she said, "No," that it was something else. [INTERRUPTION IN TAPING] We were talking about Alice Jackson. I can get that information to you, but I think maybe it was not suicide.

KS: But just taking a pill or something that –

MEH: No, I think it was her heart or whatever, that it was a congenital –

KS: Really!

MEH: Yeah. So anyway –

KS: You know, I think that's a lie.

MEH: Well, I'm not sure. Somehow I don't think it is, because of just the way it was presented, and the specific detail. I think even she said she had a letter from Wanda's father explaining what had happened. But I can check that out, okay?

KS: Oh, all right.

MEH: Because I had heard – the lore was that somehow Black Mountain was responsible for her suicide because of the hitchhiking thing and all kinds of stuff. And sometimes it's hard to sort of know where the truth is.

KS: Well, Alice and I were good friends in New York. She came to dinner one time and then she was saying that I must write a cookbook. I was saying "Well, but I mean I wouldn't want to do that. I wouldn't be able to get it published." She said "I can get it published for you." She was a literary agent. This was in 1958. So, she was actually

working on finding a publisher for a cookbook, and I was seeing her fairly regularly – not as a boyfriend anymore. She had become a lesbian. But, for example, she had a little two story brick house on Christopher Street in the middle of the block, and you had to enter through a sort of narrow alleyway between houses. She had told me where the key was, you see, and to come right in if she was – If the light was on upstairs to come right in and just call that I was there. So, I did, and her girlfriend came downstairs. she was the one who told me that Alice had committed suicide.

MEH: Well, I'll send you the other information and you can compare notes. Anyway, so at Black Mountain you just – You took painting and drawing with Bolotowsky. I have notes that you took a course in Economics.

KS: With Niebyl.

MEH: With Niebyl. Well, before we go onto another course. What do you remember about that course?

KS: Well I didn't like it. I – Hmmm. I haven't thought about it for quite awhile. Well, after I had taken a semester of that, he said that I had to take a second semester or he wouldn't give me credit. I would say, I just told him to go to hell [LAUGHS] because I wasn't going to take it a second semester. There were more interesting things to study. Actually he had a fan of his, Juli Scheir, who had arrived even later than me, who was a very good violinist but a very active Marxist. He moved into my studio, my study, and took it over, really. Then I moved in with Dick Amero. Have you been with him in San Diego?

MEH: [AFFIRMATIVE]

KS: Yeah. Then when I came back the third semester why I did have another, a private studio.

MEH: Were you at all involved in the whole scene having to do with – I think it was SNCC. I'm not sure, one of the southern organizations that had to do with racial equality?

KS: I know it's FORE - F-O-R-E, Fellowship on Reconciliation.

MEH: Okay, were you at all involved in that whole debate about membership? [OVERTALK]

KS: Well I don't know that there was any debate. I think all of us were very enthusiastic about that.

MEH: No, there was a big debate in the college about whether the college student body, as a student body, should join or whether people should join individually. It was resolved that –

KS: Oh, well that was the – what was the name of that organization? –

MEH: – people would join individually. That was [OVERTALK]

KS: That was an organization that –

MEH: Southern –

KS: Southern Conference for Human Welfare.

MEH: No, that's not it. But it doesn't matter. I have it written. It was Southern Negro Youth Conference, I think, something like that.

KS: I think that that was a very popular movement, and we did send representatives to their conference, or at least to the conference in Columbia of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare. The person who went was Hank Bergman, who lives in Portland now. Have you seen Hank and Dorothy?

MEH: [AFFIRMATIVE]

KS: Right. Everyone was very enthusiastic about his report. Then we did apply for a grant to get Negro students through – I think it was the Rosenberg Fellowship in Chicago? We did get nine Negro students in the fall of '47. Delores Fullman from Chicago, Olive from Memphis, I can't remember her last name. Jackson – I can't remember his first name, from Virginia. Well, I can't remember. But we did have quite a number – We had visits from students from Talladega in Alabama, I think. That's a Negro college in Alabama. There were a couple – a girls' Negro college. They did send representatives to see what we were doing, and so forth. I think the controversy that Bentley had been in – lots of students had left because of that, and gone to Bard and things like that, and to, maybe to Antioch?

MEH: Yeah, that was much earlier.

KS: Much earlier. Actually, there were quite a number of Jewish refugees on the faculty, and they had been frightened by the prospect of having Negro students because they thought the locals would burn down the school.

MEH: Right. That – I try not to talk about things that happened when you weren't there, because other people – It ends up really being totally hearsay or whatever.

KS: Yes, but I mean they had changed their minds is what I'm saying. They hadn't expected those people to leave. They had thought they would just continue the dialogue. But when they actually left, then people like Lowinsky decided to change his mind.

MEH: I'm not going to say anything, because there's so much involved that –

KS: Oh, he told me that.

MEH: I know – Okay. I know he did. Okay, going back to your other – you took economics with Niebyl –

KS: I took, let's see, race relations with Dr. Miller. Herbert Adolphus Miller. [OVERTALK]
We used that book The American Dilemma by the Swedish author –what's his name –as our text. That was a pretty good class. It was really a tutorial. I think there were only three of us in the class. We went into race relations quite thoroughly. Then I studied a class with Ted Dreier. We studied Utopian literature the first semester, and mutualistic communities the second semester. Amero and I went to Yosemite – not Yosemite, what's it called? A monastery in Kentucky. What is it called?

MEH: It was a Trappist –

KS: Gethsemane.

MEH: Gethsemane. Yeah. What do you remember about that trip?

KS: Well, we hitchhiked up there, and there was a Japanese abbot who was – he had been an abbot in Japan during World War Two. He was French, and he was the head of the Trappist order in Rome, and he was there at Gethsemane. He talked to us every day at great length. There was a third person with us, now who was that? I've lost names.

MEH: Richard Amero was one of the people.

KS: Yes, Richard Amero, and who was the other guy? Hmm. Well, actually the monks did live in common in a dormitory, a single large room, with just planks and straw. They only took a bath once a year, and they changed habits once a year after taking a bath.

They took a bath with their habits still on. They were never allowed to be naked.

Their farm was pristine. That's to say, the pigs were perfect, and so forth. The only people who were allowed to speak was the abbot and the friar, and the friar was a poet who wrote Seven Story Mountain. What was his name?

MEH: Oh –

KS: Well, you know who I mean. He had published poetry with New Directions before he became a Cistercian. It was kind of reminiscent of Lorca. I thought a very good poet. I liked him – his poetry. We didn't talk to him. But we talked to the Japanese abbot. They were on very severe diet because of Easter, but we weren't subjected to that because we weren't Catholics. The food was very good – roast duck and things of that sort. And cheese and lovely rye bread. [LAUGHS] I found the conversation with the Japanese abbot –the French abbot who had been an abbot in Japan during the War –I found his conversation very interesting. I can't remember, really, what he said – all that much. When we got ready to leave, we offered to pay and they refused payment, which is odd, I think. I think the Catholic Church usually wants to pump as much money out of you as they can get. Isn't that so?

MEH: I'm not part of the Catholic Church.

KS: Well I'm not either. [LAUGHS] Yeah. So, we were there on their Easter retreat, and they arose very early. Four o'clock in the morning was matins, and then there were a hundred and fifty monks. Seventy-five of them were priests and seventy-five of them were lay monks, lay brothers. The lay brothers went to work on the farm after matins, and they sang Gregorian chant. The priests sang Gregorian chant all day

long. Their use of Gregorian chant was extremely severe. That is to say, they would throw themselves on the floor for half an hour and lay absolutely inert. Things of that sort. They were doing penance for the sins of the world. They elected their own abbot and friar, so they were a democratic organization.

MEH: Now how did this fit into your Black Mountain course?

KS: Well, we had to go to some sort of cooperative community and study it, for the second semester. The first semester we studied Plutarch's Lycurgus, Campanella's City of the Sun, Sir Thomas More's Utopia, Erewhon – who wrote Erewhon? Nineteenth-century British writer. I've forgotten his name. We studied News from Nowhere by – what's his name? [LAUGHS] William Morris. Well, let's see, Amero and I were in that class.

MEH: Did you take any language courses?

KS: No. I studied literature with Dave Corkran.

MEH: Was M.C. there at the time?

KS: Yes. M.C. and I were good friends, but I didn't go to her class. She was teaching Eighteenth-Century Novel. But I talked to her a lot about poetry, and I am writing poetry now. I won third prize from poetry.com last summer.

MEH: I had a note that you took music?

KS: Music appreciation, with Charlotte Schlesinger. That was a pretty good class.

MEH: What did you do on the work program?

KS: I was the glazier. Took care of windows. Installed windows. I did other things. One time we – There was a flatland down beyond the Study Building, which would come

up with a new set of rocks every season, every year. A couple of times I worked there picking up rocks, throwing them in a – I also worked in the woods with Charlie Dreyfus, whom I hear from every year – or his wife, who was also a Black Mountain person.

MEH: What did you think, in terms of as a community, about the set-up of work-study community. Did you think it worked? When you were there?

KS: Some people did lots of work and some people didn't do any work. I think that's all right. I didn't question it. I knew that there was going to be a work program, and I fell into it all right. I think we had to work, what, can't remember now – once a week or, what was it? Can't remember.

MEH: I think, yeah, it varied. But just as a concept, not really the question of whether some people worked and some people didn't, but just as an educational principle. Having experienced it, do you think that it – Was it a viable educational policy?

KS: I never really thought of it as educational. I thought that it was just a functional way to keep the college going. I suppose people were interested in it as education. I wasn't. I don't think I gave it any thought at all.

MEH: Do you have any particular memories of mealtimes at the college?

KS: Well, we always had nice buttermilk. What else? I don't think the meals were very good. I can say that now. Mrs. Rondthaler, I guess, was in charge of the meals when I was there.

MEH: But just in terms of the mealtimes as part of the educational setting.

KS: Oh, I think it was great to sit around with people, and I did get acquainted with the whole community that way – sitting with different people. Yet I think probably I fell in with my clique finally.

MEH: The college did break down into cliques?

KS: Oh, yes. Very much so. Let's see, what were the cliques? The cliques were the Albersites, and, oh, that weaver, I can't think of his name.

MEH: Nick Muzenic?

KS: No – Well, I don't know where Nick sat. I can't remember that. I knew Nick. We were perfectly good friends. I don't think he was an Albersite, really. I think he liked Bolotowsky's classes. But the Albersites, you see, wouldn't go to Bolotowsky's classes at all, or if they did they didn't pay attention to him and talked against him and so forth. They were, oh, Vera Baker and Paul, her man – what was his name?

MEH: Paul Williams.

KS: Paul Williams. I can't say his name. He was the Dadaist who –

MEH: Ray Johnson?

KS: Ray Johnson. They were just waiting for Albers' return. They weren't interested in anybody else. [LAUGHS]

MEH: Who would have been the Bolotowsky clique?

KS: Noland, Mazurovsky, myself, Hebel, the Bergman brothers, Fiore. I don't know.

MEH: Were there other cliques, besides the art cliques?

KS: Yes, there was the John Wallen psychology group. They were a younger group, mostly. They were the group who went with Wallen to Portland to form a commune

at Estacada. That was the Schaufflers and both Dave and Sue Schauffler and Manvel Schauffler and Ed Adamy. Well, Ed wasn't so young, but he wasn't a vet. He had been, I think, in a conscientious objector camp, maybe, or prison. I'm not sure which. They were interested in folk music and psychology. Now, actually there were members of Wallen's class, his psychology class, who weren't necessarily in his clique. For example, Art Penn was very much in Wallen's class, but he was really close to M.C. and Levi, and Chick Perrow, and –

MEH: What do you think was the effect on the college of this breaking down into cliques?

KS: Oh, I think that was perfectly normal. That's the way it was in the commune that I lived in, too. There were always some people who had been accepted by the whole community. You had to have unanimous consent to be accepted, but then you would find your friends. See, I did live in East-West House for 21 years.

MEH: So, you really think it was just a natural part of being part of a group.

KS: Yes, I think so. In other words, almost invariably – That's also true in the unions. Some people accept unionism for pragmatic purposes and some of them who are very enthusiastic about unionism and so forth. Other people who are very much individualist rebels and so forth. That's normal. Actually I think at Black Mountain everybody knew everybody, really. I think so. I did. I was elected the student moderator for the last five or six months that I was there – unanimously.

MEH: What did that involve?

KS: Well, I had to go to faculty meetings. I had to attend all the meetings of the Board of Fellows, and I had to convene student meetings. I think Paul Williams was in charge

of what we called Community Meetings. He also went to faculty meetings. I've forgotten just what they called – Community Something. I can't remember. Now actually he ran against me for moderator, and so did Peter Nemenyi. There was an issue. The faculty had decided to go through the student body alphabetically and talk about everybody and weed out the unfit. I was elected really to be the student advocate. Bill Levi, in order to exclude me from a meeting, held the meeting in his own house, and I left the next day.

MEH: He was the moderator then – I mean he was the rector then.

KS: He was the rector.

MEH: You left. You mean you no longer were student moderator or you left the college.

KS: I left the college.

MEH: Because –

KS: Because I'd been kicked out of the meeting.

MEH: I mean, you really took it that seriously? You didn't try to stay and fight it, or – ?

KS: No. I decided that it was impossible, that Levi and I just had been complete enemies in the Board of Fellows, and he was out to get rid of me.

MEH: What was Levi like?

KS: He was a psychopathic liar, for one thing. His books are full of plagiarism. [LAUGHS] Literally. He even plagiarized me, and he plagiarized José Yglesias. Who else, I don't know.

MEH: This was from your writings?

KS: Yeah. He published an article in the Kenyon Review, which cribbed whole paragraphs from an essay of mine on Mondrian.

MEH: Where had your writing been published?

KS: Not published. First thing that I ever published was in Artforum in '63.

MEH: How did he have access to your writing on Mondrian?

KS: I think I gave it to him. I think I showed it to him, or maybe it was Bolotowsky showed it to him. I don't know. I can't remember that. I was surprised to see whole paragraphs in print, later, under his name – which were almost word for word. I heard from other people that his philosophy books were the same way, that they were plagiarism from student papers and things of that sort.

[TAPE 2 BEGINS]

KS: I met Krem in New York City quite by chance in the Village. He said "I live nearby, why don't you come up and see my plays?" I did, and there was a painting on the wall. I said "Oh, I know that painting – or at least one just like it." In fact I looked at it for awhile, and I said "That's a painting that Kenneth Noland and I did together, and now it's gone a third step and Bill Levi has put his name on the bottom." [LAUGHS]

MEH: And who had the painting?

KS: Kremin. Irv Kremin. He was in New York for a little while.

MEH: Were you part of the Hieronymus Bosch incident that – ?

KS: No. No, that was the two Bergman brothers and Fiore.

MEH: Okay, I have that from other people who were there, but I couldn't remember if you were. So Albers was never at the college when you were there – to teach?

KS: Well, he did come back from Mexico and he did come to my studio and we had a long conversation. I showed him all of my work. He seemed to think very highly of it, and praised me to the Albersites – to their astonishment. [LAUGHS] Because they had thought of me as just a Bolotowsky person or something.

MEH: Do you have other particular memories of the college? Anecdotes, things that happened there?

KS: Oh, I suppose I do. Well, some of us would get in Bolotowsky's old Studebaker and go down to South Carolina and get liquor, for example – bottles of wine. Then we'd put it in the creek. Because, of course, Buncombe County was dry.

MEH: You put it in the creek to chill it?

KS: Yeah. [AFFIRMATIVE] Those were pretty nice trips. I think we made at least two trips down to Columbia, South Carolina. Really, just to pick up liquor.

MEH: Did you ever make forays into the countryside to get white lightning?

KS: Yes. There was a certain place where you could leave a jug with five dollars in the neck and come back the next day and get a bottle of hooch. It wasn't bad. I thought it was pretty good liquor. I think it was too alcoholic. But I was used to that. In Wisconsin, they had – 120-proof alcohol was available in liquor stores, and it was just about the same. Grain neutral spirits, so-called.

MEH: Do you have any particular memories of parties?

KS: I'm not a party-goer.

MEH: Dances?

KS: Let's see, at Christmas we would draw a slip from a hat and make a gift for that person. I made a series of collages for Lore Kadden on – they were collages. I think she liked them. She was surprised by them. She was very much in league with Ray Johnson, and both of them came over. They were – you know – congratulating me on the collages. They thought they were "just wonderful," and so forth. Now actually when I was in New York, I sent out anonymous collage postcards to various people, and I think that's where Ray Johnson got his idea. [LAUGHS]

MEH: Yeah, he was sending actually mail in the early – in the mid-forties.

KS: Yes. Well, I was in the mid-forties, too. I was when I was going to the New School in '48-'49.

MEH: This was when he was at Black Mountain earlier. I have collages that he sent out to people at that time.

KS: Oh really? Is that so? Interesting.

MEH: I mean everybody fed off of everybody else's ideas.

KS: Now actually, you see, Ray Johnson when he went to New York was a geometric painter, and he was the president of the American Abstract Artists for at least one season. That was a pretty good group. Pretty large. I showed with them a couple of times. Mondrian himself had shown with American Abstract Artists, and – oh, who else? Dozens of artists. Even Clem Greenberg. [LAUGHS]

MEH: Going back to Black Mountain a little bit more before we leave. Where was your study located?

KS: The first study I had was on the top level, the second study past the toilets. I was only there for a month or so, because I didn't want to share it with Juli Scheir. He had taken it over, really. I wanted to have the thing as sort of Zen study, with nothing. Minimal, see, with tatamis and so forth. He insisted on having a desk, full-length, and his comprehensive library of Marxist literature on the other wall.

MEH: So, you were at Black Mountain for the year '46-'47, but you didn't stay during the summertime.

KS: No, I went to Alaska, fishing.

MEH: Were you at Black Mountain on the GI Bill?

KS: Yes.

MEH: So you went back to fish for the summer, and then returned to Black Mountain for one semester.

KS: Right. Yeah. Three semesters altogether.

MEH: One other question concerning studies – what do you think was the effect of coming there and having your own little studio? I guess you had to share the studio, so it wasn't –

KS: Well, I had to share the studio first with Juli Scheir, and then I did share the next studio with Amero. Amero invited me to because I was fussing about Scheir. Actually Amero had his study in common with Neil Noland, but Neil Noland was living with his wife who was the college nurse, and he studied –

MEH: Harry Noland.

KS: Harry Noland. Okay, Harry Noland. You're right. Neil – There was a Neil too, but he wasn't at the school.

MEH: He was there later. He was the youngest.

KS: I did know him. [AFFIRMATIVE] Harry Noland, yes. I think Harry Noland now lives in maybe Sag Harbor?

MEH: [NEGATIVE]

KS: No? Virginia? [BREAK IN RECORDING]

MEH: What did you do when you left the college?

KS: I went to Seattle and I worked as a mail carrier in Seattle for two or three months. Then I went to Alaska and worked in a gold mine, but only for a month or so, and then I went back to the fishing. I think that was in '47.

MEH: What type of fishing boats were these?

KS: Salmon.

MEH: And you were a union man?

KS: Yes.

MEH: At that point did you really want to still – Were you still painting? Did you want to paint?

KS: Oh, yeah. Sure. Then the next year I went to New York and studied with Abe Ratner at the New School – painting. Then I went to San Francisco, and Krikorian and I had a show in San Francisco.

MEH: Where was that?

KS: At the Met Art (?) Gallery, a co-op, which was actually largely Clyfford Still's students. But one of the Clyfford Still students hadn't done enough painting, and so he let Krikorian and I have a show in his place. The very next show after ours was Clyfford Still – and it was a very well-attended gallery.

MEH: What type of painting were you doing then? Were you doing geometric abstraction?

KS: Yeah. Geometric. Vibrant color. So was Krikorian.

MEH: And it was about then that you founded The Place?

KS: No, that was in 1950. I think. 1950, we had the show. Krikorian and I ran The Place in – He started The Place in the fall of '53. I had gone to Mexico. I had graduated from the California School of Fine Arts. I went there for two years. I hadn't made enough money in Alaska. Sometimes the fishing isn't good. Like all natural resource industries, it's not absolutely dependable. So I went to Mexico to live inexpensively. I did that for two winters. First Oanawato [PH] and then Oaxaca. When I came back from Oaxaca, I stayed with Krikorian. I was thinking of starting a bookstore in Seattle in the image of City Lights, and Peter Martin, who was running City Lights at that time – that was before Ferlinghetti – said that he would show me how to get books on consignment and so forth. I talked a friend into financing the project, and I came home and told Krikorian about what I was doing. He was saying "You mean to say you could borrow five thou on your face, just like that?" I said "Well, yes, I'll pay it back." [LAUGHS] He said "Listen, I want you to buy out my partner and come into The Place." I said I couldn't very well go back to my friend and tell him I've changed my mind, I want to run a bar! But he kept nagging me for two or three days, and I did go

back to my friend, and I said "Krikorian has been trying to talk me into changing over to running The Place instead of going to Seattle to run a bookstore." My friend said "That's a much better idea. I'd like to have you stay here anyway. Bookstores are just a hole to pour money down." [LAUGHS] So he did lend me the money and I did go into The Place. The Place was actually quite successful. He had run it for six months – he and his partner, his first partner – in the red. Within a month I put it in the black, and it was eminently successful. It was just full of people all the time. [LAUGHS] But it was taking up all of my time – worrying me, because the cops were giving us a lot of attention, because it was very Bohemian. It was a Beat Generation bar. See. I mean the Beat Generation hadn't even got a name, as yet, but they were all hanging there.

MEH: I was going to ask you – who were your clientele?

KS: All of the poets and lots of painters. We had art on the walls. We'd put them up for about two weeks. We had the best exhibitions in town. The daily papers would not review us, because we were not a gallery – we were a bar. But we had people like Jay De Feo [PH] and Wally Hedrick and Deborah Remington [PH] and Joel Barletta [PH]. We had an exhibition of Holbein. [LAUGHS] We had cartoons, including not only all of the artists there but also Dylan Thomas, who was a friend of mine, and Tram Combs. We had all of the poets – Kenneth Rexroth was a friend of mine. I had attended his anarchist meetings. He was there every night, in the beginning. Ginsberg. Kerouac. McClure. Snyder. Jack Spicer, and all of his coterie – his youngsters: JoAnne Kieger, Ebbe Borregard, George Stanley. All of the poets were there. None of them were famous yet, except Rexroth. Ginsberg hadn't published a thing. He wrote Howl one

night on peyote, and recited it the next day at The Place. Then I sold out and went to Mexico. It was about that time that the Black Mountain people arrived – after the Olson thing had folded.

MEH: When you were in San Francisco, were there former Black Mountain people that you were associated with?

KS: Oh, yeah, sure. Ruth and Al, and what's her name, the girl who ran the – Why can't I think of her name?

MEH: Oh Peggy –

KS: Peggy Tolk Vaughan Watkins.

MEH: What do you remember about her bars?

KS: Well, see I knew her in New York, too, after Black Mountain. We had talked about starting a bar in – She did start The Tin Angel in Sausalito. Actually, it was a very good eating place. A painter named Walter Kuhlman [PH] was the cook. Very good painter. He had been a teacher at the St. Paul Gallery School of Art. I knew him in Minnesota, in other words – before. I think probably it was me who introduced him to Peggy. Now who else was there. I don't know. I can't remember. [LAUGHS]

MEH: Did you have food at The Place?

KS: Well, yes. We had one cook, a Japanese sculptress. We would let her use the premises. Our license called for a restaurant, and she agreed to buy the food and cook it and serve it. We would give her all the equipment and the refrigeration and things of that sort, and the gas, and the kitchen. So we let her have it, you see. She was an extraordinarily good cook. She only cooked one meal per day, but it was very

good. It ran to things like chicken Kiev, boeuf Bourguignon, oh – what's that – and Japanese dish. I'm trying to think of it, I can't think – She would cook a very good meal and serve it to the first thirty people after six o'clock in the evening. When it was gone, she wouldn't cook any more. She was just doing that to make a modest living. After we closed The Place – or after I left, I guess –she started a restaurant of her own. She got married to an Italian and ran a restaurant called The Brighton Express, which was a very successful restaurant.

MEH: So when you left, when you sold out your share in The Place, what did you do?

KS: I went to Mexico, for a year. To Oaxaca.

MEH: To paint?

KS: Yeah. Then I went from Oaxaca to New York. I stopped in Washington on the way to see Kenneth Noland. He had married the daughter of the Senator from North Dakota. Langer. And had two little girls, and was very much into Reichian therapy – Wilhelm Reich – and had an orgone box. [LAUGHS]

MEH: Do you remember students having orgone boxes at Black Mountain?

KS: No. I don't. There may have been later, when Paul Goodman was there. But I never heard about it.

MEH: Then you went on to New York. You stopped in Washington and went on to New York.

KS: Yeah.

MEH: Well just sort of run very [OVERTALK]

KS: Well, Krikorian and I had a place in the Bronx, in the basement, and various Black Mountain people lived with us. Krowinski, Felix Krowinski. Stan Hebel. A Mexican,

Marie Acolar's [PH] brother. She was a photographer for Mademoiselle, and Krikorian worked in her darkroom.

MEH: And how long did you stay in New York? About.

KS: Nine months.

MEH: And then returned to the West Coast?

KS: And then I went to Alaska fishing. Then the next year I went to San Francisco. Initially I stayed with Krikorian, but he ran out of money and went back to Fresno, so then I – I went back to Alaska the next summer. But I had arranged to have that show at the Medart Gallery, and he did bring his paintings up and we set up that show – from Fresno. Have you seen the videotape that Krikorian made? Or that was made with Krikorian – ?

MEH: Yeah, he gave me a copy. I haven't viewed it yet.

KS: Oh, yeah. [AFFIRMATIVE]

MEH: Right. So you essentially stayed in San Francisco as your base, from that time on?

KS: Well, no, I went to New York in '56 and I was there till '61 – for five years. I did go back to San Francisco and tend bar at The Place, just working for Krikorian in 1958.

MEH: And in New York you were painting?

KS: Yes.

MEH: Were you working?

KS: Sure. Showing at the Brata [PH].

MEH: So you were in New York for about four years.

KS: Five years.

MEH: Five years, okay.

KS: The first year I worked in a bookstore on 57th Street – Marboro, about three doors from Carnegie Hall. I was on the night shift from six to twelve, and it was full of concertgoers after the concerts. Then I worked for what was called the Door Store, or the Furniture and Parts Corporation, for four years. During all of that time, I was showing at the Brata Gallery, and the Brata was a very active co-op. We arranged shows – I arranged a show in San Francisco, an exchange show, with the Six Gallery, which I had also been a member of – and so was Krikorian. You've heard of the Six?

MEH: [AFFIRMATIVE]. I'm not sure, but go ahead.

KS: I can show you a catalogue of the Six. Well, let's see, where did we show. We showed in Baltimore, Poughkeepsie, San Francisco, Tokyo. We showed – We sent two shows to Japan, and they traveled to six provincial Japanese museums, as well as the Tokyo Museum of Modern Art. There was a catalogue, and things sold well in Japan. What we did was do works on paper, or cardboard, so that they would transport inexpensively. They framed them. The reason that was possible was because one of our members was the Baroness Momiyama, and there was also a Japanese artist. What was her name? She's become very famous. I can't think of her name now. She lives in an insane asylum. She's crazy. But she shows very well. She had the cover of Art in America ten years ago. I can't think of her name. [LAUGHS] Also the Baroness Momiyama got together a show in Tokyo of people who were working with calligraphy – non-Japanese, non-script, just painterly work. I was in that with I guess

you'd call them pseudolithographs. I worked with touche [PH] on a photographic paper, which lent itself to printing.

MEH: Did you continue to work in a geometric abstractionist style?

KS: No, I sort of abandoned that, to a degree, when I went to the California School of Fine Arts, and I studied with David Park and Elmer Bischoff, Ed Corbett, for two years.

MEH: And when you left New York, you went back to fish in Alaska, or – after that five year –

KS: Yes, I did that for eight years, from '46 to '53. That was very much part of my life. The GI Bill paid a very small stipend, and I could make quite a bit of money sometimes fishing.

MEH: So when did you return to San Francisco?

KS: '61. I went back and I started a commune. I was really tired of New York. I really didn't like New Yorkers. I mean they are too materialistic. The place was too dirty. I was really a country boy, and I wanted very much to live back in San Francisco again. I had it in mind that I was going to start a commune, and I did. It was a terrible flop. After about three months I left and went to live in a closet hotel. Then a friend of mine, Charlotte Brodie, and I discovered East-West House, which was a Zen commune – or had been. It was sort of going out of Zen. It had already been in existence for five years. It started in '57, and we went there in, I think, '62. I lived with Charlotte in East-West House three different times. She would leave and go someplace else to do something or other. Finally she went to Esalen. She was the business person at Esalen in Big Sur. But she was gimpy. She had a childhood disease and one of her feet was atrophied and her knee and her hip. She quit Esalen

because she really couldn't walk properly and she moved to Carmel, and I would go down and sit her house when she would go home to the East Coast to see her folks for a month or so each year. So we remained friends. Finally she had an operation in Monterey General Hospital – three operations, one on the foot, one on the knee, and one on the hip – with months interval. The third operation they found that she was HIV-positive. They had saved tissue and they discovered that they had infected her with HIV, with transfusion, and she died of AIDS in 1992.

MEH: During the years at East-West House, when you were in San Francisco, you were painting and exhibiting?

KS: Yes.

MEH: And writing.

KS: Yes.

MEH: Where did you exhibit?

KS: Oh, the best show I had was at the San Francisco Museum of Art. The San Francisco Museum of Art became the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, later. I also showed two shows at the Stanford Gallery. One of the shows at the Stanford Gallery was part of the Rolling Renaissance. We did a catalogue which was very widely distributed. I wrote, I think, three essays in the catalogue – one on Wally Hedrich. I organized a show for him at – I can't remember the place name. I organized another show for Charlie Safford [PH], a friend of mine who had died. So I wrote up all three of those shows in different essays for the catalogue. It was a big extravaganza all over town. The Sunday Chronicle and Examiner had a rubbing of mine from the Stanford show

on the cover of their Sunday Magazine. I was in shows at the San Francisco Art Institute. I was teaching there. I taught painting and drawing for six years, and was finally bounced for affirmative action. They fired – They didn't fire us. They just failed to renew our contract. The people whom they – In other words, the Board of Directors told them to get rid of eight faculty members to hire minority faculty, and they fired the best faculty members – not the worst. I asked the director about that, and he explained to me that he thought it would be easier for us to get a job elsewhere. It was.

MEH: And where did you get a job?

KS: I didn't. But I could have.

MEH: With what group in that period in San Francisco did you really associate? Was there a group of people that you really associated with, or were a part of? Painters or writers? You said at one point Paul Alexander lived at East-West House.

KS: Three different times. So did Tom Field. They were painters – Fiore's students from the Olson period. I had met them in New York. Oh, and at Black Mountain. I went to Black Mountain on the way to New York, from Mexico, and talked to Olson. I think the school was down to maybe fifteen students, and an equal number of faculty members. [LAUGHS] Olson did explain to me at that time that they hadn't answered the mail properly, and I think he was conscious that that trial was going to end the college, and consequently he was cutting it off. That was the gist of the conversation, because I offered to answer mail – stay there for a week and answer mail. He said it wasn't necessary. The college was going down the tubes.

MEH: Looking back, what do you think really was the importance of Black Mountain – if any – to your development as an artist or the course that your life took later?

KS: Well, I think it had a lot to do with my life, but I don't know what I would have done otherwise. So – how can I answer that question? [LAUGHS]

MEH: I mean there clearly are some – Yeah, your life did take a certain direction and part of that it seems came out of Black Mountain – your relationship with Krikorian, your –

KS: My attitude about communes and unions and –

MEH: That's the question I'm asking you. Do you think that really made a difference in terms of your interest in communes later?

KS: Yes. Sure. Rondthaler's class.

MEH: You continued a close friendship with Ilya Bolotowsky through the years.

KS: Yes. When I left Mexico, I lived with the Bolotowskys for several months – three or four months at least, maybe five. I'm not sure.

MEH: That was in New York.

KS: Right. On Tieman Place.

MEH: At some point, did you live in Arizona? When he was teaching down there, were you associated with him at all?

KS: No. I was living at East-West House and Bolotowsky was teaching at Albuquerque. He called me up and wondered if – He said Albuquerque was going to give him a – put together a traveling show, a twenty-year retrospective to travel the west, because his reputation wasn't built up on the West Coast. Did I think he could get into the San Francisco Museum? I said "Do you want me to check it out?" and he said "No, I'll –

Let's wait till I come to San Francisco at Easter vacation, and you and I can check it out together." Well, that was a mistake, because they had already taken on a Fritz Glarner show, another Mondrianist, and they didn't feel they could have two the same year. But I had talked my editor at Artforum into doing a feature on the show, thinking that might help get a show from the Museum. So I flew to L.A. to see the show, was met at the airport by a curator who took me to the Museum. I made thumbnail sketches and color notes and looked at the show for a couple, three hours. Then the curator took me to lunch and back to the airport and I was in San Francisco again for dinner. [LAUGHS] That was in 1969, and I did write a feature on Bolotowsky which was published in 1969. It was extremely useful to Bolotowsky's career. He had never, prior to that show, made more than five thousand a year out of art. In other words he had made lots of money as a professor at Wyoming, Brooklyn, and Sag Harbor. For the next ten or twelve years – when did he die, in 1980 or what?

MEH: I can't remember.

KS: For the next eleven years, he never made less than fifty thousand a year. Everybody wrote about him, in all of the magazines – after that. But I was the first one to write a feature on Bolotowsky. In other words, he had shown well but he couldn't sell because the Abstract Expressionists were in the saddle, and they were the ones who were selling. Every feature that I wrote in Artforum – I wrote ten or a dozen – succeeded. Every one. Without exception.

MEH: Who were the other people you wrote about?

KS: Deborah Remington. Bruce Nauman. I can't remember.

MEH: I can check that out. You left San Francisco and moved to Bisbee. How did that come about?

KS: Oh, no, I – I had a collector who had bought half a dozen paintings of mine, and he was a playwright. I had done sets and costumes for him, and we had become very good friends. He died of cancer at age 54, and he left me fifty thousand. So I went to San Cristobal de las Casas in southern Mexico for two years. I didn't want to go back to San Francisco. It was getting too expensive. You would really have to have a good job to live there. So I came here as one of the possibilities of a place to live.

MEH: And you've lived here since.

KS: Right.

MEH: Have you taught here?

KS: No, I haven't done anything here.

MEH: Retired here.

KS: Just retired here, right. I did show at the Firehouse Gallery for five years.

MEH: Showing your own work, or organizing a show?

KS: No, my own work. They had main shows, but they also had a stable who are always on the wall. I was one of those. I was always on the wall.

MEH: So you've been very active in life here in the community.

KS: Oh not really, no. I mean I'm well-known here – as you can see by the magazine article. [LAUGHS]

MEH: I'll have to read that.

KS: Oh, it's terrible. She made all sorts of mistakes. I just can't imagine, because I mean she interviewed me and took notes, but she had everything wrong.

MEH: I know. That's happened to me before. Things really have to be – should be read by the person about whom it's being written.

KS: Well, I don't know that I agree with that.

MEH: Or factual things should be checked, just run back by you – information.

KS: Well, I didn't make mistakes. Sometimes Art in America would rewrite and put a mistake above my name. But my facts were always correct.

MEH: Any other thoughts before we turn this off? Reflections? Memories of Black Mountain? Did you have any encounter with snakes?

KS: No. I wasn't there in the summer. I never even saw a snake. I see snakes here. I saw snakes in Minnesota, but I never did at Black Mountain. Why, did you?

MEH: No, but there are some really interesting snake stories from Black Mountain.

KS: Oh really? I didn't know that.

MEH: Encounters. Any other, any other thoughts?

KS: No, I think we've covered a lot of ground.

MEH: Did you go – Was Ma Peak's around then? The beer joint?

KS: Yeah, sure. [AFFIRMATIVE] Occasionally. But nothing, you know –

MEH: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]

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