

Interviewee: VICTOR KALOS
Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS
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[BEGINNING OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

MEH: [GIVES IDENTIFICATION]. How, Victor, did you come to be at Black Mountain College?

VK: I read about it in—Somehow we had a brochure and I was at that time in the High School of Music and Art in New York City, and somehow we got literature. A friend of mine, Don Alter as a matter of fact, and myself got some literature about Black Mountain and it was very, very interesting. I didn't even know, wasn't very sure we'd be—you know, I'd be going to college at the time. But what I read was that interesting that I submitted—I wrote for an application and received one. I think I was turned down the first time. {LAUGHS}

MEH: You were living in New York.

VK: I was living, yeah, living in New York. We lived in the Bronx.

MEH: And so do you remember anything about the application process?

VK: Actually I remember I was turned down. I think we had to submit, I had to submit a portfolio of art—you know, paintings, drawings, or whatever. And I don't know what the time interval—we're talking well over fifty years ago. I think it was returned to me, very nicely returned to me, I was turned down — And then I remember now that it was—Penn, was Irving Penn the photographer? Somehow I was referred to him and somehow we got together and had a meeting in his apartment or studio somewhere in Manhattan, and for some reason after that, after that meeting, I get a letter of some sort or notice of acceptance. That was I forget when, I think 1948, I guess, '48-49.

MEH: Would that have been—I think it was '49, or maybe it was '48. Would that have been Irving Penn, the photographer or Arthur Penn, the—

VK: It was the photographer. Yeah.

MEH: Okay. Because often what they would do is have somebody who—because his brother had been at Black Mountain—is have somebody— Was Arthur Penn his brother? Or maybe I'm—

VK: No, I think you're right. Yeah, but it was the photographer—

MEH: Who did it. They'd have somebody who was familiar with the college essentially interview the student to—

VK: Yeah, and I think as a result of that I was reconsidered, which I never thought to thank him. I was eighteen or nineteen, seventeen or whatever it was. I never thought to thank him for it. I should have.

MEH: What about the college interested you?

VK: Well, having not considered college very strongly— I think of many things. I don't think it was terms of their how it came to me but one, I think the college was own and run by the students and faculty. Two, it was a liberal arts school, had a very good reputation in painting, which I was doing at the time, and writing, and I was more interested in those things than in the sciences. And the—Yeah, I remember specifically the buildings in that particular brochure were—those photographs—were built by the students themselves and the, it stated or said somewhere that the architecture students were designing the buildings, you know, and I thought that was a marvelous idea. It was the lack of formality, I think, that attracted me. What I didn't realize was the—at the time—was what I thought was freedom was [LAUGHS] tremendous responsibility, once I got down there. That was the tough part of it. Or self-discipline, put it that way. But it was the openness and it was sort of an attitude that was put forward in the brochure. It was very effective for me at that particular time. I didn't come out of a structured situation. I didn't come out of a family situation, and I was used to that kind of freedom and I wanted it to continue. And somehow going to one of the other colleges after school, which was too damn restricted, even Music and Art was very restrictive, so—

MEH: So if you didn't come out of a family situation, what kind of situation did you come out of?

VK: Well I had lived with many people. My—my parents were not married when I was born and I grew up in many different households, including my mother's, you know, after a while we sort of reconciled and got along. But I didn't have the benefit of a structured, you know, upbringing. And this is what attracted me in a way. It was a continuum of that. I thought it was marvelous, the whole idea that—And it didn't cost much money either.

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

VK: Yeah. It was by train from wherever we picked up the train. I think—I went down with Alter who had submitted his application at the same time, and he got, I think he got accepted immediately. We went down by train together. It was a marvelous ride, especially coming through North Carolina, you know. I think it was—was it twenty hours, twenty-four hours, or whatever it took. And that was a great adventure. I think it was the first time I had been out of the city, as a matter of fact. So it was wonderful, I mean absolutely wonderful.

MEH: So you, when you arrived, was Albers still there?

VK: Albers was there. There was—When we arrived, it was the end of a kind of war that had been going on for some time, I think. And we were sort of in the—not in the truce, in—The breaking of the schisms or whatever you call them were over, but there was a good deal of dissent but we didn't know, I didn't know that nature of what it was about. M. C. Richards was there. Her husband at the time, Bill, I think it was Bill Richards, was there and there was talk of the old John Rice's—There were different gangs or I don't know. Like the Mafia, you know, different—But it was all very

exciting. Except when they asked us to take sides, you know, and we didn't know who the hell was the good, who were the good guys and who were the bad guys, but we assumed that we were going to stay and the bad guys were going. I don't know if they were good or bad. [LAUGHS] But it was the end of a very unhap-, what seemed to be a very unhappy or disruptive period. And the college wasn't all that old, I think. It started in 1930-something, '38, '39, '40, '41?

MEH: '33.

VK: '33. I had no idea. And at that time I think there were never more than 110-20 students. And I think when we came down there were about a hundred students and about forty or fifty faculty members. Which ones were faculty and which ones were students, it took me weeks to find out. Albers, as a matter of fact—The only formality was you had to pick an advisor, and I chose Albers. At the time I was very lucky. He was very nice to me [LAUGHS], very forgiving.

MEH: What was he like?

VK: I liked him enormously but sort of stern. Very disciplined. Very open, I thought. Very open. A little bit awe-inspiring. You know, I mean very contained. I—He only admonished me once which—I'm not going to talk about pride (?) [UNINTELL] [LAUGHS] for a slight what-do-you-call-it? Not a cardinal, a venal sin. But I didn't really know, you know, much about Albers at the time but I did look at his paintings for the first time there. You know, they had them there, and I was enchanted by them and it was nothing that I had ever painted, not even close, but I liked the guy a hell of a lot. And Olson wasn't down there yet. I don't know who was—Bodky was down there—I don't know if you know—who was the music teacher. Natasha Goldowski and her mother were down there at the time. Hazel Larsen, the photographer, was down there at the time. And an anthropologist, Paul. I can't—

MEH: Paul Leser?

VK: Paul Leser. And a woman that came out of, I think, Rollins College, taught German.

MEH: Yeah, she and Paul Leser came together from Olivet—Flola Shepard.

VK: Olivet. Flola Shepard, yeah, yeah. And I studied German with her because [LAUGHS]—that was the first class of the morning and I had a work scholarship so when I came from the farm—I'd get up at four or five o'clock to milk cows, and it was a good place to sleep and she was very nice about it. And all I learned in German was "Ach, Fräulein, was tun sie denn so geh'n allein auf der Strasse?" "Wunschen mit mir ein Bier trinken?" And you will get no more German out of me.

MEH: So did you take Albers' class?

VK: Yeah.

MEH: What do you remember about it?

VK: Well, there was life drawing. There was always a session of life drawing and the models were usually chosen either from faculty or students and he constantly talked about the discipline of the hand and the eye and the

motor skill. And I don't know if I was any good. I doubt it. I don't even have any of the drawings I did. But it was a marvel—again, discipline. Discipline. And very unpretentious. Because I was a very unpretentious person. Very very—I found him very open, you know. Other people found him sort of like too disciplined. And he had, I think, as a lot of other people—what do you call them, acolytes? or disciples—they painted very much the same way he did. There was one very nice guy that painted in one study and studied in another and went back and forth, you know. He was so disciplined. He was amazing. And he had latterly, because I think Rauschenberg came after I did, he had problems with Rauschenberg who—They were both very sweet guys. I liked them both very much but you couldn't find temperamentally more different people than that. But Rauschenberg I think was a terribly disciplined guy too in a kind of a loose way. [LAUGHS] And he was well aware of it. And Albers was not an actor at all. And Rauschenberg was a marvelous actor—funny, amusing, generous. And Albers was more buttoned up and more—get the ego out. He was a great believer in deflating one's ego. I don't mean that he did that in a personal way. He did it to Rauschenberg once, I found—psst! [LAUGHS] I don't know if he remembers that so long.

MEH: How did they interact in the classroom?

VK: [LAUGHS] Not well. Yeah, but there was an imp in Rauschenberg that did not exist in Albers. You know. He was young and I think he's still young, you know, from what I read of him or what I see of his work. And I was going to say Albers was serious but I can't say that Rauschenberg was not. Rauschenberg was also very serious about having fun, and that was part of it. And I thought when I came down also John Cage was there and Merce Cunningham, and I had, you know, no talent or interest in, you know, in dance. Music to listen to but—And it was there I heard Cage first prepare a piano and I thought that was marvelous, you know—they had—And I thought—this fellow in the dining hall where they had the piano, spread newspapers over the keys, and it was, I don't know if it was Ruth Asawa, it may have been or may not, but it was a gal, either a student, again initially I couldn't distinguish, and he was putting paper on the piano keys and it would make the oddest noise, you know. I thought it was marvelous but I thought it was a little nutsy too but I liked the sound of it. But I think he came down a little later. I don't know the chronology exactly.

MEH: He was there before you came down and then he came down [OVERTALK]—then he came later in the early fifties.

VK: Possibly, yeah. So I think I was there from '48 to '52, I think, and was not there during summers. I went back to New York City to make enough money to—the 800 dollars a year or I don't know. But it was a work scholarship. I think I had to work six hours a day on the farm, you know, to do it. I don't know financially but it was practically nothing.

MEH: Who was the farmer then?

VK: They had a—I don't know if he was local but he was from North Carolina—a guy and his wife and a child. I think the child had some kind of problem, a boy. It wasn't Dale or Darrell? Does that—? And they ran the farm.

MEH: Doyle? Doyle Jones, was that his—?

VK: Doyle Jones sounds exactly right. And he was there for a few years. I think he came slightly after I was there and they ran the, they ran the—it was a big truck farm. They had milk cows. They were Guernseys or Jerseys if I recollect. They had pigs at one time. Lots of chickens, because I remember those that didn't lay I took down in the morning, slaughtered them and took them down in the morning. Took the eggs in one basket and chickens in another, the unlaying chickens. I remember M. C. Richards was there when I came. She was there. The Dehns were there. And I can't—Let's see, I will think later, you know, of some other people I knew who were there. And John Rice was not there. The Rices weren't there, but I think it was his wife or ex-wife that was the librarian, Mary Rice—

MEH: Nell.

VK: Nell Rice was the librarian at the time, and she stayed on all the way through so far as I know. And of course Olson came later and that—I forget who the painters were at the time besides Albers. I think Ben Shahn came for a short time. They had visiting painters. I think Motherwell was down there for a while and I think that Joe Fiore took over Albers' job.

MEH: You didn't study with Joe Fiore?

VK: I think a little bit, yeah. But the studying was the same as [UNINTEL]. You went to classes. You didn't sign up and enroll for classes in the sense that—I remember Olson, Olson's classes were always full of people, you know, depending on the weather they'd take place outside. But people that weren't studying with him sat in. There wasn't—you didn't have to sign anything, there wasn't anything of the sort. You sat into what you thought was most interesting. I took courses in some things I had no idea, just because the professor was or the teacher was of particular interest. They did—There were two gals down there that had a woodworking shop but I don't think they gave classes. They didn't teach it as such. Oh, Mrs. Jalowetz. She taught music.

MEH: And bookbinding.

VK: Bookbinding I think. I remember music. Yeah, she was a lovely woman. Her daughter was down there but I forget in what capacity.

MEH: So going—Trude Guermonprez was there teaching weaving.

VK: I'm sorry?

MEH: Her daughter was teaching weaving.

VK: Oh yeah, possibly, yeah. I know that Albers' wife was a marvelous weaver. I took weaving too.

MEH: Did you take weaving too?

VK: I thought it was—Yeah, because it was—I like the mechanic- I like to work with my hands. But she was again very—I don't know if the word

“severe”— She wouldn’t put up with any nonsense with anybody. But I remember that she had a problem, she started to weave with glass, glass fibers, and had a problem because the glass fibers—the very minute, you know, fibers got into her skin, got into her blood, and she had a problem with it for a while. She had a I don’t know if it was a contract with somebody to do automobile covers. You know, the upholstery, it would have been a hell of an automobile, and that sticks out in my mind.

MEH: Going back to some specific classes, did you take classes with M.C.?

VK: Yeah I did.

MEH: What do you remember about M. C.?

VK: Enthusiasm. She knew the English language—Because Olson, I mean I wouldn’t know how to parse a sentence. M. C. knew how to parse a sentence and—Really a very lovely person. I took some classes with her, after Olson—Olson had taken a trip I think at that time down to the Yucatan. Again my chronology could be all off. But I don’t know if I studied with her. I attended the classes and learned quite a bit, you know, from her. But I was kind of a slippery guy. When I was in the art classes I was a writer, and when I was in the writing classes if I was an artist I could get away—I was a voyeur, you know. [LAUGHS] Which wasn’t terribly nice but I could get away with it.

MEH: Did you take part in any of the theater activities?

VK: Yeah, and I forget who the tall guy—Wesley?

MEH: Wes Huss?

VK: Wes Huss did the theatre. And I don’t know if it was him. I know that Joe Fiore did the camera, Cocteau’s Marriage on the Eiffel Tower and I got excited about that because they asked me to do masks. There were some animals in there, and I remember working twenty hours a day for about a week, you know, making the masks for him.

MEH: Was that for Marriage on the Eiffel Tower or for—

VK: Marriage on the Eiffel Tower—

MEH: Yeah they did that, but there was another—

VK: [OVERTALK] Oh, they did Noah’s Ark. Noah, Noah—I did the masks for Noah, right.

MEH: Noah.

VK: That’s what I did. The animal masks I did, full head masks, for Noah. That’s right. And Wesley was in there. I remember I did a bear. Badly, the bear. And Marriage on the Eiffel Tower, no, I was an art dealer, I think, and I think Alter, Donald, was either the buyer—One of us was the buyer, the other was the seller on the Eiffel Tower and Joe Fiore did a marvelous camera, giant camera, as part of the sets. I don’t know how the production was. Nick Cernovich did a Noh play, I remember, there. But Nick was a student. I remember him doing that. Then I made life masks from plaster of Paris for that. And I forget the other theatre—I don’t—Oh, and then we did something, a couple of the guys and gals were interested in doing Kafka and so they made a theatre troupe. I don’t know, at the end of the performance, I think it was a complete bomb, and at the end of it I think

out of embarrassment, you know what I mean, they didn't close the curtains. We just left. And I think Olson got on for that and he said, "If you put your name, sign your name to it.." "If you rob a bank, you don't want to —" This was like robbing a bank. [LAUGHS] You just want to get the hell—We didn't get any money out of it. We were rather embarrassed. But he said something very interesting: if you do something, put it out in the public, put your name on it. And that stayed with me. It's why when we get anonymous notes, you know, poison—we don't get them, but I mean they go around. If you don't put your name on it, I'm not listening to what you have to say. He says, "Put your name on it." So that taught me—Nothing about the theatre, but it taught me something else.

MEH: Did you have any idea how unusual this learning environment was—where you were involved in theatre, art, and all of this stuff in such a free, unstructured way?

VK: Well I had nothing to compare it to, you know, in that sense. There were other people that came down from other schools. There was one fellow, I forget his name—he didn't stay very long—came down from either Yale or Harvard and he was the butt of a lot of—He wanted to play real football. We played football to knock each other down and have a good time. He wanted football with cheers and formality and keeping score. So yeah, I think some of the people that came down from other schools as students had a worse time of it because that kind of freedom makes demands of you. You know, you're not told to go to class, but if you don't go to class then all of a sudden that weighs on you. You're not told to do this, but you learn to do it and—Don't forget, all the kitchen help, they had a couple of cooks there, very nice couple, but the students did the wash-up, did the cleaning, did the policing of the campus, garbage runs. There were no staff as such. I think the only staff were the cooks, a guy and his wife, I think and the fellow, Doyle, that ran the farm. Otherwise there wasn't hired help. There weren't maids going around, there weren't bursars and pursers and other kind of nonsense. But I took to it very naturally because this was what college was. I didn't go to one. I didn't study colleges. But I thought it was a marvelous way, you know, to live. The people there were—I keep saying "marvelous"—they were, and you had access. And that was I think the most effective, it's most effective because you could sit with the faculty members. There weren't faculty tables and student tables. In the beginning I didn't know if I was sitting with a faculty member, nor did I care very much, or with a student because you could learn as much from either one and the faculty members were very attentive to the students. That of course had other problems attached [LAUGHS]—When you ask me questions I'll answer you, but— I won't volunteer information in that department.

MEH: Okay. You were very young at the time, just out of high school.

VK: I think I just turned eighteen at the time.

MEH: Did you have any trouble coping with this much freedom and responsibility? The balance?

VK: With the freedom, no. With the responsibility, I think I first got drunk there that spring. They had a, a—they didn't call it an orgy nor did it become one but it was a spring awakening, you know, and I had beer for the first time and I got drunk on the beer. And I thought "My god, I've discovered something," because I was always very shy. And all of a sudden I found a voice and I found out how intelligent I was [LAUGHS] and how much I knew, and this was all through the benefit of beer. I'm not talking about whiskey or wine, but—Well, I paid for it with a hangover, but I figured the day after the hangover that there's something to this. No, I didn't have trouble adjusting to it. It was all very strange, but don't forget, the way I was brought up, every six or seven months I was put in another situation anyway so you become—how shall I say, sneaky as a diplomat or that careful about — No, there wasn't, there weren't any problems that I remember involved in that. It was all new and it was all marvelous and I was—hey, eighteen years old. Nothing is going to, nothing's going to depress you. And it didn't.

MEH: What about coming from a city environment and then being in this rural setting, working on a farm. I assume you had never killed a chicken before.

VK: No, but—[LAUGHS] I had killed other things. [LAUGHS] Coming from a city, you know, that's part of life. No, it was new. I was hungry for experience. I went after it. It was marvelous. You know, I could— Great, you know, milking. Well, I had milk-, I had one of the first milking machines. It was kind of ineffective. You had to strip the cows by hand, you know, to get all the milk out of them and Doyle taught that to me and it was not involved (?), and he taught me how to hay, you know, and I got to drive the tractor and I learned how to thresh and learned how to plow, and he lent me out then to local farmers, whatever they were making—the college would get whatever few dollars it was because I, they taught me how to do a good job, or an effective job—I didn't break the tractor. And it was new. There was nothing that they could have thrown at me that I didn't want to do. If it was castrating hogs or whatever the hell it was, everybody pitched in. And haying was fun because then all the students would get recruited up to do it and I was in charge of the haying, you know—a few times, not always—and that was marvelous, you know, be in charge! [LAUGHS] A little power. You know, putting the hay up, I don't know if I learned anything about farming there but I did what—And that was an education in itself, you know, working up there. And it wasn't excessive. It was supposed to be I think six hours a day or four hours a day, whatever it was, but how do you divide your time, you know. I said I didn't put that amount in studying, I have to admit, you know. If I would study six hours a day—[LAUGHS] it would have been something else. But I didn't. I think I didn't know quite where freedom and license, where one stopped and the other started, you know. And I think I learned a little bit the difference between freedom and license. And freedom was just tough. License is terrific. Booze gave me license to do what I want.

MEH: So what would you say is the difference between freedom and license.

VK: Well, the responsibility for what you do. Freedom to me means always, not always but it's kind of meant responsibility. You took it. License means you have no real—that's where "licentious" comes from, I guess. I enjoyed it, you know. But it was being without responsibility and that was a very, I guess you'd call it a learning curve or whatever—the difference between being allowed to do what you want to do and then knowing when you do it you pay for it. You put your name on it. And license means that you don't—you're licensed but you're out of the, you know—you're not responsible. You can do anything you want and do it and you can blame it on anything that you want. I think even nowadays I'm very conservative. Not politically, I expect, but I think personally very conservative and I'm offended, you know, when people blame their childhood or blame the booze or blame this one or that one. Assigning blame. And I think morally, if I have any of those morals, I would attribute that to my experience at Black Mountain, because very often after leaving there—it's been quite a few years—very often I refer as almost a touchstone, you know, as one would—not to a temple because it certainly wasn't that but in terms of moral responsibility there are, particularly Olson, Albers, even Creeley who I didn't study with, you know, but almost as people I would own up to, you know, in terms of—.

[END OF RECORDING ON SIDE 1, TAPE 1; SIDE 2, TAPE 1 BEGINS]

VK: —.but almost as people that I would own up to, you know, in terms of moral discipline. I don't like to use the word "honesty" because—I mean I think to lie sometimes is civilized. I mean I think people who tell the truth all the time are rather uncivilized. It's nothing to do with—But I think that it was Creeley, something that he said once is that an author—and he's a very good one, you know, more of a poet—he said there is a definite moral responsibility that a writer has, that any human being has. And that impressed me. See, I didn't have a father that I could refer to, or a church or a synagogue or a formal set of beliefs, and I formed whatever I have for better or worse at the college. And these people—whether I put that on them or not—were very highly moral people. Very high standards. Even the Rice brothers. They wouldn't have them both at the same time. I don't know if you knew that. Alter told me that Dan was still I think somewhere in Connecticut. Jack, I don't know, I've lost touch with him—they wouldn't have them there at the same time because—whether they were unruly or what, I don't think they were unruly. But whatever it was I never saw them at the same time, you know, but I knew both of them. Dan, in particular, became good friends. But I think in terms of morality, I learned more from them and from, you know, from those other students but particularly these teachers I talk about—Olson and Albers. They were very different. And I use them as moral compasses. Until I had my own, you know, I used theirs. And I still do, to some sense. Even though I'm doing something that they wouldn't do I somehow refer to them. Like people say, "What would my father do in this situation?" You know. "Am I doing the right thing?" You know. If I'm not quite sure, then I refer back "What is the right thing to do?" and then very often my experience at Black

Mountain, whether it was with them or with anybody else, that serves as guidance. Make sense? No.

MEH: You took Olson's class?

VK: Yeah.

MEH: What do you remember about Olson as a teacher and as a person?

VK: Well, physical size and I think mental size too. When I knew you were coming I thought of Olson and I thought of Francine Gray, because they—Gray would very often catch Olson short. [LAUGHS] You know. Not accurate. Sloppy with facts, sloppy with the truth. And he also, I think she annoyed him a bit because she's a very rigorous, very, very bright—I've read some of the things she's written and she's very, very sharp, very astute and very learned, you know. [LAUGHS] And Olson, Olson was very astute and very sharp and very learned but I think sometimes overblown, you know. But I always after Olson because Olson became, in a way, my father. I mean I chose him. He didn't choose to be. I sort of chose him. I don't know if he minded. I think he had a lot of disciples, you know, many of them, and I suppose I was one of them in that sense. He was generous, mentally generous is what I remember. And very, as I say, a good person but not in a simplistic way. He was a, his perceptions—have you ever read? You've his books, you know. I think the first book—I read that I think before I met him, [UNINTEL] Call Me Ishmael, I think it had just come out about that time. And I was enchanted with the writing. It was very much like Black Mountain and he hadn't been down there yet. He hadn't (?) thought he was coming down there. But a completely open or new view, you know, of things and—The word isn't "eclectic," you know, but it was completely open, coming from any direction, and he was—except in very rare instances—very non-judgmental. I very rarely, through those four years, heard him speak ill of anybody else. But then if I think about it, I didn't hear these other people speak ill of anybody. You know, there wasn't this—which I found later, campus life was full of this intrigues and backbiting and jockeying and all but I wasn't witness—I didn't know that. I know about it reading books afterwards and speaking to people that are in colleges. There was some of it initially because of the, as an aftermath of this war that went on. And I think the only person that I heard ill of or spoke ill of other people was M. C. Richards' husband, Bill. For some reason, and I didn't know the guy very well, I remember he was sort of dapper looking, had a beard, sort of tallish I guess, and he seemed, as an aftermath of that schism or whatever the hell it was, he seemed to be bearing ill will of others or bearing ill will to others. But that was an unusual situation. There were a lot of arguments and—who's sleeping in my bed and all that. But it wasn't that deep—And Olson certainly wasn't. He was very open to most any experience. And I remember even somebody asked him about what he thought of Hemingway, you know, and instead of saying he was full of shit or something, he may have believed the thought, he did like the early stories. He pulled out what he thought—And I appreciated that. There was something very civilized about—He was a great big bear of a guy, but I came out of an uncivilized sort of background and this—And Albers as well. Albers had no patience with laziness or—I think he lost patience with Rauschenberg because he took it too lightly, you know, and I think he may have recognized that he had a

tremendous amount of talent and he was just playing games, you know. I remember Rauschenberg dressing one his gals for a costume party and I was in the room—Ingrid. Ingrid. Very lovely—she was Austrian? Austrian?

MEH: Inge. Austrian.

VK: Austrian, yeah. Very attractive gal. And he was dressing and there was an intimacy there—not sexual intimacy, at ease with her. See I think that he was very much at ease, and still probably is, very much at ease with the world. He's one of these people that could go anywhere in the world, you know what I mean, and be at home, you know. And I liked that in Rauschenberg. I don't know if Olson could do that though he traveled quite a bit. Olson was too large, almost, you know, in that sense, physically and otherwise. And I don't know the circumstances. I knew Connie, you know, his wife at that particular time, and then there was the breakup, which I wasn't aware of until it was over they had broken up. And that was kind of a shock, because she—as he was very much my father, she was not very much my mother at all, I didn't need a mother, I already had one, but she was sort of much admired, you know. Not—Physically, yes, because she was a very attractive woman but also I think maybe I idealized her. You know. She was a very lovely person and a very lovely woman. When I heard they had broken up—And then I remember Betty, afterwards. I don't know the circumstances of that, you know. Nor should I have.

MEH: Did you have anything to do with any of the printing activities? The press?

VK: No. No. There was Jonathan—

MEH: Williams?

VK: Jonathan Williams. Yeah, he published a thing of mine. I think it's around.

MEH: That's what I was trying to remember. What was it?

VK: I've got it somewhere in the papers, "The Double-Backed Beast: The Flower," I think something like that. It was a loose-sheeted.. Yeah, and Dan Rice did the drawings for it. [LAUGHS] It was on one hand a very elegant job, because he was a very good, graphically he was very good, Jonathan. It was very nice to do that. It was loose-sheeted, not bound. And in a way—you see yourself in print, that's, you know, it's kind of nice and then it was also embarrassing because "I could have done better than this." And I wasn't enchanted with the verses that I had written there, but still, to have your name on it, it's something pretty, you know, that you wrote, I scratched out on a typewriter. And to see it in print—He did "Origins," I think.

MEH: He did Jargon.

VK: Jargon. But there was something called Origins before that.

MEH: Yes, somebody else did—Corman.

VK: He wasn't? Jargon was.. And I lost track of him. And I remember the last I saw of him he was being severely put upon. He had the patience of a saint. I would have killed Fielding Dawson—throwing spaghetti at him in the Cedar Street Bar in New York. You know, I mean—and I love Fielding, but Fielding was [LAUGHS]—he was just mischievous, you know. And Jonathan taking it. You know, how — Yeah, he—Well, he didn't print there though. I don't think they had a printing press there.

MEH: Yeah. Oh no, they definitely had a printing press.

- VK:** They did? Because I thought this was printed—This thing was printed elsewhere.
- MEH:** No, it was printed at the college.
- VK:** It was printed at the college? I remember having [OVERTALK]—
- MEH:** Dan printed it.
- VK:** Who printed it?
- MEH:** Dan Sloanly [PH] printed it.
- VK:** Oh really? Because I remember picking out the type, I was so fastidious about that. It was Bodoni from whichever—But he did the drawings of it and I remember it has a blue cover and it's somewhere in the papers in the house.
- MEH:** If it's the one I'm thinking about, it was printed at the college.
- VK:** It was about six poems or six verses, something like that. I felt I'd cheated, you know—I really. One of them was three lines. I says “Well, look, if that's—if they want to print that, let them go ahead and print it, but —” [LAUGHS] It was more of a source of embarrassment—really get rid of [MAKES TEARING SOUNDS].
- MEH:** I'm going to take a quick break because I have the exact times you were at the college.
- VK:** I haven't seen it in so many years.
- MEH:** Walk around, I'll tell you about people. You can ask all the questions you—
- VK:** A couple of them are not even around anymore. I mean I know Joel Oppenheimer was a close friend. He died quite a few years ago. And the Goodmans were down there one summer. Paul Goodman.
- MEH:** You weren't there that summer.
- VK:** No I wasn't there. I came back because they were having—well they didn't call it even “gay” at that time, but that was the Queer Summer where—When I came back everybody decided to turn gay, you know, even before its time. They came out of the closet when nobody asked them to come out of it [LAUGHS].
- MEH:** Did you have, did you have any problem dealing with that as a young man?
- VK:** No. [LAUGHS] No, that was one of the nice things—There were even some—Some kids came down from New York, students, and they brought this strange stuff, Mary Juana—marijuana—and there was a lot of drinking down there but not, there weren't any drugs that I knew of or—there wasn't a drug culture even up here except the hard drug users, which were jazz musicians, which I knew. But we sold, from contacts I made at the farm, I started, I got ahold of a lot of moonshine. We bought for a think three dollars a quart jar and sold it for six. Knowing me as a businessman, I probably bought it for six and sold it for three. [LAUGHS] Maybe. Not too B-R-I-T-E, you know. Natasha Goldowski was also down there.
- MEH:** Did you take any science classes?
- VK:** No, I thought of her because she had access to lab alcohol, because of her status as a scientist, I guess. And she was—I don't know if you know anything about her. She at one time danced, I think she said, in the Folies Bergère, and she was a refugee but I think she was either Polish or Russian. Goldowski would be. And her mother was there, Madame Goldowski, and she was like this film character actress, Madame Ouspenskaya, “For you it's only music.” Very opinionated and very funny. “The difference between evolution and revolution. Revolution you have a chair—it's not good, you totally break it and look for

another chair. Evolution [LAUGHS], you fix the chair, you change the chair.” But very nice. Natasha used to go ice skating on the lake in the middle of winter. She was a rather large woman and you’d look on the lake and the ice wasn’t quite right—she had panache (?). Then her physics lab burned down one night. And I don’t know if she didn’t leave shortly after, but she taught physics and chemistry, I would guess, and I don’t know if she had all that many students. I wasn’t one of them, I know that for a fact.

MEH: What about Max Dehn? Did you take any of his classes?

VK: No, but Max was also a very—he was from the European—You know, they had all come over, I guess, about the same time. Jalowetz and Max had his wife and Max played the cello, I recollect. And who was the pianist? The music teacher. Now I remember her: she couldn’t see.

MEH: Charlotte Schlesinger. Bimbus.

VK: Bimbus. Bimbus! And another one on Rauschenberg—she threw an ashtray. She used to smoke, I mean more than just—a real chain smoker and there was one (?) chorus and I think Rauschenberg had a good voice and was musical, which was the worst of it because he had all this talent. And instead of throwing him out of the class she threw an ashtray [LAUGHS] at him—I don’t know for cutting up or whatever the hell it was. They were singing some kind of Bach motet or whatever it is. I remember her, but she was gone almost the first or second year that I was there and I didn’t study with her. I had no, I have no—Ask my wife. I have no musical talent. Hazel I didn’t study with. I think I— No. I may have taken a picture but I didn’t have a camera. I may have borrowed it. But Hazel Larsen. She was a very good photographer, I remember. She had quite a few shows down there. And I can’t think of other faculty members. There was a Victor Sprague.

MEH: Sprague. He taught biology, I think.

VK: He taught biology. And again he wasn’t there for four years. He came after I was down there and I think he left before, and he was the one that had the friend down in Georgia that had the moonshine, so we went down to pick corn. And inside the bed—loaded it up with corn whiskey and then surrounded it with the pig corn, so then if you got stopped, you know, you were carrying a load of pig corn. And you come from North Carolina? The law was either in Georgia which we came out of or North Carolina that if the troopers would stop you and if they asked you to unload and they didn’t find whiskey, if they didn’t find corn liquor, then they would be obligated to load you up again because you were—And Doyle was driving the truck and Doyle said “Don’t worry about it. If you do get stopped,” he says, “don’t worry about it.” He says “I know the looks. Keep your mouth shut.” And the trooper stopped us and he went out and talked to them and he came back and says, “Let’s go.” So we took off and he said “Yeah, I told him that if we don’t have anything in there”—and they poked around, but we had about two foot of corn all around the white lightning. And he dissuaded them from—He said “Well, you guys, we have all night, you can load it up. I’ll unload it, the kid and me will unload it, you load it back up again.” [LAUGHS] But it was Sprague’s connection, I think. It’s not very interesting.

MEH: I asked you once if they ever went into the surrounding area, but I don't have to ask you that because obviously you did.

VK: Yeah. I first drank corn whiskey with a couple of the local guys I got to be friends with. They had a Model A or T, I forget which one, and they said "Vic, do you ever drink corn whiskey?" and I said "Naw, but I'd drink anything." I had never drunk before I got down there. And they said "Well, we went up to a moonshiner's place"—some of the little roads up here are very much like that. And there were four of us there, and they stopped off and we went up to the still there. They—these fellows knew each other and we got a couple of Mason jars full and went back into the car and we started to pass it around, and they said, "What do you think of it?" I said "You know, you guys are such sissies. There's nothing to it. It tastes like good kerosene, you know," which it really would have been—The best of it tastes pretty lousy. And we were passing the jug around telling each other how wonderful we were and our successes with women and how—what else were we going to talk about? [LAUGHS] And then I says "Yeah, I gotta get out of the car to take a leak," and I stepped out of the car and I never got back. [LAUGHS] Yeah, we even played baseball with the local guys from time to time. The college was—I think the friction there took place at Peek's. It was a tavern. North Carolina's a dry state, you know, dry in some places, wet in others, and there was a Peek's tavern that served beer and sometimes there'd be arguments or, you know, dancing with each other. We'd dance with their girls. They'd come over and dance with ours. But that's the usual stuff. There wasn't this town and gown nonsense there. There were some—Before I was there I think Jacob Lawrence was there, the black painter, and when I was there they had a few black students. I remember one gal in particular, very sweet gal. We used to go into town to the movies with her. At that time the films were segregated, if I'm not mistaken, but we'd make a big show, you know, of walking down the streets of Asheville, you know, together and making—hoot and hollering like locals or like college kids, pretty much the same way. Didn't have any problems. But looking for trouble in a nice sort of way. But otherwise my relations with the local guys was good because I knew them because I had worked in the fields with them. You know, when I was lent out. Then they were all right, you know. Then one of the—I don't know if you even want to tape it. I was called up—the Vietnamese War was going on at the time and I wanted out.

MEH: You mean the Korean War.

VK: The Korean—yeah, not the Vietnam, the Korean War was going on at the time and we were of draft age. And I thought "I don't want to go to this goddam war, you know. I have more important things to do." So I was going to go out as a conscientious objector. And my draft board was in New York, which was my place of residence, and I asked Olson to write a letter explaining [LAUGHS] and he wrote it and I still—Florence finally sent me (?) a six-page rambling letter which I can't even understand as to why Kalos objects to it. But it's kind of funny because he put it down that he objects on aesthetic grounds. [LAUGHS] I think that's the gist of it. I think he was drunk or his typewriter was malfunctioning or something like that. And I had Ben Shahn, I think, write a note too, which he did with reference to it. But anyway they sent me down to a pre-induction physical I

think in Charlotte and there was, I was on the bus with thirty local guys and we all got shipped off to Charlotte to take our pre-induction physical. At that time I figured—I wasn't serious about being a conscientious objector because I'm not a pacifist by nature or inclination. If somebody wants to punch me in the nose, I can become a pacifist very fast but I really hadn't legitimately—I didn't legitimately qualify. Wes Huss did. He was a—During the Second World War, he was a C.O. and I think was imprisoned for it or put in an internment camp. Anyway, they took thirty of us down. Two of us passed the test. We sat in that bus coming back [SIGHS]. We didn't make a big noise about it, but these other yokels did. Physically, mentally, mostly I guess we knew the alphabet and these other guys didn't. Then latterly I gave up my status and I went to be inducted and that's a funny story. I went down to Whitehall Street in New York and I had the goodbye party and I was all ready to fight for my country and I figured everybody else was doing it—you know, I mean I have really not a legitimate reason to hang back. They were cannon fodder? I'm not much better, you know, I'll go take a gun and shoot whoever they want me to shoot. And one of the first people besides bending over and getting up and coughing and doing all this other stuff and counting your parts—one of this and two of that—and they have you see (?) a very cursory psychiatric examination. The guy looked at the paper and said, "Black Mountain College." He said "I know these people. I know this one"—I think he knew Penn or knew of him. And he said "You're out. I'll write you up a, you know, a 4-F. You're not going to Korea." To my sh-.. I says "I can't do that. You know I'm not crazy. I know you know it." And he looked at me as if I was. He says—the war wasn't, it wasn't starting, it was— He says "You're out. I'm going to get you out." I says "No." So he really, I mean he looked as if he was disgusted, you know, "You stupid bastard, you have no business over there." And like a good soldier, I was off to war and I took the eye test and I failed." And you know, I was a little ashamed of that, you know. I'm not physically—mentally fit, I guess, but physically I'm not fit and I felt a little embarrassed. And Don Alter went off, I guess we're the same age, and they had him down South someplace painting signs. And I remember his going to Abercrombie and Fitch at that time—they're not there anymore, about 45th Street and Madison Avenue—buying a pair of good shoes, you know, because the army shoes were no damn good and he bought these good shoes and they sent him down to Georgia and he put in his full tour, I think. It interrupted his college and he came back and they had him painting signs down in George—using his artistic ability. He's a very good artist. I digress.

MEH: That's okay. It was fun. It was interesting. Going back to Black Mountain, what do you remember—Several things. One thing—Just a second. [IRRELEVANT COMMENTS ABOUT WEATHER NOT TRANSCRIBED]. So you were there in the summer of 1951.

VK: I was there one summer I'm pretty sure, yeah.

MEH: That was it. Did you study with Shahn?

VK: I don't know if I studied with him. I got to know him very well and his wife, and she was—I liked her work very much. She did medical illustration. Bar- — I can't think of her name.

MEH: Bernarda.

VK: Bernarda, yeah. Very pretty woman. And he had one of his daughters or two—He had three children I think, and they were down there at the time. And he was a totally different painter then. He was of course a social painter and—But also a very, you know, I got along very well with- I don't know if he got along with me but I got along very well with Shahn because I came out of the social, the same—My mother was sort of a half-assed communist, you know, so—Ben was not a communist at all, but he was a, lingo (?) was very hardened. And I liked his work very much but it was totally different. It was closer to the daily life of people and it was—there must be names for it but I don't have one for it. His signature on his work was always there, you know. He had a certain line that— you could recognize a Shahn, like you recognize a Picasso, you know, immediately from the lines. And he was a very well-put-together guy. I don't think that he appreciated the abstract, what they call the expressionism tremendously. He wanted painting very—felt very strongly about painting, it should relate immediately to human needs or social needs, should serve in that capacity, but as a person he was not difficult to get along with. He told me latterly, but not down there—I met him once in New Jersey, he lived in I think Roosevelt, New Jersey? Sound right? People asked him very often “What are your influences?” and he said, “Well I always tell them Chester Gould was my greatest influence.” And I said “Wait a minute. That son of a bitch does Dick Tracy.” He says “Yeah, that's one of my—” and then I could, referring back to Dick Tracy, I guess when Chester Gould was doing it, in terms of the graphics and the composition—that direct, you know, without any interference. Not terribly subtle but terribly, very very open, very direct sort of work. “I always tell them Chester Gould, you know, and very few of them know who the hell I'm talking about.” [LAUGHS] I don't know.

MEH: Did you study with Motherwell?

VK: No. But I listened to Motherwell. Because Motherwell's a very articulate guy. Very brilliant, I think very brilliant guy. And a funny thing is he's as good a painter, you know what I mean. A lot of times a painter will be a better talked than a painter. Duchamp, who's a better chess player than a painter, but he sort—but he had an attitude which was I think fine. But Motherwell's paintings I thought were beautiful. They're very much alike. I can always tell a Motherwell but—He was a guy I loved to listen to. I couldn't carry on a conversation with him—he was a very brilliant guy, very sweet guy, if I remember. And Siskind was more my type of guy, Aaron [INAUDIBLE] [LAUGHS]. Yeah, Aaron I liked and Kline particularly I liked. Now Kline I knew better after Black Mountain. In New York I used to drink with him and de Kooning, who I didn't know as well. But Franz I did. I didn't know Pollock well. You know, a couple of times at the Cedar Street Bar I'd see him in action, which wasn't pretty. But Franz was a very engaging guy. But I think I liked Siskind because I did write a short story once and I read it and again it was a source of sort of embarrassment. It closed out a reading, you know, several people read. [LAUGHS] And also such a shrewd guy. He says, “They're putting you on last as the closing act.” You know, [UNINTEL] snowing me or, you know, if they put me on first “You're opening, you're the lead-off batter—”

[END OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1; SIDE 1, TAPE 2 BEGINS]

VK: —if they put me on first “You’re opening, you’re the lead-off batter,” but I remember Aaron coming to me afterwards and saying, “You know, I really, you know, liked that story” and that made me feel very good. That was very encouraging. And also did something once to Don Alter. Now Alter will probably tell you, because I may not tell it right. He was into Tarots at one time.

MEH: Olson or Don?

VK: Olson. And being—not being able to, you don’t have to be able to tell Tarots.
[TECHNICAL INTERRUPTION]

MEH: [IDENTIFIES TAPE 2]. Victor, you were going to tell us about the Tarot cards.

VK: Yes. I don’t know how Olson got hold of a Tarot deck, and I don’t know if it came with instructions, but I don’t think he needed instructions, and he started to tell people’s fortunes. Now that’s loaded, especially—It was an old deck and it had the Hangman, and the Hearts and all the—And I had a couple of decks that my stepfather had brought back from Italy and I didn’t bring them down, I wanted to give him a couple of those decks. But anyway he had a deck of Tarot cards and he told Don Alter’s. And somewhere, there was not just laying it out, it was a whole exposition. And of course people are very interested in hearing about themselves from a third party, you know—a disinterested third party. Some of it was manipulation. But why he did it, or how he came about it, as a result of reading—it’s not just reading one card in juxtaposition, I think it’s something like what they do, the zodiac signs, the House of Mirth or the House of Unhappiness, or the Cat House, whatever the hell house you’re in. And the end result was he told Alter that within a week or two, Don—if he remembers it, would know—you’re going to kill yourself. Yeah, which when I heard it I said “Yeah, this is so unlike”—it wasn’t Charles’s nature to say this and I never realized—I don’t think he did at the time—how sensitive he was. Because Olson was a geyser of wisdom, not just a fountain but a geyser of wisdom. Now if this guy tells you—And Alter and Olson weren’t that close but he still had his influence all over the place. I really think it threw him for a two-week loss or whatever it was, a week or two. This poor son of a gun—Alter’s always been a very mentally healthy guy, a stable guy. [LAUGHS] And that was one of the things that Charles did. It’s like when your father does something totally stupid, you know what I mean. I try to find justification for it but I couldn’t really find it and never did. And I don’t know if he—he didn’t really do it to discob—I don’t think he did it to hurt Donald or to get him to kill himself. I think he just pushed the wrong button, you know, and Don took it very seriously—That period of time until that was over, the grace period was over, this guy lived in fear and he had no idea, and it wasn’t a give and take. You know, when somebody’s telling your Tarot, you don’t offer them information: the cards tell you everything you want to know. All you have to be is at the other side of the deck, or the layout, or whatever it’s called. I don’t know if he told fortunes after that but I think it was brought to him somehow that you don’t do this. He was human after all, you know. It didn’t do this to me, did it? (?)
[LAUGHTER]

MEH: [LAUGHS] [IRRELEVANT COMMENTS] Expand more, why was Siskind “your kind of man”?

VK: There are certain people you feel immediately not attracted to but immediately at home with, that you have something in common with him. What it is you don't specifically know. I mean with women the same thing. Sometimes you meet somebody that automatically shows—conversely, very seldom but it happened maybe once or twice in my life but once it happened I ran across a fellow that did exactly the reverse to me, that I could—Hey, it happened latterly I found out. I got in a fist-fight with the guy for no reason. I didn't need a reason. You know, the chemistry was so bad, it was like I felt for the first time in my life I had an enemy. I've never felt that way. The same way with Aaron. I don't know if he would remember me. We didn't pal around together. But something in the blood maybe. Who the hell knows. But you feel very compatible with. I didn't feel that same way with Olson. I mean, you know, you don't—It was totally different. Or with Albers. And I spent considerably more time with them. I loved these guys. But with Siskind, I didn't love him, you know, but there are some people that you feel immediately comfortable with because you're never facing each other, really. You can walk along the same road. Maybe it's like Godot and his pal, you know. You're not confrontational. You can argue among each other but you are bound maybe by blood, you know. [TELEPHONE INTERRUPTION]—have a straw and that's where what's-his- — where—No, it's not Alzheimer's, where Cunningham and Cage lived, in that general area. And I think at that time what's-his-name was living in that area too—the sculptor John, John, does the busted-up cars.

MEH: Oh Chamberlain.

VK: Chamberlain. John Chamberlain.

MEH: I don't think he ever lived in that community.

VK: He lived close by. He wasn't part of that community. I don't even know if Williams was. Williams I know was always a very generous guy. I mean he helped the college out enormously from what I understand, but I was not—I know that the last few years was miserable, grubbing for money continuously, and there wasn't any more finally and they didn't want to take any money from what I understand from somebody who would put their name on it and, you know, and as a consequence have something to say in the running of the college. I think Charles at one time went to Doris Duke—

MEH: Yeah. I think theoretically they didn't want to, but I don't think the offer ever came. I don't think it was ever a practical issue.

VK: No. I mean, people there were not money-makers, not money-grubbers, not, you know—And I think, I think but I don't know—Fiores would know probably better—but I think the college came to a natural demise. It just wasn't the world, you know, it just started, it did marvelously, it bloomed throughout so many—it did so much good to so many people—and then went a way of its own. I don't think—There were no villains involved that I know of. I mean you, you study this, you know the closing much better than I do, and the opening. I was there just in the middle period, I guess. Toward the end. But I don't know if—There were no villains down there. I didn't run across anybody in the time that I was there, those three-four years, that I disliked, at all. There were no, no destructive people down there. And that's amazing when you have a hundred some-odd people there, and some very odd people, that there was nobody there—Not that everybody loved

each other, but there was very little backbiting or nast-, there wasn't nastiness that I was witness too. It's like somebody says, "I have no enemies," and you say, "Oh yeah, speak to me." But I don't recollect that being— It wasn't full of love. It wasn't smarmy and it wasn't—It was exciting people doing exciting things, and they were doing it passionately. I don't know if it was the best years, but I learned more there than I think I would have in any other college, and I learned I don't think in terms of information because now with computers you can get all the information in an hour than you can gather in years from other places. But I think it was the quality—It afforded students—it gives access to other people's experience—I don't know if we could possibly have got it elsewhere. I don't think I could have taken it so willingly and, as I said before, in terms of—it sounds stupid—in terms of morals, and it was a rather "immoral" place in terms of the morés, you know people would sleep together, not sleep together, men sleep with men—But in terms of behavior, I learned more there I think than anywhere else, more than I certainly did up until that time. And there was nothing—Was it Oral Roberts University. Nobody spoke of it, except demands were made of you to act properly to each other, and it took some effort to learn that, to appreciate it. I'd never appreciated other people, you know. I'd been self-centered, you know, which is not unusual in a young fellow, but I—to appreciate other people's work and their discipline by watching them. To—I didn't watch Albers paint but I saw the result of what he did. I wasn't there when Olson wrote his poems, but when he read a new poem with all his enthusiasm there, knowing before it was written and after and the result of it was marvelous, you know. It—You became part of it, you know. And if you become a witness then you want to become a participant and you want to do similar. You want to work at the— And there was nobody to say "Stop. Don't do this. You cannot do this." I never heard that: you cannot do this. "You're not open, you cannot attend this class" or "you cannot make these crazy things," even when Rauschenberg came up with a painting—not a painting, you know, it was different. Albers may have—. [LAUGHS]—he was allowed to do it, even encouraged, you know, to do it. And that was the marvelous thing. If you put your head to it, you can do it. Break the law before you—Because Albers would say "If—You break all the laws you want, but you better know them. Learn them first, then break them as you go along, but learn them first." I think it terms of—And M. C. Richards, you know, knew more about form, but it was—You can break all these rules. Know what they are before you break them. That, to me, was a tremendous experience, you know, to know that you— Where your limits are, nobody could tell you where your limits are. You would have to find them. You are limited, but you haven't found them yet. And for an 18-year-old, a 19-year-old, that's marvelous. They did not say "You cannot go here. You cannot sit here. You cannot study here. You cannot—" Do it, do it as you will, but it's got your name on it. Everything you do has your name on it. So watch what you do. But do anything you want. [LAUGHS] So it was that combination of freedom and the resulting rigor, responsibility. And I keep coming back to that. It's always that responsibility, which gives it to you both ways. You have the freedom, but then you have the responsibility of what you did. And there's no place to hide. And that was another wonderful thing about Black Mountain. There was no place to

hide. The professors couldn't hide behind their robes and degrees. Students could hide behind their ignorance and their youth and so you had to grow up. And growing up really didn't mean growing older or, you know, growing fatter. [LAUGHS]

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

VK: Yeah. That was also built by students, and I had—You fixed up your study whichever—There was some noise about how you could fix it up but mostly everybody did their own study. And that was private. You had your lock and your key and nobody could enter into that except—Nah, that was your private. We slept in dormitories, I don't know—you spent so little time in the dormitories, you slept, changed your clothes, washed, and you were out of there. And most of us were outside most of the time. The winters down there, you know, are not that brutal as they are here so most of the time you were outside or in your study or visiting somebody else in their study. But that was sacrosanct. Your study was your own and everybody did have a—And they were all the same. There were no special—Except at the end of the building, I remember Lou Harrison, the composer, had a study at the end of the building overlooking the porch. Yeah, and I think above them was another larger study. But I don't know if there was any distinctions. The faculties had their own houses so there were quarters available to them.

MEH: What do you think was the effect of having little studies—your own space? I mean at most colleges you don't have this. You live in a dorm and go to the library.

VK: Well yeah, and the other thing, the studies, you were not supposed to sleep in the studies, or have mattresses in the studies. There was not a study without a mattress [LAUGHS] and there was more sleeping— Well, there was more bedding in all senses in the studies. It was your place. You fixed it up and, you know, put in your desk, your chair, whatever the hell it was, Victrolas—I don't know if they have Victrolas, we had Victrolas at the time, and that was your place. And of course there were parties going on all the time. There was men and women together and—There may have been another building or two, but the study hall was where most of the students—There weren't that many students. I think when I came there was, the maximum a hundred, a hundred and twenty students. A hundred and ten.

MEH: Not nearly that many. Maybe seventy.

VK: Not nearly? I thought there were more than that. And the ratio that they tried to achieve—and I don't know if they did—was two students to every faculty member, but—I don't know if all the faculty members were that active in—you know, because you think of physics, I don't know if anybody was taking physics. I think maybe a couple people were. I don't know what Max Dehn taught—to be honest with you. Mathematics, I think, possibly.

MEH: Philosophy

VK: Philosophy—philosophy in those days was not a—[LAUGHS] It was not a school for philosophers. And Max Dehn was one of the sweetest guys. I didn't have much to do with him, but he was very—like Jalowetz, these were very courtly people, very—They were quite different. They were not Americans. They loved

America. Albers even was not an American but he loved—he thought of himself as an American Indian. I think Yippi was the name he liked or Hoopi or Juppi.

MEH: Juppi.

VK: Juppi. You know everything I'm saying. You already—[LAUGHS] You're two steps ahead. Which is fine.

MEH: What do you remember about mealtimes?

VK: Well, there were teabag twirls (?), which was the year later after Paul Goodman was down there. He invented the teabag twirl.

MEH: What was that?

VK: Well these guys would take the tea, the teabags, and when everybody else was eating they'd twirl them around and somebody [LAUGHS]—nobody cared that much for them, so if you're on the receiving end of a teabag. Once a week the students cooked for everybody, and there were a lot of health foods there. People introduced us to vegetarian fare or whatever it is. And the meals always—I think financially that showed up for the students because you didn't eat particularly well, you know, but the food wasn't, it was fine. And everybody ate the same. In the dining hall, everybody, sort of you ate with your pals or you ate someplace, but there was no seating arrangements. You ate wherever you felt like eating with, and if you'd just come out of a class and it was dinnertime or whatever, you'd continue the class at the dinner table. There weren't any servants there. There weren't anybody serving you. You'd go to the kitchen and take out whatever—And once in a while they'd have something really great, you know, like pork chops or something like that was great. But the nights the students cooked was not so great [LAUGHS]. Lentils. Lentils. That was Nick Cernovich's—I don't know if Nick's around. Do you know? Does his name ring bells with you?

MEH: I'll tell you later. Remember that.

VK: Nick was a close friend. But Nick was good at cooking. And I did something terrible. They put me on the garbage run. M. C. was into it. And I had no idea that I had to change the oil in the truck. [LAUGHS] And I lost that job and I really loved it—riding around in a weapons carrier with garbage in the back there. [UNINTEL] take it into Asheville regularly or some excuse. Only I had no idea [UNINTEL] was fine. Why change it? Now it's like a human being—three thousand miles [MAKES SOUND].

MEH: Why did you leave? You didn't graduate.

VK: No, I never thought of graduating and I regretted it afterwards because, you know, looking for jobs and things, they'd ask you if you have a college degree so if you put down four years equivalency. And I don't know if it's true or not, but the reason I gave for not giving the degree was that in North Carolina, at that time, there was no such thing as blacks attending schools with whites. Right? The law said that you were not accredited—it was not an accredited college.

MEH: Right. That's true. But that wasn't the reason.

VK: But that's the reason I gave. Well, because you had to apply for graduation, and I didn't even think it was important. I mean if I graduated or didn't, I put in the same amount of time. I wouldn't have learned anything—I would have, as a matter of fact, because graduation, if I recollect, not having gone through it,

meant that you had to put forth a course work that you had accomplished in your field of study and to be reviewed by the faculty and an outside person of your own choosing—if I remember. I could be wrong in that respect. So that if you were a musician, you would call in a musician and they would decide whether you had met your goals with your sonata or symphony or musical piece. If you were an artist then you would have an exhibition of your paintings—and whatever your particular field was. And I think—and I could be very wrong—but I think that constituted equivalency to graduation besides having attended—Records, I don't even think records were kept as to who attended what. They may have been.

MEH: They were.

VK: Don't look too closely at my records. [LAUGHS] But I didn't—It was a matter of choice. I just didn't think it was necessary.

MEH: What did you do when you left?

VK: I went to work. Well I'd always worked because we didn't have any—My mother didn't have any money and there was no money. I went to work. I went back to New York and got an apartment. I went into the printing trades, as an apprentice or hoping to become an apprentice because at that time they had the Big Six union—meant that as a typographer you had to wait a few years before you got to be an apprentice, which meant that you had—And I started—And I think it was just a job offered to me that I applied for and I was very interested. That's why I can read upside down and backwards, you know, but they don't even do that anymore. And got into that and got a place in the East Village for eighteen dollars a month rent. It was a sixth-floor walk-up. And set myself up. And then I worked, then I went out and drank, wrote a little bit, painted a little bit, drank a lot and went out and had a good time in the East Village. I had my good times in the West Village and then [MAKES WHISH SOUND] and got into—I went up for a job in an employment agency and they offered me a job behind the desk, running a desk, and because I needed the money took that job and through inertia stayed there and became an executive search—it took me quite a few years. Then got married when I was 28, three kids, ten grandchildren, and retired.

MEH: You stayed with this [OVERTALK] retired?

VK: Yeah. Pretty much. I went to work for an executive search. Then with two partners went into business for ourselves, opened up a place, and did that for about ten years, and then closed that down and went to work for a competitor. But it seemed like [MAKES WHISH SOUND] it was too easy almost. Well the first, there was quite a bit of difference. In the eight years—I left school at about twenty years old, and in the eight years I went to Europe once, I save enough money and went to Europe and bummed around quite a bit, but always worked. You know, I always had some sort of job, and when I came back then we got married. I was 28 years old and the three kids—the usual. And I kept working until about seven or eight years ago and retired. Now I've got a workshop in the barn.

MEH: What do you do?

VK: Children's toys. You know, moveable toys. I copy most of them. You know, go into old books and copy them over. You see, if I don't work with my hands I'll go cra—you know. There's more brains than I do. And some of the stuff is inside.

MEH: We'll take a look at it.

VK: But that's pretty much it.

MEH: Did you hang out much in the Cedar Bar?

VK: Yeah.

MEH: What do you remember about it?

VK: Oh it was a great place, yeah.

MEH: I'm sure. [LAUGHTER] Tell me a little more.

VK: Well, it was—I don't know, were you ever in there? Because they moved. They went from—They were on University Place and around 9th Street and then they moved further up. Well, all the painters hung out there and I was good friends at that time with Fielding—with Dawson and with Joel Oppenheimer. And—He wasn't a drinker, the poet, Ginsburg. Ginsburg, Allen would come in there once in a while but Allen was not a dr— He may have been involved with other things, but alcohol was not one of them. He was a very straight guy as far as I know. All through his life he was a very straight guy. Oddly enough. He was not a nut. He was too straight almost. I mean beside his love life which was—But still very straight and very circumspect. But he came in there once in a while. But all the painters were there—Kline was there, and de Kooning was there at the time. Jack Tworkov. He wasn't much of a—Jack was a very family-oriented guy. Rauschenberg would come in very often and Twombly once in a while. I don't remember Twombly there. I remember meeting him though once at Black Mountain.

MEH: Do you remember Twombly and Rauschenberg? Rauschenberg was there the first year, '48-'49 and then he left, and then they came back [OVERTALK] in '51-'52.

VK: I think he came—He came back I think with Twombly. When Rauschenberg came down there he was married to—I think Sue was his wife's name. And, yeah, then he went away. And at the Cedar Street, that was a marvelous place to be because on a Friday night when I was working in the printing trades I didn't get out until about 11, 12 o'clock and everybody else was drunk and spent [LAUGHS] and I was fresh and eager to go, so I had—They had had a head start but they were fading when I came in. And it was a nice place to drink because it wasn't an "artist bar." Kline never talked about painting. He talked about, we talked about baseball, about girls, about anything else. No philosophical discussions. And de Kooning never really spoke much—He's not a talker. He was a very sweet guy. When he was sober he was very sweet. When he got drunk, he got a little n-, you know, a little rambunctious. But it was a good place to meet these people that you knew. Then I met a lot of jazz people that I got in touch with. Rauschenberg, as I say, used to come in there fairly regularly but not a habitué but Franz was and de Kooning, you know, was, and the two sisters they shared—I forget, the two twins. And people would come there from all over the ci-, you know, from all over. They, you know, got in fights once in a while but that's what's a bar's for, you know. I took Florence down there once, you know, after we were going together and she liked it but she's not a drinker. But it was a drinker's bar. I don't think he made martinis much, you know, but it was booze and beer. And I remember Franz used to like Utard [PH]—cognac, brandy. That

was his favorite. And the art dealers would come down there and the art critics would come down there, and they had the Club, I remember, attending that once in a while. Painters Club. But Painters were always a lot more fun than writers, I thought. You know, they didn't philosophize. And the funny thing about the painters, they weren't—they didn't backbite on each other, you know. They were much more generous. The writers were [LAUGHS]— They weren't.

MEH: What was Joel Oppenheimer like at Black Mountain?

VK: He was like a city boy. [LAUGHS] Well he was in from Yonkers, actually. He wasn't a New York City boy. But he was close enough. Joel was always unsophisticated, which was nice, nice about him. And I remember he got married down there to Sissy [PH], and that was not such a great deal. But Joel had a—he was very enthusiastic. I don't know how good a writer Joel was, but again, Joel was again without malice—.

[END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 2; SIDE 2, TAPE 2 BEGINS]

VK: The only dance—who did I know who was a dancer? Tim. Lafarge. Tim and I had a fight once about Katy Litz. That's not—

MEH: Go ahead and tell me.

VK: No, we sat at breakfast one morning, I came in with the eggs and the chickens and he said, "I don't like what you're doing with Katy Litz." And I was—And Tim and I got along fine. I was up to his house once in Connecticut—this beautiful house that one of his family had designed. One of the loveliest houses—not ostentatious, but beautiful house. So we were not, we had no reason to argue. But he was very angry with me. "I don't like what you're doing with her." I said "Well, whatever it is, it's not your business." You know, he says "Well I want you to step outside." And I said "Why?" [LAUGHS] Well, he wanted to fight, you know. Well, I had no choice. I went out with him. And it was dopey. Then the end result of it was, I remember, pounding his head on a stone, you know, outside the front door of the dining hall. And I was really feeling sick like I didn't want to be there and he wasn't going to hurt me but I was hurting him. And I said "Is that what you wanted? Is this what you wanted?" and he said "Yes." And he's looking over my shoulder, I remember that, and he says "Yes," and then I got off him and I went back in the dining hall and he went off someplace. And then that same day somebody told me that they'd taken him off to Asheville to some kind of psychiatric facility or something like that. And I felt terrible and I thought I was—I wasn't responsible. He had been having some sort of a breakdown. And he came back and I think some of his folks came down and took care of him, you know, for a while and then he came back to school and—I don't know why—I mean I didn't take it personally but it was one of those odd things that—I didn't know he was in love with—We weren't even talking that, or—Obviously I bothered him a lot because it was not his nature. He was not a tough guy at all. On the contrary, he was one of the—He was a nice looking, big, strong guy. I don't know how good a dancer he was but he was very serious about dancing. I know that. But I guess he had some kind of a flip or mental breakdown like people have, nervous breakdowns or whatever they call them. And I met him years later in New York. And I met him at a party and I was sort of half-living with a gal at that time—No, she was in New Jersey, we were sort of seeing each other, and one night at a

party he went home with her. He stole her from me, which was justice of a sort. And she came back the next day and she wanted to resume our relationship. Well, being a stiff neck, a dinosaur, you know, I would have none of it and she was going to tell me that I was so much better a lover and I said, you know, "Fine, I have no—but I'm an old fashioned—you know, from the backwoods, you know. You go with somebody else, we're finished," you know. Stupid, but [UNINTEL]. And I saw him—and I didn't see him after that. Maybe, yeah, he was living with an English—renting from an Englishman up on the east side. But I don't really recollect that well. Mark Hendron—

MEH: Hedden.

VK: Hedden was there. His mother was a writer, was an author, at one time. I remember him but not that well. And he told me that he could, you could cure nearsightedness, which I am and he was, through eye exercises which, being lazy, I took up for about two years and exercised my eyes. It didn't work. I said "Mark, I'll go back to my glasses and you can [LAUGHS]." Mark I didn't know that well. He had an affair with somebody I remember, but I'm not going to tell you who. [LAUGHS] I'm surprised I remember as much as I did.

MEH: You remember a lot. Yeah. Are there anecdotes or things that we haven't talked about that you remember?

VK: Probably. As soon as you leave. As soon as you leave I'm going to remember "IO should have told her about—." No, the people I really learned from and cared from—Mary Fiore was Mary Fitton when she was down there, one of—fine, fine, extraordinary. Extraordinarily healthy. I mean that in my most positive way. Some people say you're healthy, that means you're not sick, but she was healthy in a more positive way. And I haven't seen her in many years. I think I saw her last when Joe, when she and Joe invited Florence and myself for dinner up in their place. They have an apartment in Manhattan—I don't know if they still have it. I know they used to have a place in Maine. And of the students down there, there are so many that now come to mind. There was one gal who was schizophrenic that was down there for a while. She and her brother. They brought the pot down there, the marijuana, which we considered—the Rices were very much against it because then they knew more about drugs—they knew that marijuana was no good for you. But I didn't—it was so stupid, you know. I tried it. Oh what's-his-name was down there that I met, the writer. Oh—I met him again in Tangiers. Not Rexroth.

MEH: I know who you're—I can't think of his name. He was there?

VK: He was a gay guy, yeah. He was down there for a short time.

MEH: I know who you're talking about. [TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE: Paul Bowles?]

VK: Harrison I knew. Not that well. But he was a cuddly, you know—he was very sweet and very unhappy. He was always between love affairs, you know, being turned down and picking up and turned down and picking up. And I liked his music very much. Bodky, who taught me that Schubert died of syphilis, which I really didn't give a shit about [LAUGHS] one way or the other. He was again from the old school. He came from the other, you know from the previous group. I don't remember too much about his wife. And I try to think of other faculty members and I really offhand don't remember them. As I said, those who

influenced me most were really Olson and Albers, mostly. And after, you know, having left there, their influenced remained quite differently. And I think—they didn't pal around together but I think there was a good deal of mutual respect there. I would assume that there was. I hope that there was. I don't know. But I know they didn't hang you, you know, together. And Callahan I met, but Cal was very retiring, quiet, and he wasn't down there that long. I don't remember him for that length of time. You know, I don't remember anything else that I can bring to mind immediately. I could make some stuff up.

MEH: Looking back, what do you think really worked about Black Mountain as an educational venture?

VK: Worked?

MEH: Yeah. What do you think made it meaningful or what do you think didn't work?

VK: Well what made it work was the availability, the personal availability. This is why when I see people trying to—I hear of people getting schooled on the internet or by—I say you can't do it that way. You can get your information that way, which I think is marvelous. I'm not against—But to learn you have to be questioning—You have to be there. You know, you can't make love by—But people do. They have love affairs on the internet. I think it's the most ridiculous goddam thing. You can get information but in terms of learning something—And it's the experience of learning is when the architects, when they have an idea for a building, get out there and build it. And when you make mistakes, you're going to fall through the goddam floor. When you write something which is terrible or nasty, you're going to hear about it from your peers immediately. And you can question and you should question your professors fundamentally, you know. How do you know this? And they had many open discussions. And now I remember, there were open discussions that were educational. Not only about the cat, kitten situation, but about free will, you know, the philosophy. I mean Max Dehn was running one of these and it wasn't a class, it was a meeting of whatever it was called about— Faculty and students were all invited and the subject was whatever you will but it was in that case, I remember, free will and the give and take was instantaneously. And even if it was (?) "I'm Professor Dehn, I know," he was curious and there was—those faculty members I knew and respected insisted on learning from the students. And they took them seriously. And it wasn't a question of grades, you know, passing, of honors, you know, getting a baccalaureate, whatever they call it, they wasn't involved in it. You said something, you could be questioned—if you were a student or a faculty member you could be questioned on it thoroughly and prove it. You know. So there were no artificial barriers except your own stupidity or unwillingness to share—whether it was that sharing, it was open. And nothing was so sacred that you could not question it, even the way the college was run—as to its finances. Theoretically, I don't know if it was every practiced, that if enough students wanted to study mice you'd get a professor of mice. If there was a genuine interest. And foolishly they would go out and find a professor of mice who would come down there and nobody liked the son of a bitch and you'd have—you'd have an expense that wasn't wanted which you couldn't do in any college. So Harvard goes on with millions and Columbia goes on with millions and millions and millions of dollars,

and those that teach the courses I understand—one of my grandchildren wants to be an electrical engineer and one other son is—and at MIT I understand the assistants are teaching and the great professors and not doing any teaching, you know. It's the removal of that, and they're going but just to have a degree from Harvard or MIT or Columbia or wherever the hell the school is, gives you entitlement that you haven't done the work, you see. You've done the study. You've done—you've got the information. But you have not put it in your hands. And I think that was one of—the great value is that if you were right, prove it. Write (right?) the damn thing. Write the damn thing. There's an old saying (?) that when it's pornography it's lousy or against the grain or however, do it and take the consequences of your doing it and there people were willing to help you in doing it. I want to put on a Noh play? You don't have to ask permission. Put it on. Find a date on the calendar. Do what you must do to perform and tell everybody. Make up signs. Tell the artists that's your friends. I asked Dan to do the illustrations—he said “fine.” This was an exercise for him but it wasn't in the privacy of his own study. You know, finally to get printed and find out how lousy I was, to have it printed, and say “Yeah, there's evidence. If you're a jerk, there's the evidence of it.” And you learn this way. You may learn you're a lousy writer.[LAUGHS] But you have to learn this way. You can't—well you can, I suppose—you can get doctors' degrees in the mail. You know, and people do. I had an operation and I was kidding the doctor. I was looking for his license. I said, “You know, when I went under the anaesthesia”—it wasn't true—I said, “the last thing I heard was the nurse talking to you and the nurse said ‘Doctor, since what happened last time, let me point out a few things to you.’” [LAUGHS] The son of a bitch had no sense of humor. He said, “You really didn't hear anything.” I said “No, I didn't hear, but I thought you might be interested.” “Well, it's your first time, doctor. Let me show you what's going on down there.” But it was that immediacy. Again, the immediacy of the experience and the value of it is to speak and share with your professor and he or she with you the availability of the human being behind the text, behind the tape or what do they call it now—the software or whatever it is. You may be able to learn that way. You get your information that way. But you cannot learn that way. There was a couple up here that home-schools, you know, they're well-intentioned. I said, my premises (?)—all the information you can give them at home but the act of mixing with other people freely, without restriction, is invaluable. I mean then it means there's a lot of pain and they will get beat up, they will be bullied, they will be stolen from, but they will also learn. And this is what happened at Black Mountain but nobody robbed, stole, or—because they were there for a purpose. And it wasn't to get a degree that you can turn into money. You know, with a degree from Harvard you get number, with a degree from—you know, the middle kid got a degree from the Brooklyn Polytech. He went to work for IBM, he transferred it into money. He's an engineer. They don't know anything. They don't communicate with people. But they convert it into an income, which is—there's nothing wrong with that—or into a profession. But the demise of the college also could have been attributable to the fact that when you got out you were not—you could not transfer if you got the degree or that four years of experience. You could not go into an employer and

say, "On the basis of these four years I want—." You were just as incompetent today as you were four years ago. I want a job as an artist? That's almost anybody. You don't have to go to college for that. You want to be a writer? Write something. Four years of college doesn't make you—of studying English—doesn't make you capable of conversing or communicating with anybody. So that was—The end result wasn't that you'd say, "Well this one went out and he's making a hundred thousand dollars and everybody else is making fifty." Yeah, people went out and did their thing and Rauschenberg became wealthy and famous but that was his own doing. It wasn't as a result of studying at Black Mountain. It was a result of the work that he did which Black Mountain enabled him to do, or fed him, or gave him opportunity to explore, gave him the freedom to explore, to get thrown out of Albers' class—you know, which wasn't the biggest thing. I'm sure he learned and Albers may have learned from him. But it was that, that ability, you know, and Cunningham was a great dancer before he ever went down there you know and became famous. But it gave him the freedom to explore a lot of—But he wasn't a student. But it gave the students a chance to—All this was available and you could not be stopped from crossing over from one discipline to the other or avoiding all of them and coming out a complete nothing. You know, you had also the opportunity to fail by not participating. It wasn't demanded of you. You had to make the demands on yourself.

MEH: Let's break here.

**[END OF RECORDING ON SIDE 2, TAPE 2]
[END OF INTERVIEW]
[END OF TRANSCRIPT]**