

Interviewee: Piet Swierstra Swierstra
Interviewer: Mary Emma Harris
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Location: Leeuwarden (Frisian: Ljouwert), Netherlands
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Transcription: Mary Emma Harris, June 2015 and January 2018

[Filming of Paris and trip to Holland at beginning of tape.]

[THE FIRST TAPE IS THE INTERVIEW. IMAGES FROM A SCRAPBOOK ARE RECORDED ON THE SECOND TAPE. DISCUSSION OF SELECTED PHOTOGRAPHS FOLLOWS.]

[INTRODUCTORY TECHNICAL COMMENTS NOT TRANSCRIBED.]

[BEGINNING OF TRANSCRIPT. BEGINNING OF TAPE 1.]

MEH: This is Piet—How do you pronounce your last name?

PSS: Swierstra. [Pronounces name]

MEH: Swierstra. [Repeats name]

PSS: Yes.

MEH: We're in Leeuwarden.

PSS: Yes.

MEH: You pronounce it correctly.

PSS: Yes. That's Nederlands. But we have here two—two languages. Also, Frisian and I'm a Frisian girl.

MEH: Okay.

PSS: So, I've always speak Frisian, and I write Frisian, and I can understand it very well.

MEH: Okay.

PSS: But also the Dutch is our real *taal*. Our real language. Yes.

MEH: Yes.

PSS: So—

MEH: Piet, how did you come to be at Black Mountain?

PSS: That's a long story.

MEH: Go ahead.

PSS: Well, I came there was in 19- 1994. And I emigrated to the States in 1946. But anyway, I stayed in hotel in village close to Yellowstone Park. There I was living. But before that I knew Trude Guermonprez. She was already at Black Mountain College. She was a weaver.

MEH: How did you know her?

PSS: Here in Holland already. And I know not [UNINTEL WORD]. I know him, but I have seen him—her first husband who has been killed during the war. So, and after the war, she left to her parents in Black Mountain College. They were already there. So, then I was in Montana at that time. I liked to travel, and I liked to see something. But anyway, I like to see people, and I want to know how people live. And I also—then she wrote to me, “You have to come here. Can you help us? We need a dietitian.” And I wrote back, “No. I can't. I won't do that.” When I came to the states, I couldn't speak one word when I came to New York. So, I thought, the first thing I have to do is start learning the language. But that was not so easy to me. First of all, I went to my family in California. Anyway, I left. I told them I couldn't speak English. At your place they all tried to speak Friesian to me, and I just didn't want that. So, I left. And I sought something else. Anyway, the time when I was in hotel, and Trude wrote

to me, "Can you help us?" I said, "No." And then she sent a message, "We need you and you come." That was all that I got. So, I was in trouble. I didn't know. But my good friend, she said to me, "Oh, just go." I said, "I can't do that—start cooking there for 120 people." She said, "You always have done it. You can do it now, too." So, I took the bus, and I arrived at Black Mountain College. But why did I went there? There was an whole movement, and all the movements take out all the South of America. You have different—you have the movements from the music. You have the movements from the paintings. You had the movements from the dance. You got all over the world the movements from the folk people—folk singers. Folk singers, yes? So, they all came from New Orleans or from the South. Look, you got that [SOUNDS LIKE: borsian dance] that time coming up. You got the sound of music. There are movements. They went over the whole world. And still out there. So, we had a folks high school here in Holland. My brother-in law and my sister and an uncle—they started here a folks high school. In the south part of Friesland. And they had also contacted with Denmark. Denmark—they were already there. Denmark also got in touch with Black Mountain College. They also got in touch with here with the folks high school in Friesland. So, that was also a movement that was going on. And then I went to Black Mountain College, and I looked it all over, and I thought, "My goodness. They still was building. They hadn't done everything yet. They hadn't finished everything. And Trude came, and she said, 'Well, I will put you someplace.'" I said, "No, I really want a room with myself. That is what told you." "Yes. Okay. You will get it," she said. "But you have to

wait a couple of days. Lots of people are moving out, and if they move out, there is a place for you.” So, when I was first there, I could stay also with her mother. And I looked at what I have to do there. And then I thought, “Stay out. One thing, stay out of the politician here. Do your own work. The work you have to do.” So, I said, “What do I have to do?” Well, you have three cooks. All were black people. And that’s what I found at Black Mountain so nice, black and white together. So, if I came to the kitchen – I want to tell you how it looks like. Anyway, I thought I have to clean up first. I don’t want rats and mice here. So, but the old cook George—well, he was the boss. He said—I said, “No, we all are the boss. You are the boss. And I’m the boss. And the other cooks are the boss. But everybody in their own field.” So, I start to organize it. And the [SOUNDS LIKE: joke] was always there. We had a farmer Taylor—

MEH: Trayer.

PSS: Ray Trayer. Yes.

MEH: Right.

PSS: He was on the farm. And Ray and I—we could get together very good. But anyway, he was holding seven pigs for the college, so he could feed all the pigs from all the food that was left over. Every morning George put it away for the pigs. And I thought, “We can use that again.” So, I start to figure what I could do. And then I started clean up, get [SOUNDS LIKE: mender] to the pigs. So, after a while I was there, Ray start explaining to the community when we had a meeting that the girl that came from Holland, she just saved so much money that I can’t feed my pigs anymore. So, and I said, “Well, that’s fine. That’s why I

came here.” That was the story from the pigs. So, that later on he couldn’t have any more pigs. But he couldn’t feed them anymore. But then the end was, we always butchered them and get them food in winter in the freezer. But George always took something out. I mean, he left the freezer open, and everything was gone. If he got his payment—pay check, George went to town and started drinking and didn’t come the next day. And I always know that. And so, the next day I always have to be very early in the kitchen. But George never showed up. Sometimes the whole day he didn’t. And then his wife came, and she didn’t say anything. She was an awful, very lovely lady. And she always [UNINTEL WORD] awful. And anyway, we started with three people into the kitchen. And so, they cleaned up the dining room that also was very filthy. And after we have cleaned everything up, everything started looking much better.

And then the politics was coming in there, and there was a movement from people who was against the head people. I could say it like that. And that was Mr. Olson, who started to gather a group students together. The other ones were out. So, that’s when we start leaving, after that summer in 1950, ’51. I don’t know exactly. ’50 I think. And then Olson started [UNINTEL] people there. But also the people who have—they always get funds for people who would give some money to explore the college. And also they got some from the students from fee. And one who could pay a little more, they paid a little more. And someone who couldn’t pay, they have to work for it. So, that was always a very good idea. And then some people – Mrs. Rice came to me, and she said, “You should stay on Albers’s side.” I said, “Mrs. Rice, listen. I’m not doing that.

And I'm leaving right now." I said, "I won't do that involvement any people. I'm doing my work, and you go at whatever you want to do." So, they tried to get me out of my apartment. And that's what I didn't want. Then I said, "I'm not leaving." And she said, "You have to leave. I want somebody else in there. [SOUNDS LIKE: Frau], she want to stay in there." I said, "No, I'm here. I'm staying here." So, she did not win that from me. Anyway, Olson had been there for summer school. Ruth was there or she had left? I think Ruth was there that summer. [MEH: Ruth Asawa was not there that summer.] And then she left, And Trude left already. She was going to California. They tried to start also a school at Pond Farm. And she asked me if I would come there. So, then I went to Black Mountain – Pond Farm.

MEH: Pond Farm. Going back a little bit. You said you knew Trude here [Holland].

PSS: Yes.

MEH: How? Were you a weaver? Did you have friends? How did you know her?

PSS: From the folks high school faculty. Her brother-in-law also was living next door at my sister in [SOUNDS LIKE: Pakafy]. She came there. And she also stayed at [UNINTEL] for a long time. School.

MEH: Right.

PSS: Once in a while her husband who was in the underground, they came over in the night sometimes and have to leave again. That's why I did know Trude. And when she left Holland, we still had contact. She always has been very, very good friend to me.

MEH: Why did you come to the United States?

PSS: I had three brothers and one sister in the States already, and I just want to see them. And the only thing was they immigrate. Otherwise you only get a visa?

MEH: Visa.

PSS: Yes. Visa for three months. And I like to see much more from America than three months, so that's why I immigrate. And I didn't care. I did want to immigrate. I still had my people. My sister, she went over there in 1933—'39—'93.

MEH: '39.

PSS: '39. That was before our war, and then she couldn't get back. The war broke—the war came with Korea [Germany] and she had to stay there. So, she later married over there.

MEH: Were you married when you were at Black Mountain?

PSS: No, I married after I came here back in 1954. Yes.

MEH: At Black Mountain, what did you do? Did you take classes? There are pictures of you dancing. You danced at Black Mountain.

PSS: Yes. We were allowed to take classes in any class we want to if we did it with our work. So, if I had a dance class in the morning between work, we could make that, but I then I stay another day for one of the cooks. So, we trade. I also took some classes from Albers, painting.

MEH: Right.

PSS: And, well, I help Trude sometimes, weaving, setting up the weaving looms. So, that—and I take some more classes. Music. We also had some music. And then Bucky was there. Buckminster Fuller that time. And he builded the dome.

MEH: Right.

PSS: The dome—I have been the first one he put in there at night. We have to test it. And then one had to sleep in it, and I said to him, “I will sleep in it.” And there was a platform.

MEH: A platform in it.

PSS: A platform.

MEH: Hanging.

PSS: Hanging. And they just put me in there for the night, so I couldn’t get any animals around me. And I have to sleep on top. I still have some pictures.

MEH: You do.

PSS: Yes, yes.

MEH: Good. I want to see your pictures. Shall we look at the pictures now and then talk some more maybe?

PSS: No.

MEH: No?

PSS: If we see the pictures, we never get out

MEH: Okay. So, what did you think of the college? Be honest.

PSS: Well, I think it was a very good movement in the college. They also have helped people thinking in their head. Not maybe helping them really in their work. But thinking in their head. That they also have to live with other people together. And not only live for themselves. I think that was—we always had this thinking in [SOUNDS LIKE: Bachify] in the folks high school, and I always thought that was also really thinking without any politics, but thinking, helping people really live

together like a community. What's not a community but really a group people who could stay together for a while. Yes, also the music. I thought it was wonderful. Wonderful. And they get the—all the people they know. Very good people. But also very good architect. Gropius came. Buckminster Fuller came as architect. Then you had the painters. Lots of painters came there. Lots of music people came there. I still know — that she came always, Anderson.

MEH: Anderson.

PSS: Yes. She was a very—once a year she came to give music lessons. And then she also got [UNINTEL]. Oh, wonderful, wonderful. She had [UNINTEL] in New York. She had been all over the world. You have very good photographs. I took photograph with Larsen.

MEH: Larsen. Right. You took photography with Larsen? Hazel.

PSS: Hazel.

MEH: Right.

PSS: Hazel, yes. Hazel was wonderful. Yes. Yes. And then we have also architects. If you see right now over the whole world, you'll always find one who has been there as students in Black Mountain College. Kenneth Snelson, Andy Oates. That were the young people. They too have called always. I was his sister. They weren't mine but others. So, we always had lots of fun. But anyway, I think it's not there anymore. The movement is not there anymore. They have to start all—an whole new school I think. But you also have lately very good folk singers. They come from the South, and they also play here in Leeuwarden. Yes.

MEH: Right. So, which—go ahead.

PSS: And also we have one here, a dance at [SOUNDS LIKE: hoking] Get every year, now four years in a row that he get the first prize in the South from North Carolina. Dancing. Folks music. Dancing. And all these people. They know Black Mountain College. And sometimes I'll stay in the [UNINTEL WORD] and always I listen—always very good. And then certainly you hear somebody talking. Well, that must be—he must have been in Black Mountain College.

MEH: Right. When you left Black Mountain, you went to Pond Farm?

PSS: Yes.

MEH: What did you do there?

PSS: Same thing.

MEH: You cooked. You were dietician.

PSS: Yes. But then I was alone.

MEH: You were boss. Your only boss.

PSS: I was the only boss but [UNINTEL WORD] If it was busy in the summer schools, we had lots of students, then I got always one woman out of town. She would help me.

MEH: Did you stay at Pond Farm until you came back here?

PSS: No.

MEH: What did you do after you left Pond Farm?

PSS: Well, have you heard about the Dreiers? Ted and Bobbie Dreier.

MEH: Right. Right.

PSS: Ted—we could be very good friends. I don't know. Have you heard if anybody is living still?

MEH: Bobbie is living.

PSS: Bobbie is.

MEH: Ted died, but Bobbie is still living. She's almost a hundred years old.

PSS: I know she is from ninety-seven.

MEH: I saw her in October.

PSS: What!

MEH: Yes.

PSS: And she is living in North Carolina?

MEH: She's living in Iowa.

PSS: In Iowa.

MEH: With her daughter.

PSS: Barbara.

MEH: With Barbara. Yes.

PSS: Really. Oh, I do care about Barbara. I have taken care of the whole family. And then I left for New York. They were living close to Boston after Pond Farm.

MEH: After Pond Farm.

PSS: Yes, Bobbie, she needed an operation. And then for twenty-five years, there was not one doctor who could help her. And she had been falling from the steps once. And she broke her bones all in splinters.

MEH: Splinters.

PSS: Splinters. And nobody ever would operate her. That time when I came, there was one doctor she'd seen in New York, and he said, "I can help you, and I will try to operate you. But it will take a long time, and you have to have somebody to help you." And so, when I came there, she told me, and she was laying in bed already a long time. And I said, "Bobbie, listen. I take now care of you. My dad is very bad. If I want to see him, I have to go to Holland first of all." So, I said to Bobbie, "I'm leaving you now. And after four months—when the doctor said I can't operate you 'til August. I think it was August. And August [INTERRUPTION OF TAPING BECAUSE OF OUTSIDE NOISE] So, I came back to take care of the family. There was one boy still from fifteen. And—

MEH: Eddie.

PSS: Eddie.

MEH: And little Barbara.

PSS: And little Barbara. And I took care of them. And I liked Eddie so much. I remember— I know all about it [UNINTEL WORD] [REFERS TO EDDIE'S DEATH]. Anyway, she got her operation, and she came back from down here [UNINTEL; SHOWS LENGTH OF CAST] to her toes in [UNINTEL WORD] -

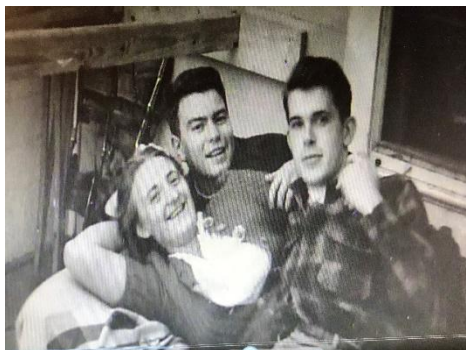
MEH: The cast. [INTERRUPTION IN TAPING FOR OUTSIDE NOISE]

[END OF DV CASSETTE 1. BEGINNING OF CASSETTE 2.]

[IMAGES OF PHOTOGRAPHS IN PHOTO ALBUM COPIED ONTO TAPE.
DISCUSSION OF SELECTED PHOTOGRAPHS FOLLOWS.]

MEH: Tell me about it

PSS: This a picture on a Sunday morning whenever one came to me for a cup of



coffee. And then my two brothers – I always call them brothers and they always said, “You are our sister.” They both did not have a sister girl so that – they said we want one picture from you. I don’t know who made the picture with my camera. That is Kenneth Snelson and Andy Oates.

MEH: I’m going to give you—[BREAK IN TAPING] where it’s taken.

PSS: It’s taken in mein little, in mein study.

MEH: How many rooms did you have?

PSS: Well, I had one room, and I had a bathroom. Between a little kitchen and a little hallway. It was very small.

MEH: It looked out on the lake.

PSS: Yes. It was looking at the lake.

On top of the mountain on Sunday morning. Sometimes on Saturday but most



of the times on Sunday morning we went up on the mountains to have breakfast on top there and could see the sun coming up. Most of times it was still foggy. When we left, but we always can go to find a bed so we were walking over there. Took a kettle with us and made some fire on top and have some breakfast. Fix us some eggs.

Ruth was a wonderful girl, an unusual girl. Very friendly with people. She was



very quiet, and that is what I remember from Ruth that she was [UNINTEL WORD]. She was sitting quietly on the steps, thinking and dreaming.

Also about the dome?

MEH: Right, the dome. I'll give you another picture for the dome. Not this one.



PSS: Bucky always came on Sunday morning with a whole bunch to get some coffee in my room. And he took Hazel with him and his wife. Then he wants to talk about all kinds of stuff. He was still thinking about his dome he was making. In the night he could always have some ideas, and on Sunday morning we were all listening to him, what he has been dreaming, we always said. Then he said, "I'm not dreaming. It is real what I am telling you." And that is one time we all were sitting in my room. Hazel, she was a wonderful girl when she was sitting there, always on the bench. And she could also dream away like I am sometimes dreaming away too. But dreaming and a real thing are very close together.

Bucky – Buckminster Fuller, he was making a dome with the students, and if



they were building, I always liked to go over there to look how far they were and brought them down some coffee. And then they had [UNINTEL WORD. DRILLING OUTSIDE] and put a platform in there. And I just came in time. Bucky ask the students who want to stay one night alone on a platform high in the dome. Nobody said anything. So I said, “I will.” “Okay.” So in the evening one time they turned me up high in the dome that I could sleep without anything around me. I have to go high otherwise the animals would come in the evening. So, Bucky didn’t sleep very well and came very early in the morning to look at me and said, “Have you slept alright?” I said, “Yeah, sure.” I said, “Do I have to get up?” He said, “Yes.” So he took me down and then he went on the platform, and he said, “Could you get me high right now on top of that.” And I said, “Yes.” So, Bucky went also on the platform, and I have to put Bucky on the platform high in the dome. [OUTSIDE DRILLING] He opened the top and stuck his head through the top and said, “Why don’t you [SOUNDS LIKE; to fall off]. I have fears.”

MEH: He said, “What a beautiful—?”

PSS: “Look. I have fears.”

MEH: Right.

MEH: You said that was Jano Walley with pots.



PSS: Yes.

MEH: But that wasn't at the college was it. Was that in the area?

PSS: I was wondering where it was. At the home. [UNINTELLIGIBLE. OUTSIDE
DRILLING] The little girl. I don't remember.

MEH: Okay.

PSS: Jenna—

MEH: Betty Jennerjahn.



PSS: Jennerjahn.

MEH: Right.

PSS: Yeah. Betty. [PAUSE IN TAPING]. Okay.

PSS: The nicest thing from Black Mountain was I found we always could take a course from one of the teachers. And so, I also took some dancing from Betty. Betty was wonderful in dancing and just could get the people so far. But they try to did what she want. We were not so handy, and it didn't look always very nicely. But if we could laugh about ourself, then it was okay. I think that's enough.

MEH: You were talking about the work that you did with the Women's Association.

PSS: Yes.

MEH: Tell me what you did professionally. What type of work when you came back, besides raising your children.

PSS: Well, I was the treasurer from [SOUNDS LIKE: any fund]. Like you have Black Mountain, a fund from Black Mountain College. And I was over here also when I came—when I came back, others lost. You were not allowed if your husband had work, to have a wife would also have some work. I always have mein whole life been working and doing all the things for myself. So, I was very lost. But my brother-in-law and my sister said, "You have to get out of—" And they took me with them. And we also had an exhibition from all kind of new stuff, like new furniture, new materials and that was a very good experience. Also a very good exhibition. And that was my first thing that I started with. But then I also

have to go with my husband if he went to meetings at some times in the country in the evening, then I have to go with him.

MEH: Okay. Two questions. The name of the organization that you were treasurer of. What were the initials?

PSS: Oh, that was the other one. That was for human rights. And for human all over the world for the emancipation, for the rights from the women. That is the AWCC. Association Women of the Country Women. Which were also the ladies from the country. But lately everyone is with it. Also country are city ladies, and cities grow over to the country. And I'm still a member of that [UNINTEL WORD], a world membership I have for a whole life I took. So, we could also contribute so much money, and they would send us always the papers that we stay a member of them. And I want to stay a member for my life. I think they do very good work all over the whole world. All over the world projects that they work for women, putting schools up, putting some water—

MEH: Wells?

PSS: — wells. We have the first wells. I have started this well in [SOUNDS LIKE: Sunselee]. I still remember. But I'm not alone. You have the group, you know. We have started that project [UNINTEL WORD] was in 1956. And we have that still going [UNINTELLI WORD].

MEH: What was your husband's profession.?

PSS: He was the head of the—how should I say?—secretary / treasurer from the agricultural organization. But this one doesn't exist anymore, so that is also gone lately. There are not so many farmers anymore, so they have all taken

different kind. When my husband left, everyone—everything was gone. And they had built up a very good, fast organization the time he was there. And still people—I have lots of friends there from that. But they always look after me. So, that is very nice. But that is why my husband was in an evening night not at home. He was not at home before 12 o'clock or 9 o'clock or something like that. But he always had time, liked to get home. I know some [UNINTELLI WORD] there who is also working for me. So, he never stayed very long most of the time. People always wanted—after meetings, they wanted to have a glass whisky, beer, wine. But my husband didn't do that. He said, "I have to drive the car home, too."

MEH: And you had two children.

PSS: Yes. I have two children, a girl and a boy. And the girl is living in Switzerland, and the boy is living one-and-a-half hour from here. So, I see them always. He also take very good care after me. Yes. And the girl in Switzerland. Yes. What shall I say? She married and they made a world trip first before they married. And then they married and had two children, two girls. And they have built two clinics in Switzerland where they are the head [UNINTELLI WORD]. They both have facial therapy.

[At end of interview are two images, one of a Ruth Asawa sculpture and a work of art, possibly a painting. It is not clear whether they belong to Piet or were taken elsewhere.]

[END OF TRANSCRIPT. END OF INTERVIEW.]