

Interview of **ANDY OATES**

Conducted by **KAREN THOMAS**, Interviewer

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KAREN THOMAS: You seem to have been at Black Mountain College for quite some time, and I thought maybe it would be very helpful to know when you were there, and how you got there.

ANDY OATES: Yes. I was at Black Mountain for three years, both summer and winter sessions, so I was there for three solid years. Before I went there, when I came out of the Navy, during World War II, I went to Rhode Island School of Design, and I spent a very happy first year in their general knowledge of the arts. You learned to draw, you learned to paint, you did some sculpture, and we also went into the textile department, and we had the experience of actually weaving. I found that very thrilling. I found it especially interesting, for me, because I thought, "Well, somehow or other I'm going to have to make a living as an artist." It seemed to me that weaving was a practical kind of way to express yourself artistically, as well as technically, and make a living, somehow, out of that.

So the second year I went into the textile department at R.I.S.D., (Rhode Island School of Design) and at that time the department was run by these retired, old men from the textile world of New England. It was so unbelievably dry and unexciting that I thought I'd made a big mistake. A friend of mine -- we had had the experience of being in the first year at R.I.S.D. together -- she also went into the textile department, and she was so unhappy that she just quit. She went to the University of North Carolina, and she went to a lecture by Albert Levi, who taught at Black Mountain. She said, "You know, Black Mountain College has a weaving department, and the person who teaches there is Anni Albers, and she comes from the Bauhaus, as her husband does." She knew all about Black Mountain because she asked so many questions from Albert Levi, and he filled her in. She said, "Just write them a letter, and ask about weaving there."

So I wrote to Anni Albers, and I got an immediate response from her, a personal letter. On the basis of that I thought -- well, you know, my experience at R.I.S.D. was so impersonal, compared to this direct approach to me, from a person who teaches -- Levi -- so I got very excited, and I actually enrolled in the college. This was in the winter session. I arrived there sometime -- I think it was the first of February.

THOMAS: Would that be '49 or earlier?

OATES: Well, it was either '49 or '50. I think it was '49. I'm very bad at dates. Sorry.

THOMAS: Well, I'm just putting it together, because, if I remember correctly, the Albers were there only for one -- there was an end-point to their time there, and I believe that was the '49-'50 session.

OATES: Yes. I think they probably left in '50. I was there for a year when they were there.

THOMAS: That would make sense, then.

OATES: Then they left.

THOMAS: That would make sense, then. I think you, and Bob Rauschenberg, and Susan Weil, were probably there together, the first year.

OATES: Yes. They had just come back from Paris. I can't remember whether they were actually married at that point. I don't think they were.

THOMAS: I don't believe so.

OATES: But I think they did get married, at some point.

THOMAS: The following summer.

OATES: And at that point, they went to New York. Is that right?

THOMAS: Yes. Exactly. They went to New York because Susan's family -- she has roots to New York. Her family was there. They ultimately, I believe, got married later that summer of 1950. But that's getting ahead of ourselves. [Laughter]

I assume that the GI bill helped you at Black Mountain College.

OATES: Yes.

THOMAS: That's wonderful.

OATES: I think, altogether, over the three years, I paid something like \$300, which was about all the money I had. But my GI Bill paid for my general tuition; the rest was up to me. I don't know whether Bob was in the same situation or not. I don't think he went into the military.

THOMAS: He actually did. He was in the Navy.

OATES: Well, then he must have also been there under the GI Bill.

THOMAS: I believe so. I get up on a soap box from time to time. I did make a documentary for PBS on the GI Bill, which I think totally changed our country, but where it had a particular

impact Susan Weil was describing, was in terms of the number of artists who never would have been able to become artists, save for the GI Bill. That was something I didn't fully recognize.

OATES: Right. Well, you know, Black Mountain College had more male students the year after the war than they ever had before or again in the future. Most of them were there because of the GI Bill.

THOMAS: The GI Bill. So you went there for weaving, for textiles, as opposed to photography. But how did you get into photography?

OATES: Well, after Anni left -- I can't remember the name of the woman who came from Chicago, who took over the weaving department. She was perfectly okay, but I just found her uninspiring. At the same time, I met Hazel Larson Archer, and I became very interested in photography. I always had done photography, ever since I was sixteen years old, but in a very amateurish way, with a box camera and everything. But it had always intrigued me, and I thought I would really like to know more about photography.

So Hazel did a class, and at the same time I had made friends with Bob and Sue, and they thought they would like to do something with photography, as well, and joined the class. They also got involved in Anni Albers' class. The beginning of that year we started making backstrap looms, and I actually got to the point where I was weaving a little tapestry on my backstrap loom. And it was quite nice. I liked it.

THOMAS: I hadn't realized they had done textile work, too.

OATES: Yes, but they mostly just sat in on the lectures. Anni's class was mostly her talking about textiles. Also, there was this wonderful Mexican and South American collection of Peruvian textiles, and Mexican textiles, that were part of a grant that one of the former students had given Anni, to make a collection of antique Mexican and Peruvian textiles. So we often looked through part of that collection. There were hundreds of things, and I think that Sue, especially, was very intrigued with them. And Bob got very interested in *photography* at that point.

THOMAS: And how did that work? You all went to these classes. Did everybody bring a camera? Was there a common camera? How did photography work, at that point?

OATES: Hazel had this little cottage on the campus. I don't know whether it still exists or not. It was a charming little house. First of all, she was in the women's dormitory, and she had had polio as a child. She could not walk without these tremendously heavy braces on her legs. But she walked everywhere, with her braces and crutches, and she got herself around; it was like half a mile up to the studies building. She often went up there for lectures, or for some reason or another. She always went to the dining room for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

So the classes, the photography classes, actually took place in the living room of her cottage, and her bathroom was our darkroom. (chuckles) She had a small collection of cameras, and she helped us all out, financially, when it came to buying film and paper to print on, all those things,

and all the chemicals that are needed. They all came about in one way or another. She got money from the college, or she provided those things with her own money. I think she had some money from her father. I think he had to take care of her. She had polio, as a very small child.

So Hazel was an incredible, wonderful person, very strong in every way, and very kind. She was a dreamer, I think, also, and she was an excellent photographer. You know, the new Black Mountain College Museum and Art Center in Asheville did a profile of Hazel, with some of her photographs.

THOMAS: What was her approach? Representational? Or photojournalism?

OATES: She did a lot of portraits, for one thing. She did a lot of portraits of people at the college. She also did some rather abstract photographs of common, everyday images, like a couple of doors to the "Quiet House" that were absolutely beautiful photographs, and a rather special way of looking at things. Her portraits were, at that point, in the early days, excellent, and very moving. She did a really wonderful photograph of Ruth Asawa, listening to Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*.

THOMAS: So did she have a particular philosophy? What I'm wondering is the connection with Bob. Because he seems to have felt very strongly that the picture is what you compose, and it's not something that you take a little piece out of it later. He seemed to have that point of view, and I wondered if that --

OATES: That came from Hazel. Hazel was interested in composing photographs in the camera itself, looking through the viewfinder. That would be as close to the final photograph as you could do. She wasn't against manipulating photographs so much, but that was her philosophy; that what you see is what you want the final photograph to look like. So you didn't manipulate the print in any way. You made the best print you could possibly make, but you didn't crop, necessarily. Or she didn't. Sometimes one of her students would do it, make thin little strips of photographs that they had taken, and she had an open mind about that. But she didn't especially encourage it.

THOMAS: She wanted you to do the hard work *in* the camera.

OATES: Yes. I got very excited about early photographs at one point, and there were several people besides -- I think Sue dropped out of her class before Bob did, because she wanted to take a drawing class or something, and it interfered with other things she wanted to do. But Bob was fairly conscientious about being there when Hazel was either lecturing, or showing us how to do something, and so on.

There were several other people in the class, as well. There was Vernon Phillips, who came from Detroit, I think, and -- his name is escaping me for the moment. He just had an exhibition at the Black Mountain College Center in Asheville. He's still alive and painting, I gather.

THOMAS: So your classes were relatively small.

OATES: Yes. Very small. There were like three or four, sometimes five people at the most.

THOMAS: Oh, my. That's great. And was the darkroom a new experience for all of you.

OATES: Brand new, I think, for all of us. We spent an awful lot of time in there. Poor Hazel probably wanted to take a bath or something. [laughter]

THOMAS: Well, Dorothea [Rockburne] has suggested that Bob always liked to play around in the darkroom.

OATES: Yes.

THOMAS: I wonder if you had some stories, or some insights into that.

OATES: Yes. Well, when I decided I'd been at Black Mountain College long enough, and that if I stayed for another year I would never leave, I decided to set up my graduation project, which would put me in the senior division of the college. It was up to me to propose what I was going to do in my senior year, and I decided I would teach a class in weaving in the summer session; also, at the same time, have an exhibition of photographs and graduate as a photographer. The way it worked at Black Mountain was, if you were going to graduate -- because we were not an accredited college -- you had to find someone who was important in your field to come to the college and say to the faculty that "this man is ready to graduate, and I approve of what he's doing."

So I went, blindly, to the Museum of Modern Art, to Edward Steichen. I made an appointment -- he said, "Yes, come and see me" -- and I didn't say exactly what I was there for. Oh. I actually went with some of Hazel's photographs. That was the first time I went. He was very impressed with Hazel's work, and he said, "Incidentally. I just got a grant from the Polio Foundation to do five posters for raising funds for the Polio Foundation. I'm supposed to assign five photographers to do a design for a poster. I want Hazel to be one of these five people. There's not much money involved with it, but it's \$500, and that might help for photography classes, and so on." I thought, "God, that's a lot of money. I haven't seen that much money."

THOMAS: Yes. Exactly.

OATES: I was about to leave, all excited -- because I got this assignment for Hazel -- I got to the door, and I said, "Oh, by the way. Could I talk to you about something else?" He said, "Yes. Come on." This was a grand old man, you know. He was in his eighties at that point.

THOMAS: Right. Sure. And important.

OATES: I said, "I want to graduate as a photographer from Black Mountain College, and I want you to come to be my graduation examiner." He said, "Oh. Okay. I'll do that." I said, "Well, you know, it's way in the hills of North Carolina. It's not easy to get to." He said, "Oh, I know exactly where it is. It's just thirty miles from my brother-in-law, Carl Sandburg's house. My sister is married to Carl Sandburg, and I go there all the time." [laughter]

So that worked out fine. He came, and spent a whole day. We went to pick him up at the Sandburgs, with Peter Jennerjahn and his wife, Betty. Sandburg had won some kind of an award, and it involved some money as well as a medal or whatever. He said, "Would you take me to the post office on your way, in Asheville, because I have to pick up my reward." So we drove to Asheville before we went to Black Mountain, the five of us in this car. Carl Sandburg looked at Betty, who was very exotic, and she was a very beautiful dancer, and he said, "What's your school yell?" [laughter] Betty looked at him and she said, "We don't have one."

THOMAS: That's wonderful! So you ended up --

OATES: I ended up graduating.

THOMAS: You did your exhibition.

OATES: Yes. I had my exhibition, and I taught a weaving class that summer. I think there were three people in my weaving class. One of them is still a weaver, in New Hampshire, and every once in a while I hear from her. That's very thrilling for me.

THOMAS: Sure. Now was this 1951, or 1950, or '51, or '52?

OATES: If I went in, in '49 -- '50, '51 -- it would be '51.

THOMAS: I was wondering, when you said exhibition, that you organized an exhibition -- that, of course, was an exhibition of your work. I know that, in 1952, the end of the summer of 1952, there was a photography exhibit of Bob Rauschenberg's work. I wanted to ask you if you had some involvement in that. For some reason, I was thinking that you would have.

OATES: Well, I did in the sense that while I was printing, I spent hours in the darkroom. One night I spent the whole night, until breakfast time, in the morning --

THOMAS: We're still in the bathroom, correct?

OATES: In the bathroom. I don't know how Hazel survived.

THOMAS: Me, neither.

OATES: I guess I had to leave from time to time, and she went to bed, and I kept on going. I had a basketful of rejects, which I hadn't even fixed. Most of them were exposed, and I wasn't satisfied with them so I just tossed them. When I came back from breakfast, the basket was empty. I thought maybe Hazel was tidying up or something. She said, "No, I haven't touched them." I said, "Well, what happened to them?" She said, "I don't know. I went to breakfast, too, at the same time you did." Years later, I was at a party, after a Merce Cunningham dance recital in New York, and Bob was there. He said, "Did you ever wonder what happened to those photographs in the wastebasket?" I said, "Yeah! It was always a puzzle to me." He said, "Well,

I took them." [laughter] He was manipulating with them. Apparently, some of them are in some of his early paintings -- collages, or whatever you want to call them.

THOMAS: How interesting. Have you ever figured out which ones they were?

OATES: I have a huge catalogue of Rauschenberg's work, and I haven't found a single one of my prints. But you know, they weren't fixed, which meant that they would keep getting darker and darker, and more purpley-brown. Basically, they would disappear -- which would probably please him as much as the real thing.

THOMAS: Sure. Well, that's really fascinating. I think we'll go on a little detective search, to see if we can find the Andy Oates images in the Bob Rauschenberg -- What do you expect that the images that you were taking back then would have looked like?

OATES: Well, some of them were portraits. I got very interested in photographs of [Matthew] Brady, the Civil War photographs, and I started using, ortho-chromatic film -- which is not sensitive to red, where red, or pink, or anything on the red side shows in the photograph as black. So this got me very interested. I also started taking photographs in dark hallways, portraits of people sitting very still, and the camera would expose the film for a minute and a half, rather than for a few seconds.

So I was doing all those things. I still have a couple of them left.

THOMAS: I think we have a project.

OATES: Also, by the way, while I remember it -- I took a wonderful photograph of Bob Rauschenberg, years ago, when we were both students together. He hated it. It was in profile, and it was very dark, of him, because it was in the front of a window, where a quite a lot of light was coming through. So it was really sort of a profile of not just his face, but the upper part of his body. I think he hated it because he was very sensitive about his big nose. I thought his nose was wonderful.

THOMAS: Right. Strong.

OATES: He had some American Indian blood. He was not sensitive about being partly American Indian, but about having this large nose. Anyway, he swiped the print that I made, and he somehow got my negatives, and I never saw them again. I would imagine that he just destroyed them.

THOMAS: Ah! Swine!

Well, I wanted to ask you about Matthew Brady. I'm glad you mentioned that. Bob had, in his house in Florida what I guess one would call a "muse wall," and he had images of people that he loved, admired, respected. One of them was a photograph of Abraham Lincoln, but it was a Matthew Brady photograph.

OATES: Was it one of the cartes-de-visit? It must have been an original.

THOMAS: I believe it was an original, and I think -- well, I don't know if it was an original. I assumed so.

OATES: I think it was, because I owned that photograph at one time. It's from the period, from Brady's studio. Sue's mother -- I had a gallery in Cambridge at one point, and I mainly started selling prints. It was called the Boylston Street Print Gallery, and I went on to exhibit paintings, also. But Sue Weil's mother came to Cambridge for some reason. I think she was interested in something that was going on at Harvard, and she came to visit me. I had met her several times in New York, and she liked me very much. She didn't like Bob very much at all. She was very suspicious of him. She spotted this actual Brady photograph, and she said, "Can I buy it for Sue?" I said, "Well, yes, but I want \$500 for it." She said, "That's okay," so she gave me \$500 and took the photograph away. I guess somehow Bob ended up with it eventually.

THOMAS: With the photograph. Interesting. Isn't that interesting? Well, Susan had said to me that her mom hadn't been all that enthusiastic about Bob. I took that, perhaps, to mean that she wasn't sure how this man was going to make a living.

OATES: Exactly what I always thought. Both of Sue's parents, they were very fine people. I went several times from Boston to New York to either stay with Sue and Bob in their tiny apartment, or, at one point, Sue started -- they had an apartment in the house that Mr. and Mrs. Weil lived in. They lived on the first two floors, and they rented to a relative who finally passed away, on the third or fourth floor -- I can't remember exactly. But Sue wound up inheriting that, and Bob and Sue lived in that apartment after they moved from their basement apartment -- which was kind of like a hole in the wall.

THOMAS: Yes. She described one apartment (I guess it was on 96th Street) -- that was actually the place where they had done the blueprint pictures for *Life* Magazine.

OATES: Yes. At the time they were doing those, I went to stay with them in that apartment, and the bathroom was just covered with prints and exposed blueprint paper. It was just everywhere. It was also very exciting, and Bob got an interview at that time with the editor of "Speaking of Pictures" at *Life* Magazine, and she wanted to see all these things. She got very excited about them, and did an article for *Life* Magazine about those. At that point, the art director of [Bonwit Teller] said, "I want those blueprints for my show windows, on Fifth Avenue." That was Bob's first big commission, where he was actually making some money. It was, I guess, quite substantial, at least for that time when money was much more important than it is now.

THOMAS: Sure. And hard to come by. It must have been an exciting kind of breakthrough. I wonder how he got that interview. Did he just walk in the door?

OATES: He just walked in the door. I went with them. I went with them to the woman's office. I can't remember what her name was, but she was very excited about doing this article. She took photographs of some of their work. A lot of them were of Sue, who would lay down on the

blueprint paper, and Bob would take a photo lamp and move around, exposing her body to this blueprint paper, so he would end up with a silhouette. They were really beautiful. I loved them.

THOMAS: The blueprint picture that Bob did of Susan, is just gorgeous, absolutely gorgeous. And she did the picture of Bob -- sort of Bob up and Bob down, I guess you would say. They must have had a great time together, doing that. What were they like as a couple, at Black Mountain.

OATES: Bob kind of drew people to him, all kinds of people. My first year at Black Mountain, or my first few months at Black Mountain, Bob took over my life. Bob and Sue and I had to do everything together. We'd go in to breakfast together; we would go to the bathroom at the same time; we would go to bed at night at the same time. I lived in a dormitory with Bob and several other men, and we had the top floor of the girls' dormitory. I don't know how that happened, but there were more men than there were women at that point. I think that's why. There were six of us who lived up in the attic of the girls' dormitory, and Bob was one of the people. We all had our individual beds. Sue was downstairs in the women's dormitory. They weren't actually living together at that point, except that we were *living* together in everything we did. We took the same classes. We were in the choral group. We went to the movies in Asheville. We went to church on Sundays, the Baptist church in Asheville.

THOMAS: Was Bob in the choral group, also?

OATES: Yes, and he was a lousy tenor. He could hardly hold a note, but he was very enthusiastic.

THOMAS: One would never want to sit next to him at church, I guess. That's very funny. So you all were a wonderful little troupe, it sounds. That's really very nice.

OATES: Bob was, by nature, the director. He would say, "Well, we're going to go to the movies now. We're going to do this." Or, "It's time for us to go to bed." Or, etc. One of the other people who was part of our group was Dolores Fulman [phonetic], who was the one and only black person at the college at that time. She came from Chicago, and she had a wonderful voice. Sue's grandmother was very interested in her, professionally, and helped to support her to go to Black Mountain College. So Dolores was part of our group, but a little separate. She had her own little independence, but she would often go to the movies with us, and she would have to sit in the balcony while we sat downstairs, because there was segregation at that point. But we could all go to church together [laughter], so we often did that.

Then Bob started this life-size painting --I guess the canvas was three feet by six feet-- of Dolores, a portrait of her, full-body. Bob would work on it, in the art studio, I guess it was, the basement part of the studies building, and Sue and I would just sit there, watching Bob work on that painting. At one point it got to be so beautiful, I said, "Bob, you've got to stop. It's going to get spoiled. It's so beautiful, just the way it is." He said, "I know it is. I know it is. But I haven't finished it yet, and I'm going to finish it." So more days would go on, and the painting would get worse, and worse, and worse. Finally, he destroyed it. He realized that he'd gone too far, and he'd spoiled it. I thought that was so sad.

THOMAS: Oh, yes. And what a bitter but perhaps helpful lesson. I don't know how artists work in that way, but I would think there has to be a moment when you recognize you have to stop.

OATES: I think that might have been what happened with Bob. I'm not sure. I don't think he ever saw it as being really beautiful, but it was.

THOMAS: Was it figurative?

OATES: Yes, but it was very full-blown. Dolores was a big girl, very bosomy, very round face, and tall. Strong. It had all of that character in it, and it was more or less realistic -- less abstract than some of his later work.

THOMAS: Sure. That brings me up to Josef Albers. Because you were there when Josef Albers was there with Bob, and I gather that Bob had some difficult times with Albers.

OATES: Yes. He did. He did. He couldn't do anything right for Albers, and Albers picked on him quite a lot. If you went to Albers' classes -- which we all did. I took the color class, and so did Sue and Bob -- you could not go to class unless you had done the assignment that he gave at the previous class. So there was always quite a lot of work to do, and Bob was always trying to get out of doing the assignment, somehow. He took off with the idea of the assignment, but he went further than he should have gone with it, and Albers would get furious with him, and pull him down in front of everybody. We had to put our assignments up against the wall. There was a blackboard wall with a little ledge, and we had to put all our assignments on the ledge. Albers would go along, take one and throw it down on the ground. He didn't want to comment on a whole bunch of them, so he just got rid of them. It was always very disappointing, because you felt like you would like to have some kind of a comment about this work that you'd done. Frequently, we'd work late at night, getting our assignment done for the next day's class, and Bob would just get torn apart.

One of our assignments was to go out in nature and make a design with things that we found, whatever it happened to be. There was this wonderful woolly dog that one of the faculty members had -- I can't remember what the dog's name was, but it was a very affable, big dog, and very hairy. You could hardly see his eyes -- and Bob did a whole life-image of the dog, using brown oak leaves, covering this frame, and presented the dog to Albers. And Albers said, "Is this some kind of a joke?" And Bob was crushed, because he was very happy about it.

And it *was* full of charm, and funny, and serious at the same time.

THOMAS: It appears that he did not moderate his approaches to satisfy Albers.

OATES: No. I think you're right. He just had to go ahead and do the things that were in his head to do. And you know, he later said, in an interview, that Josef Albers was the best teacher he ever had. We all felt the exact same way. Albers was very inspiring. He would not only bring you down, he would also build you up, and do things that you felt were important to your life and your work.

THOMAS: Like what? Because in Bob's situation, it doesn't sound like he ever did that. Or did Bob just see what he did nicely for everybody else?

OATES: Well, I can only say what happened to me, with Albers.

THOMAS: Tell me. I would love to know that.

OATES: For a long time he never commented on my work, and these were color studies. Then I sort of latched onto the idea of making the same colors change, in different parts of the paper. I started working on these, and I did several, over a period of two or three weeks. Albers praised them too much, in a way, but I was thrilled that he liked them. I was actually using color, working with color. Then comes the fourth week -- Oh. And then he would do a review, and he would have several of your things together. At that point, the fourth week was the review week, and he said, "Well, now I see what Oates is doing here. He's latched onto a formula. This is nonsense," and he took them and threw them on the floor. [laughs]

THOMAS: Really. Oh, interesting. Well, that *is* a good lesson, isn't it. He wanted you to keep challenging yourselves, I guess.

OATES: Yes. He wanted you to work, and I was working, in a sense, but I was making life easy for myself, too. So I think that Bob realized that Albers was a serious, serious teacher, and he couldn't please him but he appreciated what Albers was doing. I think that's it.

THOMAS: That's very helpful, because I've never quite -- the Bob Rauschenberg I knew would not necessarily have paid so much attention to -- I guess one develops somewhat of a thick skin the older you get -- but I could imagine that, in your twenties, when you're just gingerly stepping into that world, to be brought down so --

OATES: Yes. It's not easy. That's for sure.

THOMAS: Yes. So he must have found the darkroom great solace, in lots of different ways.

OATES: Yes. I have the feeling that Albers knew that Bob had a great deal of talent and ability, and he wanted Bob to really work hard at it.

You know, Albers was fascinating in that the people he chose to come to the college for the summer session, people like Motherwell and de Kooning -- you would think they would be the last people on earth that Albers was interested in, but, obviously, he was very interested in those people, and wanted them to come and work with students. So, I think Albers was the best teacher I ever had in my life.

THOMAS: Interesting. You then became a teacher, right?

OATES: Yes. Well, I became a teacher of sorts, because I had appointed myself to do a weaving class. The other thing I did for Albers was -- At the time he was about to leave the school, he

started working on the color books, and he wanted me -- he asked me if I would come and work with him in the evenings, like two or three times a week. We would take students' work and reproduce it on better -- because we used the cheapest colored paper you could buy, and they would tend to fade, or get destroyed in one way or another, and some of those color studies he started collecting, because they represented his theories about color and everything.

So my assignment for him was to reproduce those old, on cheap-colored paper, onto coated color paper, which was quite expensive. So I was reproducing a lot of people's work.

THOMAS: When you say "reproducing," are you repainting them, or photographing them?

OATES: Well, they were all collages, so it was a question of cutting out of other paper, and pasting them and all of that. It's quite tricky to do, especially with coated color paper, because it's very sensitive. It has a matte surface, if you need to stain it, or damage it in some way.

So I did that for several weeks, and I got to be extremely friendly with Albers at that point. He was like a different person when out of class. He was very funny at times, too, which you wouldn't expect.

THOMAS: So he may well have very much appreciated the dog; he just didn't feel like he could say so. [laughter]

OATES: That's right.

THOMAS: He might have been one of those people who went home and said to Anni, "You know, that guy Rauschenberg? He did a very funny thing in class today, but I had to knock him down." [laughter]

OATES: Yes. Right.

THOMAS: That's terrific. That's terrific.

I have to ask you -- we've been chatting for an hour. Are you exhausted? Because I'd like to talk to you some more.

OATES: Well, getting to the point -- there are a few things I have to do today -- also tomorrow morning -- because I'm leaving early on Tuesday morning --

THOMAS: Exactly.

OATES: So I was wondering -- maybe we could continue at another time.

THOMAS: We absolutely can.

I did have one question that I wanted to ask -- and I wonder if you were part of this, now that I know how close the three of you were. Susan told me that at one point there was -- I guess they had dances rather regularly up at the dining room --

OATES: Yes.

THOMAS: -- and she said that for one event she and Bob made a decoration for Hazel Larson's braces, so she could come in costume. Does that ring a bell?

OATES: I know something about that, but for some reason I wasn't there. I don't know how that happened -- because I used to go to all of those things -- and they happened a lot. Happenings started to happen at Black Mountain.

THOMAS: I know. And *that's* where we're going to pick up. I'll quote that back to you.

OATES: Okay.

THOMAS: Thank you so much. This has been a great way to start my day.

OATES: It's a pleasure.

THOMAS: Talk to you later. Bye, bye.

OATES: Bye, bye.

[End of Interview]

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Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Interview of **ANDY OATES**

Conducted by **KAREN THOMAS**, Interviewer

July 5, 2011

Key West, Florida (by telephone)

Interviews with Rauschenberg Friends and Associates. RRFA 08.
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.

ANDY OATES: Are you familiar with the Black Mountain College Museum and Art Center in Asheville?

KAREN THOMAS: Yes. I have spoken, on several occasions, with Alice [Sebrell].

OATES: Yes. Okay. That's good.

THOMAS: She's terrific.

OATES: Yes, she's very nice. I did an interview with her.

THOMAS: Oh, you did? Is it on-line?

OATES: I did a two-hour interview with Connie -- Alice's partner in the Museum -- and when we started, I just said, "How long do you think this is going to last?" and she said, "About twenty minutes." So I talked for two hours. I was exhausted.

THOMAS: I bet.

OATES: It began to be hard work.

THOMAS: I know. The minute it starts feeling like it's not fun, I want you to tell me, and I'll come find you at another time.

OATES: All right. Also, you know, at the moment, the Museum is having an exhibition of Jack Tworkov's work, and on the announcement of the show there's a wonderful photograph by Bob Rauschenberg.

THOMAS: Of Tworkov?

OATES: Of Tworkov, yes. It's a really beautiful photograph. It's of him working on a painting, with the window behind him. He's in profile, and it's almost like a silhouette.

THOMAS: How lovely.

OATES: It really is. I think you should get a copy of it.

THOMAS: Absolutely. I think there's nothing more wonderful than being able to look at everybody's contact prints. They do have a lot of photographs of Bob's up at the archive in New York. There are so many of them. There are just notebooks full. But I don't know how far back they go.

OATES: They probably went back to Black Mountain College days.

THOMAS: I would hope so. Did you keep your contact sheets from back then?

OATES: Well I did, but the dark room finally left Hazel Larson's cottage and moved into the science building. They had a big fire, and a lot of negatives, prints and things that were part of the collection were destroyed.

THOMAS: Oh, that's terrible.

OATES: Yes. So I have very few negatives from that period, although I do have a few prints.

THOMAS: When did you leave Black Mountain College?

OATES: Let's see -- either '51 or '52. I was there for three years. That's why I decided that I had to graduate -- because I thought I'd never leave [laughter], if I didn't.

THOMAS: We are sad that you didn't stay in North Carolina.

OATES: Well, I've said, too -- because I loved North Carolina, always have -- but here I am, in Key West.

THOMAS: There you are in Key West -- and about to leave for Nantucket?

OATES: Yes. The end of this month.

THOMAS: That's very nice.

I wanted to do two little pieces of housekeeping. I checked the record, when we were talking earlier, about the windows that Bob had done in New York. You had said Lord & Taylor. I double-checked, and it's Bonwit Teller. So shall I correct the record for that?

OATES: Yes.

THOMAS: I also wanted to confirm with you that the painting you said that Bob had done of Dolores Fulman that was so beautiful -- you said he ultimately destroyed it.

OATES: Yes.

THOMAS: I wanted to confirm that because there was apparently a painting he had done of a fulsome woman that he put on the window of his parents' house in Port Arthur. I may have the details of that exactly wrong, but anyway, they [Rauschenberg Archives] were wondering if that might be Dolores, and I thought I heard you say that he had actually destroyed the picture.

OATES: Yes. I think he actually cut it up. But that was sixty years ago. [laughter] I could be wrong about that.

THOMAS: ... Into small, two-inch pieces.... [laughter]

OATES: And he might have saved the canvas to paint over it. [laughter]

THOMAS: When we left last time, I had said that we would begin our conversation talking about the Happenings at Black Mountain College -- because you said that Happenings had started to happen when you were there.

OATES: Yes. Right.

THOMAS: You were there, I would think, at the beginning of all of those dramatic pieces. Tell me about that.

OATES: Well, they happened in the dining room, for one thing. The dining room was also a dance studio, and it was a place where concerts took place, and plays, and all sorts of other things. Then there were the Happenings, which usually were on the weekends -- Saturday, mostly -- and the tables would get moved around, people would do various sets, and people would perform in one way or another. I actually did a dance performance [laughs], sitting on a stool through the whole thing, to a record of Scarlatti harpsichord music.

THOMAS: If I get this image right, we have Scarlatti in the background, and you sitting on a stool, or dancing on a stool.

OATES: Well, sitting on a stool, and mainly waving my arms around. [laughter] I'm embarrassed to even mention it. That was my one and only dance performance.

THOMAS: Did you have the opportunity to be alone in the room, or were there other people with you, performing?

OATES: There were a lot of people just sitting, watching the various things that were going on. In fact, I remember that there were some people from Asheville who came out for that particular Happening, and one man came up to me, after my performance, and said, "I don't know what the hell you were doing," he said, "but I was with you all the way." [Laughter] So I took that as a compliment.

THOMAS: How would they know, in Asheville, that these were happening? Did you promote them in some way?

OATES: Actually, I don't think so. Not formally, anyway.

THOMAS: Word of mouth.

OATES: I think it was more word of mouth. There were some people who had friends in Black Mountain -- in Asheville, I mean -- and the word got around that things were happening on the weekends and so on.

THOMAS: Did they happen every weekend?

OATES: Not really. I think it was more spontaneous. But some of them were really impressive -- we had one summer Happening -- we had two Indian dancers -- India dancers -- Vashi and Vena were their names -- and they were married to one another, and they fought constantly, arguments galore, but they performed, and they actually did a formal dance recital. More than once, they did two or three different concerts, but at the end of one of them -- the rest of the performance was like a Happening. I remember Charles Olsen read a poem, a long poem, and he wanted me to get involved in it, in one way or another. I said, "Well, I've been working with this rabbi, who is married to Marli Ehrman," who was teaching weaving at the time, and her husband was a Jewish scholar. I said, "I would love to hear the Lord's Prayer in Yiddish," and he said, "Oh, that's very interesting." He said, "I love the King James Bible, because our King's English is so beautiful. I'm not so sure about the Torah and everything." But we were talking about the New Testament. Anyway, he started to teach me how to recite the Lord's Prayer in Yiddish.

THOMAS: Oh, my gosh.

OATES: Charles Olsen got wind of this, and said, "You've got to do this as a performance." I said, "Okay." Oh, and then Mary Falconer Fitton [Fiori] got involved in it, and she was going to recite the Lord's Prayer in English, while I recited it in Jewish.

We went on. We did several rehearsals, and I just totally got cold water about -- I said, "I'm not going to do this. I'm not going to do this." Charles was very disappointed, but I said, "I'm sorry. This is not my field." [Laughter] So it never happened.

THOMAS: I never thought of the Lord's Prayer in Yiddish. That's a beautiful idea.

I remember that Dorothea [Rockburne] told me that she had been in a scene from *Hamlet*, and that Bob and Cy [Twombly] had done the costumes for it. She said that she just remembered floating around on a lake, on some boat -- a canoe, or a barge or something, and somehow that was supposed to be -- I can't remember what it represented, and she couldn't either. [Laughter]

OATES: Right.

THOMAS: They really sounded quite special, and I gather they were *sui generis* --everyone just decided, "I think I'll put this together for this weekend"?

OATES: Yes, they were very spontaneous -- in a way. I mean, they began spontaneously, anyway, and sometimes it became quite serious, because people were working so hard, doing costumes, and having rehearsals, and that sort of thing.

THOMAS: Well, Dorothea was talking about this Frenchman -- [Antonin] Artaud (Oates: yes) -- because I asked her if there were rehearsals, and she said, "Oh, of course not. That was the whole point." So I guess the preparation really came in the costumes, and the props, and that sort of thing.

OATES: You know, the interest in Artaud started with M.C. Richards.¹ She translated a book of his about theatre and performance. He was very interested in the theatre, and I think it's quite a famous book now, because --

THOMAS: Because of that translation, probably.

OATES: Yes. Because of her translation and because people became very interested in Happenings. Part of the book *was* about spontaneous performances in Paris. This was long before we did Happenings at Black Mountain. But because it was toward the beginning of the twentieth century -- early 1900s.

THOMAS: I wonder when that book was translated? But M.C. Richards was there at Black Mountain, and would have shared that [experience].

OATES: Yes.

THOMAS: How fascinating.

OATES: Right.

THOMAS: You know, when we last spoke I had mentioned that Susan Weil had told me, just sort of in passing, that she and Bob had decorated Hazel's braces for one of the dances, one of the parties. (Oates: yes.) You said that you thought you remembered something about that.

OATES: I remember hearing about it, but I didn't actually see it. I think the reason was that I might have gone home for Christmas, or something of that sort, that I missed that performance. I think that Hazel would have probably been staying through Christmas.

THOMAS: She [Susan] said something to the effect that everybody else was going to be dressed up, and so they had put silver paper, or something like that, on her braces. Does that sound familiar? I don't want to make things up.

¹ Dorothea Rockburne, in her interview for the RROHP, discusses Artaud but does not make it clear if she had been introduced to Artaud in French-speaking Montreal or at Black Mountain College.

OATES: Yes. I don't remember exactly what the decoration was. In passing, I heard that this had happened.

THOMAS: It was a kind thing to do.

OATES: Yes.

THOMAS: Were you there for the summer that John Cage and Merce [Cunningham] -- they did that crazy piece where -- I believe John called it Theatre Piece #1?

OATES: Well, you know, they were there two summers. The first summer was before I actually came to the college. Merce and Buckminster Fuller were in a performance of -- I can't remember the name of the play. It might have been a Cocteau piece, but I'm not sure. Anyway, Buckminster Fuller had never done anything like that before. He was a great talker and lecturer, and he was very spontaneous in his preparation. He had a general idea of the subject he was going to talk about, but he would stand up, and for a couple of minutes he was just totally silent. It became kind of nervous-making. It was like he was struggling to begin his thoughts. Then he would burst out, and he would talk for a couple of hours, without stopping -- which was very impressive. He was very interesting, in spite of the fact that it was not my field of interest, necessarily. Anyway, he and Merce Cunningham and several other people were involved in this play. Oh. Also, Willem de Kooning's wife.

THOMAS: Elaine...

OATES: Elaine was in it.

THOMAS: Because that was the summer that Willem de Kooning was there.

OATES: Yes. Buckminster Fuller was terrified. He just had terrible stage fright, and somehow Merce got him out of it -- somehow. I've only heard about this, I didn't actually see it. Merce said, "You have to be brave. You have to go out there and just do it. Do it." So Buckminster did it, and enjoyed it thoroughly, once he got started.

THOMAS: That's a great story.

OATES: There are some photographs of that performance. I think Hazel did them. They might be in Mary [Mary Emma Harris] --

THOMAS: I know who you're talking about.

OATES: The book that she did.

THOMAS: The one that has the yellow cover.

OATES: Yes. Well, it actually has photographs of the faculty on the cover, on the paper cover.

THOMAS: Exactly.

OATES: So the photograph in there is from that performance that Buckminster Fuller did.

THOMAS: You said they were there another summer. Were you there for that one?

OATES: Yes. I was there for the second summer that Merce, and John, and David Tudor, and the whole group came.

THOMAS: Did you happen to see that performance?

OATES: Yes, I did.

THOMAS: Was it as stunning as everybody remembers?

OATES: Well, I think it was quite wonderful. John's music, I thought, was very beautiful at that point. He performed on a prepared piano, and they were rather lyrical pieces, in a way. Later on, his compositions became more remote.

THOMAS: A little more academic, perhaps.

OATES: Yes. That summer -- I think it was the summer that the Indian dancers were there -- and Charles Olsen was there. Willem de Kooning was there, I believe, for part of the summer.

THOMAS: Wow.

OATES: Yes.

THOMAS: And Bob was there, also?

OATES: Yes. As I recall, they did go away. They went to New York for a time, and then they came back to Black Mountain, for one of the last summers.²

THOMAS: Right. But I think, at that point, Bob was with Cy Twombly. Correct?

OATES: Yes. Cy was there at the same time.

THOMAS: What I have in my notes is that Bob was part of something that John called Theatre Piece #1, and that his white paintings were on the ceiling, and somebody projected images on the

² Robert Rauschenberg and Susan Weil were in New York City for the fall, 1950 and spring, 1951 semesters. They returned to Black Mountain College with their newborn son Christopher for the summer session, 1951. Susan Weil returned to New York at some point during the summer. Cy Twombly was at Black Mountain College that summer, 1951.

walls, and Charles Olsen was doing something. David Tudor played the piano, and Merce was dancing.

OATES: Yes. Well, that was a typical Happening.

THOMAS: Was it all happening at the same time? Not like a circus, but was it happening ... was it sequential?

OATES: Several things going on at the same time. But, then at other times, there might be a group of dancers. Merce had a class that summer, and Betty Jennerjohn was in it, and Vera Williams.....

THOMAS: I do have to tell you that for weeks I have been laughing about your Carl Sandburg story, about the school yell. [Laughter] I tell everybody I know about Carl Sandburg turning around and asking about the school yell, to this woman. And if they come from North Carolina, and understand how important those things are, they all crack up. [Laughter]

OATES: Right.

THOMAS: You gifted me with a great moment. I really enjoyed that.

OATES: Well, something else about Carl Sandburg -- I think I said -- it must have been in our car ride to Asheville -- I said, "It's interesting that you haven't come to the School to recite something, or to read something." He said, "Well, they asked me to. I didn't want to, but I'll come anytime they want me to sing." [laughter] Because he was very interested in folk music, and he was quite serious about it. [laughter]

THOMAS: That may be why he was so interested in being in North Carolina, because there was so much of that going on, and collecting.

OATES: That's right.

THOMAS: That's a nice insight into Carl Sandburg.

OATES: Yes.

THOMAS: I wanted to ask about John Cage, and your sense of the influence that John Cage had at that time in general, and at Black Mountain in particular.

OATES: Yes. I think John began to realize that he was a teacher, and that people were interested in what he had to say. He gathered a group of people around him. I don't know whether he had done this before, in New York, but I have a feeling it might have begun that first summer he was at Black Mountain. It continued, you know, after he went back to New York, and Merce, of course, did. Merce first gathered a group of dancers together, you know, which became his Company. I think that that actually began just before he came down for that summer. I can remember Carolyn Brown was there, who was one of his initial group. But John --

THOMAS: And Remy Charlip.

OATES: Remy was in it. That's right. Yes.

THOMAS: When John and Merce were there, had they met Bob before? Was that the first -- ?³

OATES: No, I think they met at Black Mountain.

THOMAS: At Black Mountain -- and became good buddies, then.

OATES: Yes. Yes.

THOMAS: That's a question rather than a statement. I know they became good friends, but I didn't know if the genesis might have been at Black Mountain.

OATES: You know, Bob was very, very creative in many ways. He actually became a set designer for Merce Cunningham -- finally -- and sort of replaced Nick Cernovich, who had been doing the lighting, and working with sets and so on. Bob was actually more creative, in a way, and also got involved in performances.

THOMAS: Bob did? There?

OATES: Yes. And he did it in New York, as well. I think there are some other photographs of him -- I can't remember now -- at Black Mountain College, in the arts book. But I'm not sure.

THOMAS: I'll look and see. I knew he participated in pieces like the Theatre Piece #1, and I know that he became involved with the Judson Group, when he was in New York -- which were more Happenings, I guess, rather than dancing, per se.

OATES: Yes. It was really more theatre -- or, it was dance and theatre. I guess that's the way to look at it.

THOMAS: There's a new biography of John Cage that I have just started reading, by a wonderful fellow called Ken Silverman, who was a consultant of mine on a documentary I did on Edgar Allen Poe. Cage's influence just seemed pervasive, particularly, first of all, on that generation, and then subsequently, because everybody in that generation seems to be so impactful on where we are now, culturally.

OATES: Yes.

³ Robert Rauschenberg met John Cage in New York in the late spring (May 14 – June 2), 1951. Source: Susan Davidson and Joan Young Chronology published in *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1997).

THOMAS: I had read somewhere that his composition 4'33' had been performed at Black Mountain College. I saw that it happened in the month of August, so I assumed that it might have happened at Black Mountain College. Did you ever see that? Do you know that piece?

OATES: I'm not sure that I do.

THOMAS: It's remarkable in that it's about sound. The performer goes out and sits down at the piano, and puts his hands in his lap for four minutes and thirty-three seconds --

OATES: [Laughs] Right. I've heard about that.

THOMAS: -- then stands up and walks away. Meanwhile, the audience is very nervous. [Laughter]

OATES: Of course.

THOMAS: I think it's wonderful.

OATES: Yes. He did that at ... -- When I had a gallery in Cambridge, he came to Harvard and performed that piece in Harvard Square. Harvard Square is in the middle of traffic, going in hundreds of different directions. It has an island in the middle of the Square, and he performed this piece on a piano. It was four minutes and I don't know how many seconds.

THOMAS: Exactly. Thirty-three seconds. I'm reminded of it every time I see somebody walking down the street with their iPod plugged in, because I think John Cage would be horrified. [Laughter]

OATES: I used to go to New York for Merce's concerts quite regularly, whenever he was performing with this group. Of course, John was very much involved in it, and I used to go to the parties afterwards. I don't know why I was so interested in the music, but I was. That was the reason I went. But, you know, all of the people I knew at Black Mountain were more or less involved in what was going on in New York. I was an outsider, because I went to live in Boston, and started this gallery in Cambridge.

Incidentally, Bob and his friend --

THOMAS: Cy? Jasper Johns?

OATES: Jasper Johns. Bob and Jasper came to Cambridge, and their purpose was -- they knew I had a gallery, and they wanted to see the space. They proposed to do an exhibition in my gallery. I had just opened, like maybe a few months before they actually came, and I said, "I would love it, but the thing is that Cambridge and Boston are not prepared for you, and you would just be wasting your time. You should go back to New York and find a gallery to work with." So they did. So I never had the first show that they had together. [Laughter]

THOMAS: But it was the right advice, wasn't it?

OATES: Oh, yes it was. Yes.

THOMAS: They were barely ready for them in New York.

OATES: Well, that's right.

THOMAS: What a good friend you were. [Laughter]

OATES: Well, I was a very good friend of Bob's at one point. I was totally devoted to him as a person. He had that dynamism that gathered people around him, and I was one of them. But, you know, it was like being part of a club, I guess -- in a way.

THOMAS: Was it his interest in having a good time that drew people to him? His interest in other people? I feel that there is quite a lot of humanity in those images that he creates, and I'm just wondering if that -- what part of -- if you were to dig deeper into what drew people to him, what would that be?

OATES: I think it was -- I'm thinking of the word "dynamism." He was kind of a manic-depressive. He had periods when he was very depressed. They didn't last very long. Most of the time he was quite up. He liked to tell people what to do. Like when we started going to the black Baptist church in Asheville -- that was *his* idea. I said, "Well, would they appreciate our going?" He said, "Oh, sure they would. They'd love it." And, for sure, they did. We were very welcomed. We did quite often go. We'd even sit in the balcony, like black people used to have to do at movies.

THOMAS: Really! So you all chose to sit upstairs, not downstairs.

OATES: Yes. Well, sometimes it was so full downstairs -- I mean, hundreds of people would go to the Sunday service. And it was quite compelling. That's why Bob loved it. There would be a woman pacing up and down the aisle, saying, "Good morning, Jesus!" and people would start clapping, just a very spontaneous thing.

THOMAS: That's nice. Did you have a job at Black Mountain College?

OATES: Yes. I did.

THOMAS: What was *your* job?

OATES: Well, I worked on the farm for part of the summer, and I started to get into the kitchen, learning how to be a help in the kitchen. There were two cooks. Actually, there were three cooks at one time, but, basically, there were two -- good -- cooks -- and then the rest. I was a dishwasher, for one thing, which was a big job. [Laughter] Ruth Asawa and I worked on the farm together. I can remember she was doing an exhibition in the little gallery by the studies building -- I forget. There was a name for that little building, I can't remember what it is. But she said, "I'm going to be hanging my exhibition, and I might be there in the morning. So make

sure to stop and get me when you're on your way to the farm." So I did, and she was sound asleep on the floor. She'd worked all night, hanging, and finishing things. I said, "Oh, I don't want to wake you up." She said, "No, no, it's okay. I want to go." That's the way she was. She had so much determination to do things, and to do them right. So we spent a couple of hours working on the farm.

THOMAS: You remind me that I was interested that one would have to have a show, and then somebody certifying that you had "graduated," been graduated from Black Mountain College, and you had Mr. Steichen. I noted, in the chronology for Bob Rauschenberg that in August of '52, I guess it was, *he* had a painting show. I was wondering whether or not --

OATES: Was that the white show?

THOMAS: I don't know. It could well have been. I don't know what it was. But I was wondering if that would have been a graduation exercise.

OATES: I don't know whether Bob actually graduated from college. I don't think he did. It was unusual that -- at the time I graduated, several other people wanted to graduate, too. Donald Alter was one of them, and I can't remember who else. I don't think it was Nick. I can't remember whether he did or not. But I think it might have been '52, the year that Bob and Sue came back to Black Mountain, and Sue had her baby.

THOMAS: Oh. That would be '51.

OATES: Fifty-one. So that was the year that Bob did an all-white exhibition, and he asked de Kooning for a drawing, and his object was to paint it white. So that was in the exhibition, too.

THOMAS: He painted one of de Kooning's drawings white?

OATES: Yes.

THOMAS: I knew that he'd erased one, later.

OATES: Maybe that's what it was. Yes. That's what it was.

THOMAS: But he did something with it.

OATES: Yes. He erased it. That's right. You're right. [Laughs]

THOMAS: Did you follow Bob's -- I guess you did follow Bob's paintings, because you were talking about the picture he did of Dolores.

OATES: Yes. Oh, yes, you know, he had a really huge exhibition at -- oh, what is the gallery called?

THOMAS: In New York?

OATES: Yes. In New York.

THOMAS: Castelli, Egan, Betty Parsons --

OATES: No. It's an actual museum.

THOMAS: There was that big retrospective at the Guggenheim.

OATES: Yes -- no. There was another exhibition in the Frank Lloyd Wright Museum.

THOMAS: Yes. I think that *is* the Guggenheim.

OATES: Oh, that *is* the Guggenheim. Right. That show just thrilled me ~~no~~ end, because I think it was the first time I'd seen so many of his paintings together. There was so much variation. And yet you could tell that they were done by Rauschenberg. But before that, you know, it was just an occasional color study or something, when I was at Black Mountain. I didn't see that many of his finished paintings.

THOMAS: Because I know he did -- this is a funny story -- Dorothea told me that when she arrived, she first arrived, I guess it must have been in the fall of '51. She'd had pneumonia or something, she arrived and she was not well; that she'd spent some time in the infirmary, and then when she got out, they made all the work assignments. They assigned people to teams, and she was assigned to the team with these two handsome young men, who were Cy and Bob, so she thought that was terrific. But then they told them they were going to have to creosote a house, and she said she could just feel herself sinking; and that Bob then whispered in her ear, "Don't worry. It'll be all right. I have a car." [Laughter] She suggested that Bob used that creosote in some of his paintings; and, in fact, he does some black paintings that I believe include creosote in them. So it just suggested to me that he really was using all available materials. That was kind of fun.

OATES: Right. Right.

THOMAS: Was it odd to everyone that Bob would one year be with Susan, and then the next year re-appear with Cy?

OATES: Well, they were all there together at one point.

THOMAS: Oh, really.

OATES: Yes. And as far as I knew, Bob and Sue were living in one of the little cottages, because they had a baby. So they were not in the so-called dormitories. Cy -- I don't know where Cy was at that point, but I remember walking from the farm -- I was barefoot -- and I was being very careful not to step on the stones. Cy was coming out of the studies building, and he said, "You're walking very funny." [Laughs] I said, "Well, it's because I don't want to step on any stones."

But I have the feeling that he was probably sleeping in his studio -- because it was fairly early in the morning. That's why. And I don't recall seeing him around the dormitories.

THOMAS: Right. I've never met him. Nice guy?

OATES: Yes. Very nice -- a southern gentleman.

THOMAS: Southern gentleman.

OATES: I think he was from North Carolina, but I'm not sure.

THOMAS: I don't know -- North Carolina, Virginia, South Carolina. I know Jasper Johns is from South Carolina. There was a professor at Princeton -- he died tragically. Kurt Varnedoe. He'd had an idea to write a book on Bob, and Cy, and Jasper as three artists from the South.

OATES: Yes. That's right.

THOMAS: I thought that was a really fine idea.

OATES: Did he actually do that book?

THOMAS: No he didn't do that book -- which I thought was really too bad. He just ran out of time. I thought it would make a great book, and I was all prepared to make the movie. I thought that would be very nice, too. I suppose one could still do the movie -- because Cy and Jasper are still around. Anyway, I should perhaps think about that.

But I guess my curiosity is if Bob arrived with Susan and Christopher, and then spent the next year and a half with Cy Twombly -- is that considered an odd thing, or was that just Black Mountain College?

OATES: I think it was just Black Mountain College. No one seemed to be particularly interested in what anyone else was doing, as far as sex goes. It just kind of happened. I think that some of that -- Sue and Bob came back -- Christopher was having colic, and crying constantly. It drove Bob crazy. He might have run away from Sue at that point, leaving her to handle it by herself. It was very hard on her, too, but she was more stoic about it.

THOMAS: And had no choice, I guess.

OATES: I remember that he actually left the school. He left the college campus. I don't know whether he went by himself, but he left Sue alone. One day she was ironing a dress or something, and the iron started exploding -- I mean, sparks were coming from it, obviously from a wire that was so frayed that it was sending off sparks and everything. It terrified her, because she was in an explosion on her uncle's yacht. She was very badly scarred. This just brought it all back to her. She came running to me because Bob wasn't around, and she was trembling. She just needed some kind of support for a while.

THOMAS: Yes. Exactly. Oh, how horrendous.

OATES: Have you met Sue?

THOMAS: I have. I spent a little time with her. She's a very bright woman.

OATES: Yes.

THOMAS: Very kind, and quite talented. I was so interested in the solargrams that she and Bob did, the blueprint pictures, because she's really the genesis of those.

OATES: Yes. She began those.

THOMAS: She taught him how to do that. Actually, she had a show here in Washington -- it's still up--, at the Jewish Museum, and she has a catalogue of her images. I should ask them to send that to you. I think you would enjoy that.

OATES: Oh, I would love to see it. I would love to have it.

THOMAS: Yes, I think you would enjoy it a lot.

I wanted to ask a little more about Joseph Albers, because I've never taken a studio art class, and I was just wondering if you would remember for me, what a class would be like under Josef Albers. I didn't know if it was lectures; if it was, "Here's a box, now draw it"; or slides; or discussion. Do you remember that?

OATES: Well, I never took his drawing class -- which I should have done, but I didn't -- but I took his color class. Because, basically, I was working with Anni, [Albers] and they were at Black Mountain. I felt, "Well, if I take the drawing class, it's just one more thing." Because in order to take Albers' classes, like the color study, he would assign us a project for each class, and then we would go and do the study. If you didn't do the study, you were not allowed in the class. Just *out*, if you didn't do your assignment. Out you'd go. He was quite serious about it. He would make somebody go, and they would say they tried, and they thought it was so awful that they didn't want to present it. You put your color studies up on the ledge that went around the classroom, and he would comment on them. So we never actually did work in the class; he just talked about the work that we had done.

THOMAS: So that *was* the class -- there weren't didactic classes about this is theory, etc., etc.

OATES: Yes.

THOMAS: It was much more through what everybody was doing.

OATES: Yes. And he enjoyed talking. He would say things like, "I think that Matisse is the most brilliant painter of our generation," and then he would talk about Matisse's work, etc., etc.

He would talk about Greek sculpture, and how it became more and more beautiful as the ages wore on it, so that a Greek sculpture became more and more like a piece of stone rather than an object of a human form. Then he'd talk about color, and then he was working on a color book when he was at Black Mountain. He used a lot of student -- he would save, out of many classes, two or three color studies by various people -- and a lot of those are in the color book that he did. He asked me if I would come and work with him in the evenings, to copy those student color studies in better-quality coated color paper. So I spent quite a lot of time doing those. Anni would make cocoa, or coffee, or whatever, while we were working. She would come in and out of the room and chat, and so would Albers, you know. He wasn't there all the time, because I was doing most of the work. So I got involved in copying those student works for the book, which was great fun. I learned a lot, doing it.

THOMAS: And what an honor, to be chosen by him to do that.

OATES: Yes.

THOMAS: That's terrific. That's really terrific.

Did you make photographs of Quiet House?

OATES: No. Those are Hazel's. I did do some photographs *in* the Quiet House. I did a couple of photographs of Joe Fiore. He was just sitting in a chair. One of them, by accident, was a double-exposure, which I loved.

THOMAS: Oh, that's great.

OATES: I still have it somewhere. Well, I was very interested in early photographs -- nineteenth-century photographs -- and I thought, "Why is it so different than contemporary photographs?" Then Hazel pointed out to me that the film was not sensitive to red. It exposed red and black. Of course, there's a lot of red in the complexion. The other thing was that the exposures were very long, so people had to sit very still. Otherwise, it showed. There was a blur, or a double-exposure, even.

So I was very interested in doing some monochromatic -- that's what it's called -- monochromatic film. It's not black-and-white, it's color, but it's not sensitive to the color red. I also did photographs in dark hallways, with somebody sitting very still, and I had a view camera at that point, on a tripod, so that I could take a one-minute exposure, or a half-minute exposure. I did quite a lot of work like that for a while.

THOMAS: When you say "view camera," what do you mean?

OATES: You know -- one of those big, professional-looking cameras.

THOMAS: The square ones.

OATES: Yes.

THOMAS: I forget. It's a German manufacturer?

OATES: Yes. Well, some of them were. Right.

THOMAS: Those are beautiful. Did you feel like Matthew Brady? [Laughter]

OATES: Well, I didn't, but -- but I was fascinated by Brady, and Gardner, and those early photographers. And some of the English, earlier photographers. And [Eugene] Atget. I had an exhibition of Atget photographs in my gallery that -- what's-her-name, Dorothy --? A New York photographer, woman photographer -- good heavens.

THOMAS: Not Dorothea Lange.

OATES: Not Dorothea Lange. What the hell was her name? She was, I was told by someone, the illegitimate daughter of Atget, and she ended up with his whole collection of negatives -- glass negatives. She had some originals, as well -- quite a collection of them. At one point I called her and asked if I could come and see them, with the possibility that, while I was there, I could ask her if she would loan me some to have an exhibition in Cambridge. She said, "Oh, well, that's an idea." I went to her apartment, knocked on the door, and she said, "You've got to take your shoes off before you come in, because I just washed the floor." [Laughter] She was kind of a black-and-white person, in a sense.

THOMAS: No reds here.

OATES: Yes. [Laughter] She also did some beautiful photographs of New York City, a famous collection, now, of photographs, in the late 1920s, '30s, and '40s. She's quite a famous photographer -- and I *cannot* remember what her name is.

THOMAS: Well, you know, when we hang up, you'll remember it, and you'll let me know.

OATES: Yes. Right. [Laughter]

THOMAS: Well, I was curious about Quiet House. I had heard this story that it had been built because a couple had lost a son?

OATES: Yes. It was the Dreiers. Their little boy, Eddie, was in an automobile accident, I think on the campus. I don't know what the circumstances were. But Ted Dreier was director of the college for many years, and his aunt, Katherine Dreier, was a very wealthy woman, and she helped support the college for several years. I think it ended up that she gave so much money to this school that Ted didn't feel like he had to go out and raise money -- or maybe he just wasn't talented at doing that.

But young Ted was one of my roommates. You know, I had Bob Rauschenberg, Donald Droll, and Ted Dreier, Jr., and Stan VanderBeek. We were all in the dormitory, in the girls' dormitory.

THOMAS: Upstairs, right?

OATES: Upstairs. Right. So that was quite a group.

THOMAS: Stan VanderBeek went on to make pictures dance, right?

OATES: Yes. He's just had an exhibition at MIT. Yes. They have an art gallery at MIT, and he had a big, retrospective show of the work that he did when he was teaching there; and, also, the work he did at NBC. Of course, he died several years ago. Two of my friends -- one of them lives in Cambridge -- and then Vera Williams was lecturing in the library in Cambridge, so she and my friend, Lenore, went to see Stan VanderBeek's show -- because we, at one point, all lived together in the suburbs of Boston, in Hyde Park. There was Stan, and Paul and Vera Williams, and Nick Cernovich, and me, and sometimes Tommy Jackson.

THOMAS: Was this sort of a Black Mountain College North? [Laughter]

OATES: Well, no. Then it developed that Vera went to live in New York City for a while. Then they bought land up on the Hudson River, and Paul, who is an architect, built several houses, and a lot of the Black Mountain people gathered around that part of the world. Richard and Karen Karnes had a pottery studio on that land, and David Winerip, also. John Cage had an attachment, an annex on Paul and Vera's house. One time a friend and I drove to their property from Boston, and stayed in John's separate little house. He was away. He said we were welcome to stay there. But Stan and his Joanna also lived on that property, as well. I can't think who else did.

THOMAS: Well, if you were in Boston, were you privy to what was going on in the New York scene, with Bob's career?

OATES: Yes.

THOMAS: Did you follow that?

OATES: I did -- although I only saw him occasionally, when I would go to a concert in New York.

THOMAS: Right. And I know it wasn't just like jumping on the train, as it is now, to go and see things.

OATES: Right.

THOMAS: But just so I put a period on the Quiet House question, it was the Dreiers who decided that that building should be --

OATES: It was built as a memorial to Edward, but it became a place where people could actually go in, sit down, and either pray or just meditate. It was a lovely, simple interior -- and also exterior, too. It was a lovely building.

THOMAS: Well, all the photographs that one sees of Quiet House seem to have a peaceful presence.

OATES: Yes. Those are Hazel's photographs. And she also -- I got the idea about photographing people in the building, because she had done several portraits inside, as well. It had this very quieting atmosphere about it, so it was a great place to take photographs.

THOMAS: Yes.

When you look back at Black Mountain College, do you just pinch yourself that you were part of it, or do you think that people who wished they *had* been of it are romanticizing it in some way?

OATES: I always felt that I was *so* lucky to have found it. It was like a gift. Coming out of the Navy during the end of the war -- I felt that that was one of my major experiences in life, being in the Navy. Then I went to the Rhode Island School of Design, and the first year was very exciting. It was an introduction to the arts, basically. We worked with clay, and we worked with paintings, and drawings, and art history, and the rest of it. That was very good. My second year there, in the textile department, was very disappointing. It was just a fluke that a friend of mine had gone to a lecture at the University of Chicago⁴, by M.C.'s [M.C. Richards] husband, Albert Levi, and she said, "You should find out about Anni Albers and weaving at Black Mountain College." So that's how I got involved. I just thought, "I am so lucky about these things."

THOMAS: It does seem to be sort of a life-changer for so many people.

OATES: Yes. I think it was.

THOMAS: Kind of a magical moment.

OATES: Yes. And, you know, strangely enough, I can't say that I worked very hard there, or that I got very intensely involved in learning. But I *was* learning, all the time. I was learning how to live, I think. [Laughs]

THOMAS: That's very nice. Well, I've talked to you for an hour, so I'm going to be aware of wearing you out. [Laughter] But I love our conversations, and if I have other questions, may I call you?

OATES: Well, certainly. You're more than welcome to.

THOMAS: That would be great.

OATES: I'm sure things will pop up.

⁴ In the first interview, Andy Oates recalls that his friend had attended the lecture at the University of North Carolina, and not the University of Chicago. A cursory Google search did not reveal where Albert Levi taught, but Oates believes it *was* the University of Chicago.

THOMAS: I'm sure things will pop up, and I don't want to lose our connection. When are you going back to Nantucket?

OATES: Well, I just made reservations this weekend, so I'm going the last Thursday of July.

THOMAS: Then you'll be gone for a couple of weeks?

OATES: I'll be gone until October.

THOMAS: Oh, wonderful.

OATES: Yes. Well, this is what I do every year.

THOMAS: Oh, how fantastic.

OATES: I usually go -- by this time I'm on my way to Nantucket. But I went up with a friend, and we spent ten days on Nantucket, living at my house, which is on the beach. So I delayed going again until the end of July, so I'll be there August, September, and leave mid-October -- I think.

THOMAS: So where should I have this book sent to you?

OATES: I think send it here, because my mail gets forwarded for the summer months.

THOMAS: Okay. What is your address? I know it's [REDACTED] Street, right?

OATES: [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] with a "C." It's [REDACTED] Street, Key West, Florida 33040.

THOMAS: Okay. And I would like to send you a copy of the release that I need to have from you. So what I'll do is, I will put it on the mail to you, with a return envelope, and you can take a close look at it. If there are any changes you want to make, feel free to do so. Some people think it looks just fine; other people mark it up. But feel free to do whatever feels comfortable to you. Then you can just send it on back to me, at your leisure.

OATES: Okay.

THOMAS: That would be great.

OATES: All right. That's one.

THOMAS: Well, have a beautiful day --

OATES: Well, thank you.

THOMAS: -- and a wonderful August, and I will hopefully speak to you soon.

OATES: Bye, bye.

THOMAS: Bye, bye.

[End of Interview]

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