

# ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES ARCHIVE BALNAVES FOUNDATION AUSTRALIAN SCULPTURE ARCHIVE PROJECT

## Interview with Mike Kitching

11 September and 23 October 2014

This is an edited transcript of interviews with Mike Kitching on 11 September and 23 October 2014 at the artist's home at Lovett Bay, Sydney, NSW by Deborah Edwards, senior curator of Australian art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, for the Balnaves Foundation Australian Sculpture Archive Project.

The project focuses on significant Australian sculptors and sculptural practice. It was developed with a grant from the Balnaves Foundation in 2010, which supported the recording and transcription of interviews with artists and other figures in Australian art.

### About Mike Kitching

Although he won the 1964 Blake Prize for a painting, Mike Kitching (born 1940) is best known for his sculptures in stainless steel, aluminium and plexiglass, which often incorporate light. A self-trained artist, he has also taught for many years, including at the City Art Institute in Sydney.

*This is an edited transcript of a recorded interview. Some adjustments, including deletions, have been made to the original as part of the editing process; however, the accuracy of all statements has not been verified and errors of fact may not have been corrected. The views expressed are those of the participants and do not represent those of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Unedited audio files of this interview are in the Gallery's archive.*

## Interview on 11 September 2014

[The interview starts with general discussion.]

Mike Kitching (MK): If I'm in the studio I can put in 40 hours a week in two days and can emerge not knowing what day it is. All your concentration goes on what you are doing.

Deborah Edwards (DE): You were born in 1940 in Hull [in England] and you emigrated to Australia in 1952 with your family. Do you have siblings?

MK: I have two sisters and a brother, but my youngest sister, who was the happiest of all of us, died before the rest of us, about ten years ago.

DE: You went to Manly High School [in Sydney], did the leaving certificate, then went on to teachers college. Were you interested in art at that stage?

MK: The oddest thing was that I had always painted as a child – sketches, paintings, watercolours, poster-colours.

DE: But had you decided to be an artist?

MK: No. It never crossed my mind that I could be an artist because they didn't teach art in any of the boys schools.

DE: And your father was a very practical man. You moved pretty quickly from painting to assemblage to sculpture. Was there a special awareness, do you think, which came to you from your father, who was an engineer?

MK: Absolutely. I liked painting, but I have to be careful here. There is a point in painting where you are trying to represent one thing in a totally different medium but in sculpture you go straight to it. You are working in three dimensions and can go straight to the point.

DE: When did that become an awareness for you? By 1959 you were a teacher of manual arts, but by 1960 you had resigned from teaching.

MK: I think I had two years of teaching. It was very interesting because I was a misfit. I always have been. I just thought the whole education system was a pain in the arse.

DE: Was there a politic to this? Were you a rebel?

MK: It wasn't politics, it was the way it was packaged, it wasn't going to work. I believed we were stuffing these children with details, but what you really had to do was excite them by, for example, taking something apart and putting it back together.

What I did was slowly work my way out of the teaching department. I got what is called 'a tour of the west' [of New South Wales]. I got to West Wyalong and I thought that if I get any further west they were going to have to give me a camel [laughter]. But the great thing was that I loved seeing the real Australia out there. I started in Wagga [Wagga], then I went to Junee, then Temora. I was on the move, or the run, I'm not sure which. The other crime I committed was to have a motorbike. I enjoyed the teaching but I never fitted in. I knew I was on the wrong bus. It was a very fuzzy period of trying to work things out. If I said I was going to study art, it didn't entirely sever the employment. That was the idea. The problem was that when I got to art school it was the same as the schools I was trying to get away from. I just got painfully bored with those people and lasted about a week before I quit.

DE: I think that was 1960 at East Sydney Technical College [now the National Art School], and I would have thought that the school was at the cusp of starting to become more modern.

MK: It was that but it wasn't giving me what I wanted to learn, as simple as that, and I'm glad it happened because I had to force the issue with myself. I didn't resolve this until many years later. I only lasted about two days or a week there. No one was able to tell me what we were doing. It was just another carbon copy of what I had escaped from. So I just thought I will have to do it by myself, that's all there is to it. And it wasn't hard to find out about the history of art, and there were many amazing people who didn't go to school at all.

[Followed by a short period of general discussion]

DE: There is a gap in your CV over 1960–62 when nothing much is mentioned.

MK: That was when I got myself somewhere to work. Well, I had various studios.

DE: So you got yourself a studio, and by the time you enrolled at East Sydney Tech you were doing to be an artist.

MK: Yes, I had decided that.

DE: Who were your artist colleagues at the time? Did you go to galleries?

MK: I did look at galleries. I looked in books, but I led a fairly non-social, reclusive existence at that time. One, I had no money.

DE: You didn't work part-time?

MK: I did occasionally. I did a bit later in the piece when I settled myself a bit and got what I believed was a direction. I was still painting in the early 60s but I started sticking things onto the surface as well and they got thicker and thicker until they stood up on the floor themselves.

DE: Tony Coleing said to me that when he went to East Sydney Technical College it was a revelation for him as the school was getting a series of international art magazines – *Studio International*, *Artforum* and the like, a variety.

MK: I'd forgotten about that but you are right. I subscribed to *Art International* and that was a bit of everybody. Those influenced me enormously, they helped me set my compass.

DE: Your *Phoenix II* at Mildura [Sculpture Prize] in 1967 was from another world when other artists were showing their wood carvings.

MK: I ran into Ken Reinhard at the time. I have to be careful to speak of my gratitude for his friendship. The critical bit is that they were all in the dark. *Art International* helped me

DE You had a couple of years finding your way, but by 1962 you had found your way to part-time teaching. How did that come about?

MK: I don't know whether I found out that I could go back to the Education Department again. They would pay me for one day's teaching and I could survive. I did lead an absolutely frugal life. Drinking was about my only luxury. It was like an anaesthetic. I drank for the Olympics and I drank for Australia. I don't know why I did it. And in and out of that I

would fall in love. I always had painful love affairs, because I just adored women. I was just putty, or a doormat, you name it, I didn't care. Antonia [Hoddle] was the right one.

DE So your part-time teaching, 1962–64, was in the manual arts?

MK: Yes. There was metal work, woodwork and engineering drawing, and I could do engineering drawing, that was like second nature to me, growing up with my father. And the woodwork and metal work were the same.

DE: You did that to get money.

MK: Yes.

DE: And at the same time starting to limber up with painting and assemblage, and by the time the Blake Prize came around in 1964, you won it with an 'enhanced' painting, a painting with assemblage elements [*Last Supper*].

MK: What I really discovered was that I was not really a painter. Antonia is a painter. I just don't have that eye.

DE: Why is that? It wouldn't be about colour, as that seems important to your work.

MK: Yes, colour I like. I actually don't really like sculpture 'naked', if you like. I'm not saying it doesn't have merit but I don't go there. I admire that from a distance.

DE: Well, you were starting to produce sculptures which were very much of the time.

MK: That's the key, and that's why I was really pleased with *Cathedral*. [This is followed by a discussion of the work at the studio.]

DE: It is a seminal work for you, isn't it? And it doesn't involve light.

MK: Yes, it was, and that one doesn't have light. Poly-stainless steel. It is what it says on that triangle, which is important. I can recite it to you. It says, 'In the time that we live, believing that God is the consistent universe...' Now I can't remember, but finally it says, 'We journeyed into the sky ... rockets ... such were our cathedrals'. We landed on the moon!

DE: There are a lot of discussions during the 1960s, particularly about the linkage of art to science, the view that we live in a scientific age, that we are increasingly secular.

MK: Yes, that's what it was about. My personal interests in life had always been aided by science. 'Nothing is to be feared. Everything is to be understood.' [Kitching is paraphrasing Marie Curie.]

I eventually met Col Jordon, and Ken Reinhard, and I'd occasionally go to exhibition openings, and Ken asked if I would put a day or two into the City Art Institute, and I enjoyed that because it was more like the place I thought it [an art school] should be: a place of experiment, argument; of trying to come to grips with things, rather than trying to tell people things. It was about finding out.

DE: This was when Ken was director? And were you a sculpture teacher?

MK: Yes, Ken was director and I was sort of a sculpture teacher, but really I only ever talked about the purpose of art. First of all I insisted that our exchanges, mine and the students,

should be those of questions. If you don't ask questions, how can you expect to get any answers.

DE: That would have been an attitude in sympathy with new methods of teaching by the 1970s.

MK Yes, that's why Ken and I got on. I made it entertaining for them.

DE: You burst onto the Sydney art scene from 1964 with a bit of a bang, didn't you? First the Blake Prize in 1964, several others, and then the Alcorso-Sekers prize in 1967 [travelling scholarship award for sculpture, announced January 1968]. They are pretty strong years, and those in which you started to use artificial light. Can you remember how and why you came to light? You clearly weren't looking at Dan Flavin, for example. What were your influences?

MK: I don't think I can answer that by itself, how I found my way to anything,

DE Well, you were already using stainless-steel surfaces. Was the light an extension of your interest in light-reflecting surfaces?

MK: No, I don't think that's a necessary extension. I'll try and think about that. I can't quite put my finger on it, but in my pursuit of trying to get the young bucks to attack me with questions, we got into an argument about what beauty is, and I discovered that I couldn't answer what beauty was. Anyway, as I'm trying to get them to dig a hole and find what's in it, I went through my dictionaries and found the word 'aesthetics'. Which said aesthetics is the appreciation of beauty according to the principles of good taste, and I knew I couldn't use that! And it ended up being just one of those experiences that opens up your eyes. Across the road from City Art Institute was a coffee shop run by a Greek. I'd always go over there and have a cappuccino, so I asked him one morning, 'Is there a word like aesthetics in Greek?', and he said, 'What about *aisthetikos*?', and I said, 'That sounds like it's on the right track. What does it mean?' He said, 'To see the meaning', and I thought, 'How could I have not fallen over that myself?' I knew it had to be simple. Not all of your experiences are comfortable. That for me was the least fuzzy edge.

So if you ask me what is that sculpture all about [indicating a work titled *Nevada*], I would say that I was trying to see the meaning of the atom bomb. Nevada was the actual place where the very first atom bomb was let off at Alamogordo, in the Nevada desert. [The atomic test site is actually in the US state of New Mexico.] What I understand about that is that we learnt how to let off an enormous amount of energy. And we've used it to good purpose. There are lots of atomic things, but it's had its negatives too, though it saved a lot more people than it killed. [Kitching is referring to the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II, which lead to Japan surrendering.]

I read up on that explosion [at Alamogordo]. I can't remember the diameter of the circle now, probably something like 20 miles, and when the bomb went off, the sand all around the site turned to glass! The whole surface turned to glass. You see what it means then. You see that sheet of glass on the surface,

DE: So in the end, using light is about putting that kind of experience into an aesthetic language, specifically of your time?

MK: Yes, yes.

DE: Artificial light illuminated the world so it becomes, in some ways, always the quintessential symbol of new science.

MK: Mixed up in both of them is the technology that allows it to be done. You have to find or invent the technology.

## Interview on 23 October 2014

DE: Last time we started to go over your biographical details. In 1965 you created a work called *The aggressors*, which you put into the Manly art competition. You were judged the winner by Daniel Thomas. Or was it David Thomas? But the judges refused to present the \$100 winning prize.

[Festival of the Pines Art Competition, Manly Art Gallery, 23 January – 14 February 1965, judged by Daniel Thomas. Kitching and Peter Pinson are listed in the catalogue under the heading 'Not eligible for judging']

MK: I vaguely remember an uproar over that.

DE: Can you remember on what grounds that uproar arose?

MK: I don't think they gave any reason.

DE: Too adventurous?

MK: Yes, that was it. I think it was just a little ahead of the pack. They couldn't make any sense of it. I can understand that. The Blake Prize [entry I put in] was not really a painting. Someone came up with the word 'assemblage'. Some clever person always comes up with such words. The Manly was after the Blake Prize, I think, and it was Daniel Thomas, by the way. I knew Daniel well.

DE: How did you get to know Daniel Thomas? That was by 1965.

MK: Antonia knows all the dates. I have a tag that says, 'If found, ask your wife!' [Laughter]

DE: In 1966 you exhibited 'sculptural assemblages' at South Yarra Gallery. Can you tell me about your transition from painting to sculptural assemblages? *The aggressors* was one of your first assemblages, in the sense that it was a wall work which projected out.

MK: It was built, rather than painted on; actually built and then painted on.

DE: Can you remember how successful the South Yarra show was? What works you put into it?

MK: The truth is, I don't. I remember meeting Violet Julia. I liked Melbourne. I'm not even sure that I knew Antonia at that time.

DE: By 1966 there is a press clipping that cites Antonia as your girlfriend, so around 1966. I think by 1966 you were starting to use the plexiglass and aluminium. I'm not sure when you began to incorporate the light elements.

MK: The aluminium came before the plexiglass. I can't remember precisely when the lights came in. What Antonia and my two daughters have done for me – although I don't know where it is [laughter] – is a lot of research, of names, of pieces etc. I don't know if they have records other than details on the pieces, but it is there.

DE: Antonia did say that she would be happy for me to photograph the press clippings today, and you are happy with that?

MK: Yes, of course. Antonia saves things.

DE: Well, you began as a painter. Can you recall why you wanted to [change] from a painter to a sculptor?

MK: The answer to that is relatively simple. My father, his father, half the other side of the family were builders and I just grew up in his workshops, much to his amazement and discomfort [laughter]. He was very good to me. If I ever said to him, 'Dad, I need some money', he would say, 'Come with me', and he would take me to a building site and always give me work, with the best men that I could learn from. I loved it. It was good, and I really saved money, but it was so tiring. I would come home every night and just sleep. I also actually think that I inherited about 98 percent of my father's genetic code.

I've got to be careful that I don't upset anybody but to get a response from a painting you have to play a little game of trying to make them see 'over the hill' or 'around the corner'. Antonia can do it. That painting over there [gestures] is hers, a beautiful thing. But I can't imitate what I see in front of me. In other words, I never mastered painting well enough to look at a colour, look at a shape, and paint it.

DE: But then you were starting to become an artist in decades when abstraction was starting to take real hold, and colour painting, shaped canvases, that kind of development. In that sense you were developing in the easiest years to not have to worry about figurative concerns, and allowing a strong pull to the three-dimensional.

MK: Yes, that's certainly true. Where I found myself deficient, there was a door open already to something else. And the first thing that happened was that my paint got thicker and thicker. I did paintings like a brick layer! Dollops of paint on them. And in a way sculpture is more about itself. It does represent other things happening around it, but it is also a little self-centred, and I don't know whether that is something I should admit to.

DE: I think that's a very astute point.

MK: Well, it was a rescue attempt, to get myself out of the water, to get to the other side of the pond, so to speak. Antonia's water looks like water. Mine didn't. It just looked like bricks cascading down the wall. And I thought, 'This is stupid. I should just stick the bricks on'. It was a transition like that. There was some spark.

DE: You went on to an incredible trajectory from the mid 1960s with such work.

MK: Yes, that was amazing, even to me. I didn't know what was happening.

DE: Can you remember whether you did sell works from that 1966 show? There is, of course, a difference between success with the critics and sales from show.

MK: Yes. After the Blake ... The Blake somehow put me on the map, much to my surprise, and I think from then onwards I started to attract attention from galleries, and in turn they started to sell. Barry Stern sold a lot of my work for a while, for which I have never really thanked him. He took a lot more risks than many of the galleries.

DE: He was interested in showing contemporary artists?

MK: Yes.

DE: By the mid 1960s, there still weren't that many so called 'contemporary' artists. The Central Street Gallery artists, did you hang around with them?

MK: No, I was then a very new Australian. I did some of my tertiary education here but I really took a long time to settle in. About the only thing that kept me going was to go home to England but I managed to stay here long enough that when I did go to England I found it so bloody cold that I didn't know why anyone would go there. No, there were other reasons, but that was the main one.

DE: You didn't know the Inhibodress crowd? The artists of Watters Gallery?

MK: I knew all the names, I knew they were there, I took an interest in their work, but I was fairly non-social. I wasn't anti-social, but just non-social in those days, because what I was dealing with was trying to find who I was here in this country, and how I could fit in and do something. At the same time I was trying to resolve the fact that I really enjoyed being an artist, which was something that my mother probably did to me early in the piece in England. If I was causing any problems she would just give me a new paint-box and brushes, and some marching orders. I then went away and vanished for a while. And I became a good vanisher too, because I like working.

DE: 1966–67 seems to me the time you start to use the aluminium and plexiglass and the light elements. Can you remember why you moved to these materials and the light elements?

MK: I did subscribe at one point in my life to *Studio International*, and I could see where things were going. But I don't really know how I got into the plexiglass and light thing. I earned my living quite often by designing things.

DE: Like what?

MK: When you said Antonia was doing textile design, she was working at that time for John Kaldor. She became his head designer. I did all of John's showrooms and in them I used elements which were in the plexiglass world, and you put the light in there because that's what you need to run any kind of visual display inside, and somehow what I was doing in one direction turned up in another.

DE: So designing Kaldor's showrooms might have come before light incorporated into your works?

MK: I can't tell you that, but they were around the same time. The showrooms were just like the things I had been doing for myself so it cut both ways. [In fact, Kitching was incorporating light elements in his constructions before he designed the Kaldor showrooms in 1970–71.]

DE: Ken Reinhard seemed to be involved with similar materials.

MK: I did know Ken quite well, and we were often combatants in a sense: who was going to get it [a prize] this time, him or me? So we both really worked hard in trying to trump the other one, and it is probably jumping ahead a bit, but where he gave me a wonderful gift was that he asked me if I would come once a week to the City Art Institute. He set that up, and that was perfect for me because it just gave me enough income in that one day's work to stay in the pond, but it wasn't taking a lot of my time, it was only taking that one day.

DE: And what were you teaching? Sculpture?

MK: Art generally. And where it benefitted me was ... I never really went to art school, and when you have a bunch of energetic pupils, they start asking you questions, and I had a rule of thumb: 'Ask me a question this week and I'll find you an answer by next week'. And in the process I actually educated myself. Art was in such a bubbling cauldron at that time. Nobody really knew what the hell anyone was doing, and nobody knew why they were doing it and yet these funny things just kept bubbling over all of the time, and you lose your sense of usefulness – not your sense of purpose, that was under control, but you would turn around and think, 'What the hell am I doing this for?' Where does it belong in the scheme of things? Where does it belong in the history?'

DE: So you had a sense of the 60s as a cauldron, as you say, where you still had artists associated with previous generations creating work but then also had an explosion, America-centred ...

MK: Yes, I think it largely came from America. They were the ones who backed it, if you like. They got their artists on the street. But when I looked back a bit, some time ago, I began to realise that I was born into a seriously interesting century, and that is where I started looking for inspiration.

DE: Did you start to then have the sense that you wanted to be using contemporary materials, that you wanted to be an artist of your time?

MK: Yes, absolutely. That more than anything was the trigger to that.

DE: Had you tried wood-carving?

MK: Yes, and all I managed to do was cut myself severely, and end up with a lot of shavings on the floor, some of them mine [laughter]. I was seriously never interested in wood-carving, because it was really an imitation of the stone work that had been done and that was so beautiful, way back to the Greeks and Romans, for example. It didn't have anything to say about the time I lived in; that was another time. For instance, we didn't have time to dig out a lump of limestone and give it to someone else who would sit there and carve it for god knows how long to make those figures. Our society moves a hell of a lot faster than that and has to. We have more mouths to feed, we now have the other end of the Industrial Revolution, we have a lot of mechanical things that had to be fed and nurtured. [Back] then it just seemed a very natural thing that you used elements from the time around you. So that if you put a tube of light in a piece of work, it said, 'This is the 20th century'.

DE: In terms of my researches into luminal kinetic work, one could argue that artificial light signalled the contemporary par excellence. What other material is there – apart from cinema – that represents that revolution?

MK: Well, there was another. What became available was aluminium sheet, copper. What happened was they invented machines to roll it out. Copper has been around since Julius Caesar but only in small amounts. You might have been able to make yourself a shield out of it. But we could get things out of the ground, and if you wanted the entire surface of Pittwater covered you could do it. So your thinking blew your hat off. Because you weren't restrained anymore by the fact that, 'You can't use that! It's worth your right leg just to have a handful of it'. That had gone too, and the speed of it. The Industrial Revolution happened in the 18th century but we perfected it in the 20th century.

DE: *Phoenix II* is a sculpture you showed in 1967 at the Mildura Sculpture Prize and that work then would have looked like an inhabitant from another planet coming to Mildura! [It won an acquisition award to become part of the Mildura Arts Centre collection.]

MK: It was on the edge of the universe then! [Laughter]

DE: Were you into Mildura? There were a lot of environmental sculptors who took part. It was a form of sculpture festival, wasn't it? And it does seem to have been very important for at least half a dozen shows.

MK: Again, my memory of time past is not particularly good. I took the Mildura art prize and I regarded it as a serious exhibition. That it attracted a much broader spectrum of people was probably why I regarded it as serious. There was room for everybody there. It was a wide open space.

DE: Can you remember how you got *Phoenix II* down there?

MK: I usually deliver my own stuff, so I probably drove it down there, but I can't remember. I'd had a taste of that area when I was teaching, because I taught at Wagga High, that was my first job – if not the first, then the second – when I came out of teachers college. I went down to Wagga and I think I had a utility at that time, specifically for carrying my own sculpture. I couldn't afford to pay other people to do it.

DE: To become a sculptor is to enter into a more expensive arena [than painting].

MK: No question about that. It wasn't so much the expense of those materials, but that they existed and if you could raise the money you could get them. That you simply could not have done in the century before.

DE: What did you think of the general reception for sculpture in Australia? Your sense might be a little skewed then as you were doing so well.

MK: Sculpture is cumbersome. Its major defect is that it occupies spaces larger than other human beings, so you are always standing on the side of the road. And I don't know how it happened either, but somehow or other – and I must have had friends doing things for me behind the scenes that I was relatively unaware of ...

DE: You have said you were self-contained, but did you have a set of cohorts you were getting around with or artists whom you admired?

MK: Well, I had a friendship with Ken, particularly when he offered me that job of teaching. And still today I enjoy it. I don't really teach. I've been called a lecturer but I never lecture anybody! But I like to go somewhere and try and make the audience ask questions. Because you get something out of it and hopefully you give it back to them in a nice package that they understand.

[Followed by a general discussion on topics including an accident Kitching had and early land grants at Lovett Bay in Sydney]

MK: My secret in life has been to avoid doctors because they do more damage than they do good, but not this one, she is excellent. So I walked there yesterday. It is probably a walk of about five to six kilometres, I took the walk to talk to myself, just to sort myself out. And once I started the walk, there was no going back. You can walk at about four to five miles an hour. It took a couple of hours. I took a long walk because I talk to myself. I do it all the time.

DE: Do you actually talk to yourself? I think I think things but don't necessarily speak them.

MK: I talk my ideas out. The only time I don't talk is when I am drawing. It shuts me up, because I am speaking the language of line work.

DE: OK, 1967, the Alcorso-Sekers Travelling Scholarship which you won. Can you tell me who else was in it, the judges?

MK: I can't remember to be honest. I didn't spend it straight away. I think I worked for some time before we took off. I think it impelled Antonia and I to get married.

DE: Before you left? You would have met around 1965–66, and married by 1967–68.

MK: That would be about right. Anyway, I then won another scholarship, which was the Flotta Lauro [also in 1967], but that wasn't money. That is what got us going, because we had the money *and* a fabulous cabin on the *Achille Lauro* [cruise ship].

DE: Which work won the Flotta Lauro?

MK: You know the orange reflector light switch on the back of trucks, about that big [gestures] and a shallow cone. I had mounted that on a circular panel with bits cut off it, of the pink Perspex that's here [gestures]. And then I mounted that on an aluminium or stainless leg, with a little thing at the bottom.

DE: No lights?

MK: Yes, it was illuminated. But it looked like a bedside lamp.

DE: There was never any thought in your mind but to travel overseas? Of course, the [Alcorso-]Sekers was a travelling scholarship. It would have been a big thing to win.

MK: Yes, it was, and that one really opened my suitcase on that kind of sculpture.

DE: I meant to ask you about the 1967 exhibition of 14 works at the Hungry Horse Gallery. Would that have been your first large Sydney solo of this new kind of work [in aluminium, Perspex, light, stainless steel]?

MK: I had a couple with Barry [Stern] much earlier in the piece, and they were assemblages, and by the time I got to Hungry Horse ... That was [run by] Betty O'Neill. I haven't seen her since.

DE: I have given Betty's number to Antonia. So aluminium, Perspex and light were your three primary materials by 1967?

MK: Yes.

DE: What were your thoughts on what you were doing with them? Firstly as we have said, they signalled the contemporary, but you were also working with metaphors of the machine.

MK: Yes, you are quite right. I looked at the whole thing and thought, 'What really keeps us all alive is technology now, in everything that we do'. Well, there are a couple of things we don't have technology for. Fornicating is about the only one I can remember at the moment [laughter].

DE: There is a zeitgeist to this too, isn't there? The whole art and technology debate is very much alive in the 1960s, with, of course, its fair share of detractors. So I assume you would have got your fair share of critiques which saw your work as 'dehumanised'. And then others who would have seen your constructions as vanguard work.

MK: Yes, I copped the good and the bad.

DE: There was a lot of anxiety amongst people about how art would become dehumanised by incorporating technology.

MK: I had a favourite story on that. Oh well ... One of the cleverest things I did at that time was that I stopped making my own work. I started using industry to make it for me because they had tools I would never be able to buy, under any circumstances.

DE: Who did you find your way to, and how?

MKL: By a fluke, like many things in your life. I asked somebody somewhere, 'Do you know a good stainless steel welder?' And I then came out of aluminium and into stainless steel and that's another world.

DE: What is the difference?

MK: I could tell you but I'll show you [moves away to get something]

[Break in recording]

MK: I can't remember how long I worked with these guys, DJ Industries [metal fabricators].

DE: Before you left to go overseas or afterwards?

MK: I can't remember, but perhaps after I came back. I ended up being with them for about 40 years. It was a tragedy that they stopped, about three or four years ago. Two partners set the business up and one of them died, and they then sold the business.

DE: And in relation to cutting the Perspex?

MK: That was easy. You mentioned neon, the neon, acrylic. There are huge companies that manufacture all sorts of things, largely for advertising, but they perfect the machines to do it. I can show you here, sheets that are hand cut and sheets which are machine cut.

DE: And what about the lighting? Did you become your own electrician?

MK: Yes, that's relatively easy. I would ask people when I was buying things, and a lot of time, because there was a huge industry behind that, it was available.

DE: We have talked about the way that you wanted to use light as a contemporary material, but what did illumination bring to your works? Was it something symbolic or metaphysical? Were you interested in how light invades space? How would you describe your relationship with light?

MK: Pretty well for all the reasons you have just said. There is an ambience. You give a lot of power to a piece of sculpture, but when you put a bar of light in it, you have to take notice of it, it gets your attention. But it does add an ambience to things. It can be both gentle and fiery, for that matter, depending on how you use it and in what circumstance. What's around it tells you what it is. For instance, you can make references to the sun or the moon. Painting the moon has been done very well, but you can put a light in there that gives you the same sense or experience.

DE: You would know from reading *Studio International* etc that there were many artists at the time who were interested in perceptual modes in relation to light. Dan Flavin, Keith

Sonnier, and then some more eccentric artists like Nicolas Schöffer, I don't know if you remember him, a French artist?

MK: I don't remember.

DE: And early synaesthetic projects came back also in the 60s. With your work you kept light as an element, but you don't appear to want to have become 'a light artist'. It remained just one of your elements.

MK: Yes, it is interesting that you say that. I just want to go back a fraction to DJ Industries. They were halfway between Dee Why and Brookvale [in Sydney], I think at Middleton Road.

DE: Were you still living in Paddington before you left [Sydney]?

MK: Antonia can tell you that. I am not sure I remember living in Paddington.

DE: Wasn't that where the old stables were that you lived in?

MK: No, that wasn't Paddington, it was halfway down Coogee Bay Road, a street off it. That was probably my best studio. It was just perfect.

DE: So with DJ Industries you would go to them and nut out the problem?

MK: Well, they were already the experts. I had asked if anyone knew a good welder for stainless steel because that is an additional skill. They gave me DJ's address and off I went. And I knocked on the front door, I could see an office with a couple of little windows, and I said, 'I know you work with stainless steel and welding. This is what I'd like to make', and popped some drawings in front of him to show him what I was doing. His name was John Elmoos [?]. He said, 'Look, don't talk to me. I am a partner in the business but I only look after the phones and the money'. He said, 'I'll take you through into the workshop and you can talk to the guys who will actually make it for you'. And that was like the sky opening up and god speaking to me because the problem with getting industry to do things for you is that you would give them the drawings and what you would get back from them was your drawing and something they thought they should add on. And I had gone through a whole row [of them] and they weren't much good. But with DJs, the big clients that gave them a continuous flow of work were breweries, where their welding had to be absolutely perfect, so I thought alcohol and I had become serious friends! [Laughter] So here I was talking to a whole workshop of guys who were really good at what they did, to perfection, and so all I had to do was to have the ideas. And they'd let me on the floor. I'd be with the guy who was doing it, and sometimes when I was designing something, I would go down there and say, 'There is a bit here that's a bit tricky. Is that going to cause any difficulties for you to get in and weld it, or can I make this in a slightly different way?' You see these things [gestures to tubes of plastic]. You just buy these. They are called bends. There is a sleeve inside. I think they are probably glued, but what is not glued is that piece on the end. That's a piece man-made, stuck on.

DE: Did you find with opening yourself up to that kind of collaboration with industry that it changed the way you started to think about the way artists were going to work in the next decades? Or was it just a marriage of convenience with skilled people who could work the modern materials?

MK: It was a mixture of that and the fact that industry itself opened up so many other doors for things I could get to, like these bends. You can bend tube yourself but you can't do it as well as a machine. They take a straight piece of tube. They [the tubes] are rolled 20 feet long by a machine; you could never do it by hand, it is physically impossible. It is welded on the

outside, again by a machine, and then it's polished off. It's done beautifully. What technology did at that time was completely outrun the hand-made – there is almost nothing that a machine can't do better than a human being – and it put a lot of people's noses out of joint. And people used to say to me, 'Oh, you don't make your own work?' and I used to say, 'No, I don't, but then Shakespeare didn't make his own paper, he just put the words on it'.

DE: There was a lot of that at the time. But you haven't let go of aesthetics.

MK: Not at all.

DE: But you are able to see beauty in things which aren't hand-wrought, and able then to use those for artworks which are still about beauty?

MK: Absolutely. And remember before I said that I like to go and talk to people, particularly people younger than myself, and I mentioned that Ken Reinhard had opened some windows and doors for me, mostly in being challenged by young people. What happened one day, I had gone into my usual stint in Cleveland Street where the City Art Institute was, and somebody asked, 'Well, what is beauty?', and that was bloody difficult and we really never got a good answer out of that, but it started a bit of good warfare about trying to define what it actually was. The dictionary didn't help. Sometimes when you go backwards in time you can find the fundamental meaning from which you can grow a clearer answer with all the push and shove that's happened to it. Anyway I wasn't getting anywhere with this thing. Then I remembered the word 'aesthetics'. I thought, 'Right, there is the answer', and I figured it was Greek. So opposite Ken's CAI was a coffee shop run by a Greek ...

DE: You literally went back to the Greeks?

MK: Yes, so over the road I go. The week before we had fallen into this pit about what beauty was. And I wanted to get a coffee anyway. So while I am having the coffee, I said to – I have forgotten his name – I said, 'Is there a word in Greek like aesthetics?', and he said, 'What about *aisthetikos*?' I said, 'That sounds good. What does it mean?' He then backs off for another five minutes. I can see him thinking in Greek and then translating it into English. He said, 'It is to see the meaning'. I thought, 'Oh god'. It still brings me to tears. Right in front of your eyes! What beauty is, is when you see the meaning in something. And what the hell does art do? That's its business. That answers all the questions of the tube lights and everything. That was a moment of truth for me, a real one.

DE: It is a very good definition.

MK: And it works everywhere. There isn't an absolute.

DE: January 1968, you won the travelling scholarship and then you went overseas for two years. Was that the first time you had gone back to England?

MK: This was the first time I had gone home. We got off – again Antonia has the memory for it – but I think we got off the boat at Genoa and made our way down to Florence because Antonia has a lot of Italian connections. Her grandfather's stories are beautiful. His name was Sir Hugh Poate and he was a doctor, in charge of the hospital ships at Gallipoli, and he is purported to have been the last man off the beach. That always gives me a lump in my throat. That was a walking graveyard. They were in the wrong place, the Turks were on top of them.

[Followed by a short discussion about Gallipoli]

MK: That's the English side of Antonia's family but they then retreated to Cairo and that's where he [Poate] met Aida Diacono. That was the Italian connection, although she was really Armenian, and they were also a people who had been pushed out of their country by the Turks. I don't know where they married, there or back in England, but he took her back to England. We picked up the Italian end of the connection in Italy. It was fabulous. I have a lot of time for the Italians.

DE: Was Antonia also involved in professional development over there?

MK: I think she probably let it go.

DE: So it was probably a trip about your professional development alone?

MK: Not really. See that painting? [Gestures] That is one of Antonia's. She was an art student. I stole her off the front steps. I fell in love with her like walking into a tree. I think I came off second best. She is still pretty, but I still show signs of having walked into a tree [laughter].

DE: I thought you had met each other at Kaldor's.

MK: She was studying first and then she went to Kaldor. But Antonia's family does have a connection with John Kaldor. John is Jewish and they had had one hell of a time escaping from where they had been before, and Antonia's family looked after them when they first came out. I was trying to think how I met John, and the answer was just that. Having met Antonia and her family, I naturally met John Kaldor.

DE: Did you have a brief overseas that you wanted to see the most contemporary art or art of the past?

MK: Quite truthfully, I really just wanted to go and visit my home. I had never really quite become Australian. And I did do just that. I was homesick here for god knows how long it was. I say it now with a bit of a laugh, but I thought this country was so rough

[Followed by a short discussion about buying a car in Italy]

DE: Did you have an artistic awakening then overseas? Notwithstanding that you had gone over mostly to see your home and to visit Italy and family there, but wasn't it extraordinary to look at Renaissance art?

MK: I had had a fair dose of that when I was young, which was part of my homesickness. That my father – an amazing man, for which I never gave him credit ... We were like two peas in a pod, so we fought and argued all the time, made my mother's life a misery. I was the eldest son, born in 1940, and my father was away at war in Egypt and all over the place so my sister didn't turn up until six years later. But he was a clever man. The reason we came to Australia was because he was asked to build the Caltex oil refinery in Botany [in Sydney]. I think he had done it twice before, once in England around the time I was born. We first all landed in Frenchs Forest in some old army houses.

[Antonia Hoddle (AH) arrives]

AH: Do you mind if I take a photo of you interviewing Mike?

DE: Not at all.

MK: You have been quoted several times as the only person who knows the answers to most of the questions! [Laughter]

[End]