

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

Interview with Ken Scarlett

25 March 2010

This is an edited transcript of an interview with Ken Scarlett on 25 March 2010 in Melbourne, Victoria, 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 Ken Scarlett

Ken Scarlett (born 1927) was involved in art education in Victoria, as a teacher and at the National Gallery of Victoria. As a practising sculptor, he served as president of the Victorian Sculptors' Society in 1964–65. He is also a curator and writer, and the author of the 1980 book *Australian sculptors*.

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 25 March 2010

Deborah Edwards (DE): I wanted to start with a brief biography. You were born in 1927, and you graduated with a teaching diploma in 1949 and you taught over 1950–52. I'm interested in views about your training and then where you taught and transitions from there.

Ken Scarlett (KS): As a young adolescent, I wanted to become an artist and in those days to become an artist was to become a painter. There was nothing broader than that. But my parents didn't have a great deal of money so I accepted the studentship and started training as an art/craft teacher. I was training at old Caulfield Tech [Technical College]. I went in there with great high hopes, and in the first year I not only did all of the first-year subjects, I picked up a number of other subjects from other qualifications which were offering at that stage. But I soon became totally disillusioned and desperately tried to resign. But of course I couldn't because in those days you had a bond, and my parents couldn't pay it. So with great reluctance I was forced back into the course.

Let me tell you what we didn't do. We didn't do any oil painting and of course acrylic hadn't been thought of. We didn't do any life drawing, we didn't do any history of art, but we did have a subject called 'historic ornament' so I prepared a whole book of illustrations in which I laboriously drew and painted Egyptian ornament or Greek ornament or what have you. All trivial, useless stuff. We didn't have any outdoor drawing, but we did have geometric drawing. So, for example, I could do the most incredible things. If you, for instance, took a square brick chimney on a sloping corrugated iron roof, I could draw the exact shadow that would show on the corrugated roof. So I had all sorts of useless talents, but nothing to do with art.

DE: So this is absolutely 'technical' in capital letters, the idea you would supposedly be an art teacher but in fact teaching you skills that would have once made you an architectural draftsman or commercial illustrator.

KS: I don't know what the point of it was. We did a lot of plant form drawings, and then we changed these plant forms into little decorative designs. It was all of the past, absolutely of the past.

DE: And so what was its reputation then?

KS: Well, what was confusing was that Harold Ellis, who was in charge of the art department, was a genial man, of some breadth of knowledge, said, 'If you want your qualification, this is what you have to do, but frankly, forget it; it's got nothing to do with art'. And he set little exercises which we did in abstracting the figure and we put these exercises up on the board and thought we'd been very smart. It was all a total disaster. By the time I got to Melbourne Teachers' College, which was the third year of the course ...

DE: Which is where you did teacher training?

KS: Yes, teacher training – I was totally disillusioned and totally anti-social. And when I found you had to pay a fee to the student union, and the fee covered sporting events and an annual ball and a dance on Saturday nights, I was so viciously opposed that I ran a campaign for 12 months and I was only forced to pay the fee because they wouldn't give me my exam results and therefore they wouldn't appoint me to a teaching position. Melbourne Teachers' College was a disaster.

DE: Was there anyone who was there with you who was like-minded? Who were your colleagues then who were doing the same course?

KS: No, they seem to have all dispersed. I suppose the only people I made contact with – this is at the Melbourne Teachers' College – were communists who joined me in the marches around the college and the holding up of placards, and that's how I eventually kept going further and further to the left. It was the start of my political enlightenment, I suppose.

DE: So at this time, because it is so unsatisfactory, are you also starting to look elsewhere? This is late 1940s, so you are pretty young. Are you getting a hold of groups outside? Are you going off to exhibitions, commercial gallery shows? Frequenting the NGV [National Gallery of Victoria]?

KS: I don't know how it happened, but I think from my adolescence I had a great interest in art, and at Melbourne High [School] I was going to exhibitions – the old Sedon Gallery, for example, the Athenaeum Gallery, the Vic Artists [Victorian Society of Artists]. I was going to those and I was writing reports for the school newspaper. I was the unofficial art critic for Melbourne High. For example, the Rupert Bunny exhibition, 1946. I had met Rupert Bunny about 12 months before that, and there's my catalogue with all my annotations of what I thought of Rupert Bunny! Hard to read the writing.

DE: You were already a curator. You knew you were related then?

KS: Yes, and I remember, it must have been about 1948, Alan Warren was in charge of the Myer Gallery, and I distinctly remember going to an exhibition there of Vic O'Connor, Noel Counihan, Yosl Bergner, Jim Wigley [*Three realist painters: Noel Counihan, Joseph Bergner, Vic O'Connor*, Myer Art Gallery, Melbourne, 16–25 July 1946]. That's in my head firmly. Yes, so I was going to all these exhibitions from about Year 10, Year 12, right through my years of training.

DE: You were knowledgeable enough to be totally disenchanted?

KS: Totally.

DE: Now why not the NGV Schools? Was there anywhere else that may have presented itself as better in terms of training?

KS: Well, it wasn't an option.

DE: Because they didn't provide a teaching course?

KS: Yes, teaching was a way of earning a living, and it was a way, supposedly, of getting a training on the way.

DE: And then you were sent to St Arnaud, which is at the edge of the Wimmera [in regional Victoria], north of the Wimmera, almost into the Mallee.

KS: If you've got a copy of my little book *Limited recall: a fictional autobiography*, there is a story in that called 'Three mistakes in two years', and it tells of my period at St Arnaud. The whole town revolved around the football. When the team went to a nearby surrounding town to play, St Arnaud was deserted, as there was no one left in the whole damn place. And there were only two other things to do: go to the pictures on Saturday night or go to the dance on Saturday night. So I was very much the fish out of water.

DE: Any other art teachers there?

KS: No, I was the sole art teacher, art and craft teacher.

DE: And you were meant to be there for three years, or at least teach for three years to pay out your bond?

KS: Yes, I think I lasted three years, and I only moved because they appointed some other senior woman and I don't know what I would have been doing then because she was the art teacher. She came in as the senior woman and I moved out.

But my time there was very interesting. I became the commissar for cultural affairs for the town of St Arnaud. It was in the days of the Council of Adult Education [CAE], so we had a book group, a music group and a political discussion group. And we had an overriding body that ran the whole thing, brought in concerts and the occasional art exhibition and so on. Because of my left-wing opinions, well, I decided to inform the town that the Western world had made entirely the wrong decision in going into Korea [to fight the Korean War], so I went to the local printer, gave him the thing I wanted printed, he took one look at it, took me into his office and said, 'You know, I might agree with you but I would lose all my advertising if I printed this with my name on it. One thing I will do is print it without the name of the printer and you can collect it from me surreptitiously'. Anyway when I letterboxed it, it nearly blew up the town. The RSL [Returned and Services League] discussed me. There were headlines in the local newspaper.

DE: Everyone knew it was you?

KS: Yes, and I was asked to resign from the St Arnaud CAE group. But I must say that the local headmaster was very good and where I was boarding, dear Mrs Pope got up from the back of the audience in the hall and asked if there was anything in the constitution that said that people must reveal their political affiliation to become members. And the chairperson said no, and she said, 'Well, then I move that the motion to dismiss our secretary is out of order because his political opinions are his and have got nothing to do with this group'. And that was carried so I remained.

DE: Was it tenable though?

KS: Well, several people resigned. What I found absolutely delightful and ironic is some years later I went overseas and then I taught at Warragul [in regional Victoria] then I was appointed as education officer at the National Gallery [of Victoria] and we used to take exhibitions out to two country towns a week. There was an opening on a Monday night and a Wednesday night. We could transport the exhibition, set it up, give lectures to school kids, but then the opening – which was usually in the town hall or the mechanics hall or the RSL – the opening was invariably attended by the local mayor, and when I went back to St Arnaud many years later, the mayor was none other than the person who had violently opposed me and had resigned from the cultural group in protest, and there he was having to welcome me back to the town – that was nice. So I did eventually resign from the Education Department because I ended up in Kyabram and that was intolerable.

DE: Where was that? Further west or south?

KS: In an area of northern central Victoria which is absolutely dead flat. I found that depressing. It was a higher elementary school with a headmaster who appointed me in charge of music, and as I had had no music training, couldn't sing, couldn't play the piano, I found that fairly difficult to undertake it. I got boxes of records from the Council of Adult Education.

DE: So that could be done at the time? You as an arts teacher could be teaching anything?

KS: Anything. So I got these boxes of records from Adult Education which I illegally used within the school and I distinctly remember introducing my inattentive students to Beethoven's Ninth [Symphony] and the only way I could give them the tune was to whistle it! So I resigned from Kyabram.

DE: So at St Arnaud had you started to limber up with your own work?

KS: I was painting at St Arnaud. I had done some sculpture way back at Caulfield Tech. There was this wonderful bloke, Stan Brown, who was in charge of modelling. We did everything in clay. We had these flat boards on which you could model in low relief and they all went into racks in storage and you got them out, took off the dirty wet cloths and worked on them the next week. But Stan Brown was wonderful and I actually did some sculpture there. I went to *The Herald* [newspaper] and got type metal, which is lead with just a little bit of antimony which makes it just a trifle harder. It was something we could melt down in the back room at Caulfield Tech, and Stan Brown helped me and we actually cast a few things. We had to cast them absolutely solid, so they were literally as heavy as lead, and I've still got a couple of those. So yes, I was producing sculpture surreptitiously. It was not part of the course. We never studied sculpture, heaven forbid, but I was making sculpture from the time I was a student at Caulfield.

DE: So then you resigned, and are we now up to 1954, and you resigned to go overseas?

KS: Yes, I spent a year overseas.

DE: And so what happened there? When did you mature in your view that you wanted to be a sculptor?

KS: No, it took me a long time. I liked painting but I found the limitation was that I was painting either landscapes or cityscapes, shown at the Herald Outdoor Art Exhibition of course, but in good company – everybody was showing there then. But I found that my main interest was the human figure and I found that for some reason I wasn't including that in my painting and I slowly but surely started to do more wood carving, and it was the human figure that intrigued me.

DE: Did you then immerse yourself in galleries overseas in Europe and in the UK?

KS: Yes, wonderful.

DE: And looked at a lot of sculpture there too. I remember my first time at the Athens Museum, for example, I was overwhelmed.

KS: I went and saw ... In those days you could go and see Professor [Joseph] Burke [at the University of Melbourne] who ran those courses in fine arts, which I'd done quite independently. I'd enrolled in his lectures before I went overseas so I had a broad background which I hadn't gained from my formal training.

DE: And you went to all of those? A lecture a week?

KS: I went for 12 months. And then when I went and saw Prof Burke, he gave us some advice. He said, 'Are you going to Greece?' and [we said], 'No, we didn't have enough money, we were going to get off the boat in Naples', and he said, 'Alright, then you must go down to Paestum, the Greek temples at Paestum'. 'Are you going to Egypt?' 'No, we haven't got enough money.' 'Well, then you must go to Milan museum with the big collection of Egyptian art.' And so he was wonderful in giving us tips in terms of which galleries and where to visit. I greatly appreciated that.

DE: So you saved to support yourselves for a year overseas?

KS: Yes, I resigned from the Education Department and got another job. It wasn't too difficult in those days. You could always get another job and save money fairly easily.

DE: This is getting the boat, of course?

KS: Yes, five weeks to get to Naples. My wife and I we got off the boat in Naples and started hitchhiking through Europe, something you wouldn't recommend now, but then it was quite acceptable, and we never had any great difficulties.

DE: Did you meet people over there? You said this was 1954. Were there any artists you were starting to deal with, and sculptors you were starting to deal with?

KS: No, I didn't have the links, didn't have the push, didn't know anybody.

DE: So when you came back?

KS: I went to Warragul High.

DE: And that was back to art teaching?

KS: Yes.

DE: So this is 1955?

KS: 1955, 56, 57, three years. And then Gordon Thomson somehow found me and invited me to become an education officer at the National Gallery of Victoria.

DE: That's interesting. So how?

KS: I don't know how he found me.

DE: Were you writing?

KS: No, I hadn't written a thing.

DE: So how did he find out about you? You must have made a stir.

KS: Well, I was instrumental in starting the Warragul and District Education Committee. That was a political move. We built a new high school in Warragul, but we had a very active art group, virtually all amateurs. I remember Dr Ursula Hoff coming up to open one of our exhibitions.

DE: So you must have invited her up?

KS: Yes, and she very generously came. So I became half-time education officer at the National Gallery and the other half time I was studying sculpture for a diploma at RMIT [Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology].

DE: By that stage you thought, 'This is what I want to be doing'.

KS: That's right. That was wonderful. Now the teaching there ranged from OK to better than you hoped. I mean George Allen was a delightful person who had given up making sculpture

and what sculpture he was producing was a flabby version of modernism. If you think of the Pinkerton monument [by Allen] up at Ballarat, it's a bit jelly-like, you know. But a nice person.

DE: Very much techniques based?

KS: No, he wasn't deterred by abstraction even though most of his stuff was figurative and we were set exercises and I think we were introduced to wood carving, to stone carving, and then of course Lenton Parr had just returned from working with Henry Moore and Lenton Parr actually brought in welding equipment and that was the first time at RMIT that anyone had seen oxyacetylene welding, so that went pretty well.

DE: How was Lenton Parr working there? Was he part-time?

KS: No, I think he was full-time but I think George Allen was still in charge. I didn't find Lenton Parr a great teacher. I think he was a very quiet and very private person; conversation was never easy. I got to know him fairly well and I think I had a very pleasant relationship with him much later in his life, but being there as a student, I should have been able to gain a great deal, but he didn't give a great deal. But he set me on the road to sculpture.

DE: Were they the two primary sculpture people there: George Allen and Lenton Parr?

KS: Yes.

DE: Were you modelling there at RMIT? Where are you in terms of ... Well, I think you've maybe supplied the answer by saying you were there during the time that Parr brought in the welding equipment. So you went from the traditional modelling and carving, and then started to move into assemblage?

KS: It was very much an intermediate period.

DE: Was Parr able to make that transition?

KS: He was proceeding very tentatively at that stage. I think probably something which influenced the direction of my sculpture was the fact that by this stage, of course, I was in the Communist Party and I was meeting with people like Noel Counihan and Vic O'Connor and so on and so the emphasis on social realism was very strong and I moved towards that.

DE: You were already interested in the figure as well? You were already oriented towards the figure?

KS: Yes, but then there was the matter of using the figure to make political statements and I remember doing a work – *The leader of the march* – a man holding a flag aloft. I did a number of works on the theme of 'fear of war'.

DE: One of those works is reproduced in the book and is made from ciment fondu.

KS: Yes, ciment fondu was wonderful. None of us had the money to cast in bronze except for ... What was his name? There was one foundry down in [the Melbourne suburb of] Moorabbin, I've just forgotten the name of the person – Lemon! It was a small foundry, but none of us had the money to get things cast. The norm was plaster of Paris looking like bronze. Ciment fondu was a wonderful release. So I modelled a lot of things in ciment fondu. Lenton Parr showed me how to weld a mild steel armature, and once I had the armature then I could build in ciment fondu, so a great number of those works were in that material. Then, of course, we got to know about fibreglass and casting in resin and that was all the

vogue. Of course, most of the sculptors who used that at first made it look like bronze. They called it 'cold cast metal', all sorts of strange descriptions. You could put bronze powder in the first layer and it did look remarkably like ... Well, my work up at Ballarat, *The cry*, that looks a bit like bronze and that's bronze powder in the fibreglass. Then I changed from that and I remember casting one pure white one and one bright orange, and so realised it was a different material that could be used in its own right.

DE: This was a cathartic time for you? Were you starting to read *Studio International*? In 1961, it's not yet *Studio International*. It becomes *Studio International* about 1963–64.

KS: No, I think we were all pretty ill-informed. I was not subscribing to any international magazines. I think we were sadly insular, finding our own way, fumbling away almost in the dark.

DE: A raft of sculptor immigrants had come out: Inge King, Julius Kane etc.

KS: The contact was through the Victorian Sculptors' Society.

DE: Which you became very important in. You were showing in Mildura, I think, in 61?

KS: I showed in 61. It was a *Horseman* in ciment fondu.

DE: Because you had finished your part-time diploma at RMIT by 1961. And then I have that you are a secondary art teacher for two years.

KS: I was at the National Gallery as an education officer and at the same time training at RMIT 1958 to 60, a three-year period. Then 1961 to 64 I was teaching at Melbourne High School.

DE: So back to your alma mater?

KS: Yes. I won't go into great detail there but my time at Melbourne High I think was very good. I would say even including later teaching positions at tertiary institutions, Melbourne High was the closest I got to a totally professional teaching position. The demands there that the staff made on the students or staff made on other staff were quite remarkable. You had to work. It was a high level of expectation.

DE: Was it a selective high school?

KS: Yes, it is. The astonishing thing is, when I was there, the classes were of 45. Forty-five boys coming in for art. And, wait for this: I decided that I would no longer stand up the front of the class and give a lesson to the class, so I drew up a whole series of exercises and pasted these up on cards and students had to decide whether they wanted to do a series of drawings or paintings or printmaking or sculpture or whether they wanted to spend some time reading in the library, because we had an extensive library. So they had to make a decision from one of these five things. Then they simply got their cards from out the front and proceeded. I spent my time wandering from one to the other, talking professionally. Astonishingly enough, I think it worked. Some students skipped exercises, took one look, said, 'I don't like that one', and went on to the next one. For instance, if I was introducing them to drawing in tone, I would take some rectangular prism, whether it's a matchbox or a book, only use three tones and make it look solid. Right, having done that, now here are a series of topics in which you've got to use tone. I want you to draw a series of factories or your own house. You've got an hour to apply your knowledge of tone to make these objects look solid in this composition, which you are going to put together.

DE: Just about everyone in your generation who wanted to be a sculptor appears also to have had to teach. Was that how you were positioning yourself now? You were becoming very involved in the Victorian Sculptors' Society. Was Mildura 1961 your first professional exhibition as a sculptor?

KS: Probably was.

DE: And did you go [to Mildura]?

KS: No, I sent the work.

DE: Did you get to meet Ernst van Hattum?

KS: Yes, I met Van Hattum when I was taking travelling exhibitions around. He was quite a wonderful bloke, and I think Tom McCullough put Mildura on the map but it was Van Hattum who started the sculpture triennials. Eric Westbrook used to take a lot of credit, saying that he gave the idea to Van Hattum. It's possible that's true. I don't know.

DE: And what about the Victorian Sculptors' Society? [Scarlett searches for a document.] Have you got scrapbooks from beginning to end, over the decades?

KS: Not to end, no, I'm still going, but yes, here it is, the Victorian Sculptors' Society, a letter from Pam Hallandal: 'Dear Ken, It is my pleasure to inform you that you have been elected by the council a full member of the society. My congratulations on your promotion, Pam Hallandal'. That's 1962. One thing I want to point out to you is that in this first book of Alan McCulloch's, in which he has an entry for the Victorian Sculptors' Society, most of the dates for the presidents are wrong. I am not mentioned, which is also regrettable. [In McCulloch's *Encyclopedia of Australian art*, published in 1968, the list of presidents jumps from Andor Mézáros in 1962–63 to Charles Miller in 1966, making no mention of Scarlett as president in 1964–65.]

DE: You were president twice, I think?

KS: Yes. I never thought of it but Alan McCulloch was the only person I approached for support to do my book *Australian sculptors* ... I got letters of support from Professor Burke, Patrick McCaughey and several other people saying it was a worthwhile move and supporting me wholeheartedly. Alan McCulloch refused to give me a letter of support.

DE: He also wrote some pretty scathing sculpture reviews in his time, didn't he?

KS: He damned my book *Australian sculptors*.

DE: Did he? I was going to ask you about him in terms of what sculptors thought of the critics in the 1960s and 1970s. Because I have been a bit struck by a sense that critics didn't necessarily know what was going on.

KS: Can we get back to the Victorian Sculptors' Society? I think what we saw there is crucial. I joined and greatly welcomed the link with the other sculptors. It was all very convivial. You could join as an associate member, which meant that you could be invited to exhibit but your work may or may not be accepted. If you became a full member then you had the rights to place your sculpture and they couldn't reject it. The fascinating thing was in that period of the 60s – I must have joined in 1961; 1962, I became a full member so I must have been an associate for a year or two – virtually every sculptor in Melbourne, and I can't remember if there were any outside Melbourne, I don't think there were at that stage, the only ones who didn't join were Ian Bow and Ray Ewers. Everybody else was a member.

DE: [Clement] Meadmore was gone by then?

KS: He was gone. 1963 he was in Sydney and left Sydney.

DE: I'm sorry. Ian Bow and ...?

KS: Ray Ewers. Yes, they were the only two who were not members. Julius Kane came and resigned and then rejoined. What was fascinating was that ... I was president in 1964 and 1965, and who was before me?

DE: It's pretty soon after joining that you become president?

KS: Yes, that's true. Andor Mézáros was 1962–63 and then I followed Andor in 1964–65. I picked up from Andor. He got very distressed and annoyed as Centre Five had started but they started surreptitiously. They didn't inform Victorian Sculptors' Society and the members that they were meeting separately and Andor was incensed. He felt this was destroying the society's unity.

DE: But had there been an agenda of conflict before this? My impression of both groups was that there was a very strong desire to get commissions. That it was really about practical support to enable sculptors to get their work into architectural settings in buildings and very related to that.

KS: Andor picked up somehow that this group was meeting and I think that built up a certain antagonism. I think Julius Kane was the one who precipitated the move, through annoyance with the Victorian Sculptors' Society. Looking back, it was a funny, mixed, disparate group of people, and we were only brought together to hold hands to give ourselves a bit of strength because we were a very small minority, and we gathered with mutual interest.

DE: Did you have much to do with Sydney Society of Sculptors and Associates?

KS: Not really.

DE: They, of course, were allowing in any interested parties, including architects, which caused some contention.

KS: I don't know if you've seen that massive book that Queensland Art Gallery published on their collection [*Brought to light II: contemporary Australian art 1966–2006 from the Queensland Art Gallery collection*]. They asked me to write about Centre Five. The interesting thing is I looked at the constitution and the aims of Centre Five, the Victorian Sculptors' Society and Sydney Society of Sculptors and Associates. There is a great deal of similarity. For instance, they are all plugging for a certain percentage for art, they were plugging for architects to employ sculptors and so on. Andor Mézáros did a lot to contact the old Public Works Department here in Melbourne. I remember when I was president, I took Gough and Margaret Whitlam to dinner, plugging the notion of percentage for arts. I think Centre Five were far more successful because they were a tight-knit little group, they could make decisions and take action, and they were extremely successful in promoting modernist sculpture and, of course, promoting themselves.

DE: Well, they were aesthetically simpatico, weren't they? How about you? Where did you find yourself? Where were you going in your work and who were you influenced by and who were you looking at?

KS: Well, I was still strongly linked with the human figure and sense of social realism.

DE: Is that when you were showing with the group which become known as the Realists?

KS: Yes. I was still plugging for figuration – not opposed to other forms but that was where my interest was. So, what happened in the last dying moments of the Victorian Sculptors' Society, two exhibitions were organised. We felt we had to get out of the old Victorian Artists Society, that had become too much of the past, and find new venues, so two exhibitions were organised at the Argus Gallery, which was really very lively under Ruth McNicoll. I organised an exhibition of figurative work, and Clive Murray-White organised his *Twenty four point plug show*, which I think was 24 artists and none of them were figurative, and that really was the demise of the [Victorian Sculptors'] Society even though it staggered on and was revived by Michael Mézáros and it became the Victorian Association of Sculptors [actually, the Association of Sculptors of Victoria], but it is essentially an amateur organisation.

DE: And Sydney Society of Sculptors went a similar way, didn't it?

KS: Yes.

DE: Does the Victorian Society of Sculptors still exist? Excuse my ignorance but, if they do, we certainly don't get anything about them in Sydney.

KS: They still exist, yes [as the Association of Sculptors of Victoria]. Interestingly, if I may divert for a minute, one of the most interesting works I did during this social realist period of mine ... Do you remember Governor [George] Wallace in the southern states of America who opposed the integration of Negro schools? He supported segregation. I thought there are all these monuments to kings and queens and Brits and I thought I would do this monument to a bastard. So I did this colossal head based on Governor Wallace, put it on a high pedestal ...

DE: Are you talking mid 60s?

KS: 1968 I think, and then I put a plaque on it, a bronze plaque, 'Monument to a segregationist'. I modelled it in clay and cast it in ciment fondu in two pieces. But putting together ciment fondu in that way you always see the seam line and that worried me. I camouflaged it slightly. That went into the collection of McClelland Gallery many years ago. But quite recently we cast the head in bronze, and we installed it about a week ago. It is now on a granite plinth and it's got another plaque and is on display at McClelland Gallery. So that past is still with us.

DE: Were you starting to become aware of the ground substantially shifting for sculptors of the 1960s? It becomes very apparent in the 1967 Mildura [Prize for Sculpture] exhibition – with Tom McCullough purchasing Mike Kitching's light work [for the Mildura Arts Centre], yet [Bert] Flugelman got the prize – two very different streams of sculptural production become apparent.

KS: I'm just trying to look this up. There was one exhibition in Mildura in which the judges found it impossible to award any prizes; there was such a diversity.

DE: Did you go to the 1964 Mildura [exhibition]?

KS: Yes, I went to all of them except for 61.

DE: Are there any recollections you have?

KS: One of the great positives of Mildura was that it was not only the focal point for sculpture, but it was a great meeting place. Bert Flugelman from Adelaide and Ron Robertson-Swann from Sydney and John Davis, David Wilson from Melbourne, we were all meeting, and I think the exchange of ideas and just seeing what was being produced was quite wonderful.

DE: And were you doing what a lot of sculptors did? Go down a few days beforehand and stay for the opening?

KS: Yes, and John Davis and I took students there as well.

DE: So 1964–1968, that's when you became a lecturer in sculpture at Caulfield, and that's a good time to talk about shifts in teaching but also in sculptural production. Also, just in relation to the Victorian Sculptors' Society. You were the president twice then how long did you stay with them?

KS: I stayed until those two exhibitions at the Argus Gallery, whatever year that was. That was probably the end of my link with the Victorian Sculptors' Society. My time at Caulfield ... Anita Aarons had been a very powerful force in the Victorian Sculptors' Society and, for some reason or other, I never knew why, she nominated me to replace her in lecturing in sculpture at Caulfield Tech. That presented me with huge problems because by moving in halfway through the year when students had had Anita Aarons for some considerable amount of time and then I move in ...

DE: But you were happy to do that? You resigned again from the Department of Education?

KS: No, I was still part of the Department of Education because Caulfield Tech at that stage was still under Education Department control.

DE: So you just transferred?

KS: I just transferred from secondary to technical; that was still possible. Now Anita was a very flamboyant and very emotional person, who could talk incessantly.

DE: That's what I remember about her – being trapped in my office for an entire day.

KS: So if Anita had had a bad night and her love life wasn't going right, the students would know about it; that would be the basis of her introduction to the class the next day. All intensely personal and emotional. And then I came . . .

DE: That wasn't necessarily about a new aesthetic of teaching; that was simply her personality?

KS: Yes.

DE: But we are in the 60s and certain hierarchies are starting to break down too, aren't they?

KS: Well, I don't know. I found it very difficult at first and I think it was the following year before I was able to start to establish myself as an entity because her ghost was still very strong. Then of course Fred Cress came to Caulfield. Fred came back from the UK and brought with him quite avant-garde and controversial attitudes to teaching. He gathered around him a small group: John Davis, Sandra Weaver and myself, and another New Zealand teacher whose name I've forgotten.

DE: Was he a bit older?

KS: Fred? No, a bit younger than me, but not much. I think I was instrumental in getting John Davis his job. I was there before him and we saw the works he was doing at the Victorian Artists Society, and we got him transferred from secondary teaching.

The astonishing thing is that none of those teachers working at a tertiary level had a syllabus. They just went in and started talking or looking at students' work and there was no overall planning. Each lecturer ran their own classes as they wished and no one ever checked or knew what they were doing.

DE: Why was that, do you think? Other art schools had syllabuses. East Sydney Technical College [ESTC], for example, had a prescribed syllabus. Rayner Hoff introduced the sculpture syllabus and it was based on the Royal College of Art and it had a tiered system, and yet the Victorian art schools of the period were purported to be more advanced than the New South Wales ones.

KS: Well, I was placed in charge of the SACs students – the secondary arts and crafts students – and therefore I felt it was perfectly OK to say to the members of staff, 'May I see your syllabus?' They didn't have any. So when the board of inspectors came later I raised this predicament with them and they then lent fairly heavily on the staff, who a year later came up with syllabi.

DE: So was this an anomaly of Caulfield?

KS: I don't know.

DE: Who was Caulfield under?

KS: Harold Ellis, who had been there forever, had retired. It gets very involved. People eventually came up with syllabuses and I have them here and they are a revelation because they are so lightweight. Fred came in and he had an overall plan for all subjects. In fact, he just broke it into 2D studies and 3D studies and then he had a very simple progressive introduction to the basic structure of art. It was just point, line, shape, form, these elementary ways.

DE: Basically a formalist focus?

KS: Yes.

DE: This is a little like Lyndon Dadswell perhaps, who returned from the USA on a Fulbright scholarship and immediately introduced Bauhaus-type exercises to ESTC, based on the design teaching he had seen in American art schools.

KS: Anita Aarons brought that sort of approach down to Melbourne. The wonderful thing about the way Fred was organised was that we would have a meeting of this group of four or five members of staff and we would know what the next exercise was and could use it in either the 2D or the 3D class. We would then meet with all the students and tell them what the exercise was, and then at the end of the week all of the students and staff involved would meet and we would see all the work and discuss it. So there was great cooperation amongst the staff. There were disagreements and arguments but we were essentially working together, and there was this wonderful relationship between staff and students. It was very, very lively.

DE: And this was still a technical college, in which the art department was one of many?

KS: Yes, they also had blacksmithing!

DE: I cannot easily work my way through what happens in Victoria during the 1960s and 70s in terms of college and school amalgamations.

KS: What happened at Caulfield was that this first-year course progressed remarkably well and Fred Cress organised to have what I think was the first exhibition of student work in a commercial gallery. So we had the Zetetic X exhibition in the Argus Gallery two years running and they were extraordinarily lively. There were a lot of kinetic works, there were a lot of sound works. It was highly experimental.

DE: Who was introducing these highly experimental practices?

KS: I think it was the basic attitude. We had no idea of the end result. We gave them open-ended questions which deliberately allowed an infinite number of possibilities, except the limitation was they had to do it in terms of line or in terms of shape or in terms of form. What happened was, as the year went on, was that the exercises became more complex, the time allowed for them became longer and longer. So what might have started as one week might end up as four weeks.

I was looking through and there were all sorts of interesting things. I came across one exercise where the students had to go out and introduce themselves to someone they had never met before and didn't know and start asking them questions about their life and attitudes to life and so on, and then to use that as a basis for their work.

DE: Was that encouraging performance art?

KS: No, I don't think we went that far. But, of course, a student who was there at the time was Stelarc. And at one stage we got huge crates, I think from a car factory, so these were huge panels from crates that had been demolished that came in on a truck, and we built three rooms in the quadrangle, and I can't remember what they did in them, but there were these three huge areas that were totally blacked out. Stelarc at this stage made a work; it was a circular chamber.

DE: Stelarc – Stelios Arcadiou – was an 18-year-old student then?

KS: Our ambition was unlimited. Stelarc built this circular drum that was big enough for one person to sit on a chair inside it. The whole interior was covered in broken mirrors, and the ceiling, so you had these fractured images. Then the whole work could rotate and he piped in sound. And this was installed at the Argus Gallery in a room off to the side so people could go in one at a time. Now that was an extraordinarily ambitious work, a motorised chamber produced by a student.

DE: Where did that sense of ambition and optimism ultimately come from? Was it in the change in the course? Was it what they were seeing outside? Travelling shows coming in?

KS: It was generated by the whole spirit of the course and the idea that anything was possible, and we proved it. Now this tore the staff apart. Most of the staff resented Fred, were entirely opposed to his ideas, and did their best to undermine him. And when eventually a new head of department, one Harold Farey, was appointed, he firstly came with us, because we were achieving the most amazing publicity. Patrick McCaughey reviewed the Zetetic exhibitions very favourably so we were achieving a great deal. But Harold was very conservative so he swung from first supporting us to opposing us. This was at the critical stage when Caulfield Tech became the Caulfield Institute of Technology [CIT]. So it

became autonomous, no longer within the Education Department's control. So we were all forced to make a decision as to whether we would remain with the Education Department or whether we would take up a new position at this new institution.

Fred Cress was told he would never be permanently employed. So Fred resigned because that was just so insulting. I went back the next year and sat around for a week wondering what I was going to do. I eventually went to see Harold Farey at his home one Sunday night and said, 'Is the first-year course continuing? Have we got the same syllabus? What are we doing? We've got the first meeting with students tomorrow. What am I telling them?'

DE: Because who was the head or replacement for Fred?

KS: Well, that's right. Was someone else going to be appointed? And Harold Farey said, 'Yes, I see you've got some good points. We'll have a staff meeting tomorrow morning at 9.30. We'll clarify the situation before we meet the students'. The next morning he walked into the staff room at about five to nine and I said, 'Where are we holding the staff meeting?' and he said, 'We're not', and I said, 'But last night you agreed we'd have a staff meeting'. He said, 'I suggest that you teach your subject and confine yourself to your subject and mind your own business'. So that was it. Within half an hour I'd walked out of Caulfield Tech.

DE: What happened to John Davis?

KS: He took some long service leave, came back and then went to Prahran [College]. So the whole thing collapsed.

DE: So within four years you'd got one set of first-year students through the entire course and changed with this and then let's say in the fourth year one year left so what I suppose happened to those who stayed at Caulfield was one year of your course then went back to ...

KS: The traditional single subjects.

DE: So I assume Caulfield disappeared off the horizon? And that was the beginning of your close friendship with Stelarc?

KS: Yes.

DE: Which continues?

KS: Absolutely. That was the most exciting period of my professional teaching career. And, of course, when I walked out of Caulfield I didn't have a job. So I hawked around all the art schools in Melbourne but, of course, in the first week of the new term they all had their staff. So I was pretty desolate. My last port of call was Melbourne Teachers' College which was the last place I wanted to go because I remembered my year there as a student and it was an appallingly conservative institution. But Harold White very generously took me in. He knew my role in charge of the SACs students at Caulfield so he appreciated that, so we had a nice relationship, and he said, 'One of our members of staff has gone on long service leave so I can take you for three months, in charge of experimental studies', which at least had some of the qualities of the Caulfield course.

DE: Now, taking experimental studies ... So we already have inscribed in the teacher's diploma the ability to instruct on performance? on process? ie what was experimental studies?

KS: No, experimental studies was really a series of exercises with a range of materials which you mightn't normally use. For instance, we got slides and worked on them, painted on them, scratched them, or we took the plastic things that chocolate comes in, so we'd assemble those and make sculptures out of those.

DE: Was there starting to be a schism between your art or the interests you had sculpturally and what you were teaching? If we think of *Fear of war*, your figurative aspect still, highly politicised, but you've also got Stelarc with his broken mirrors. Did you start to feel that there was a schism?

KS: I think I probably have had and have still got a very broad attitude to what art can be and be made manifest, so I find it fascinating that I was fighting a battle for figuration. Fred was the total abstractionist, but now if you step into my lounge room you see a lot of abstract art and Fred, of course, became like a social realist! It was a very strange turn of events. I suppose there was conflict but I don't remember seeing it at the time.

DE: Were you still thinking, 'I am going to be a teacher and practitioner'? Or were you starting to think, 'I'm going to be a writer and an academic'?

KS: No, I wasn't a writer at that stage. My wife at that stage, Lois [nee Pedrazzi], was earning money at an incredible pace, and when I resigned from Caulfield she offered me the opportunity to become a full-time sculptor, but I either didn't have the courage or, being a male, didn't like being supported by my wife, didn't accept it. I suppose it was when I got to Melbourne Teachers' College and eventually I stayed there something like 15 years; 11 years was in the Gryphon Gallery.

DE: Is that called Melbourne State College?

KS: That's right, it went through a number of name changes [Melbourne Teachers' College became Melbourne State College then Melbourne College of Advanced Education then part of the University of Melbourne]. When I was there and eventually moved into the sculpture department with Clive Murray-White, I'd started on my research for *Australian sculptors*.

DE: The records say you went to Melbourne State College in 1969 and were there till 1975. And then from 1975 to when, director of the Gryphon Gallery at the college?

KS: So I started in the early 70s gathering material for my book for *Australian sculptors*.

DE: So what was the genesis of that?

KS: A chance statement by Kevin English who said, 'I guess nothing has been written yet on Australian sculptors, has it?' And I said, 'Well, no'. And at that stage, there was that little book on Margaret Baskerville, a book on Karl Duldig, there might have been two very small books on Cliff Last and Andor Mézáros – they came out in the mid 70s, I think. [Margaret Baskerville and Edward A Vidler's *Margaret Baskerville, sculptor*, 1929; Pamela Ruskin's *Karl Duldig sculpture: Vienna, Singapore, Melbourne*, 1966; Max Dimaack's *Clifford Last*, and Kelman Semmens' *Andor Mézáros*, both 1972.] So I thought if nothing has been written, the few things that have been written would be so little that I could very easily gather it and bring it all together. And, of course, that took me ten years.

DE: Did you go down to Mildura and get a lot of material from people there? Did you start writing to them all? It would have been a way to very quickly have a national perspective on what was happening in terms of sculptural production.

KS: I went to the state libraries in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Hobart.

DE: This is all while you are still full-time teaching?

KS: I got some time off.

DE: How was your own practice going?

KS: Well, this was the predicament. I was married, you had to mow the lawn, wash the car, and I was trying to gather all this information and collate it, and you also need time to think. So in sheer desperation I evolved a process of producing sculpture extraordinarily quickly. I got some soft wire, about two metres long, and then I would get a model, sometimes my wife, sometimes somebody else, and I would bend this wire around certain parts of the anatomy. It might be down an arm and back and part of a breast, or it might be a buttock and a thigh, it might be around the stomach and a breast. I'd get these shapes in wire and then I'd get recycled timber and cut them out so I had this great stack of vaguely female forms, which you could sometimes vaguely recognise but sometimes you couldn't. And then I assembled them. I showed them at Mildura. I think I showed five of them.

DE: In 1973 or 1970?

KS: You'd have to look up the catalogue. [Actually 1975, under the title *3x5 (plus)*.] There is one of them outside on the wall you can have a look at. But even that wasn't even enough. I evolved another scheme which was even quicker. I dispensed with the model. I stood at the entrance to Melbourne State College – this is something which would be politically unacceptable nowadays but OK then – as the young girls came in, I gave them a little package and it was a bundle of soft wire and a series of instructions: 'Please, when naked, bend this wire around various parts of your anatomy ...'

DE: That didn't cause consternation?

KS: 'Please return the wire anonymously, and drop them in the box in the foyer the following day.' Many, of course, didn't reply, but many did, and that was the end of my sculptural career, I think. That was the last thing I attempted.

DE: Really? What happened then?

KS: I just became so overwhelmed with trying to gather information for this book.

DE: In a sense you made a choice, whether it appeared that way or not, of moving into writing and intellectual activity. Part of that was becoming part of the Gryphon Gallery. Do you want to tell me a little bit about that? I assumed at Melbourne State College you were doing a course similar to the Caulfield one?

KS: No. The predicament for me was to move from Caulfield, where [there was] this wonderful sense of freedom and exploration, back to Melbourne State College, and the head of the sculpture department there, Reg Parker, was a minimalist sculptor and quite a good sculptor. He didn't produce a great amount of work, but there is one of his works down at McClelland Gallery and it still looks good.

His philosophy had come from America and it was one of total freedom for the student; that is, he didn't believe in any core structure; he didn't believe in class instruction, even to the point that there was no instruction in the use of power tools, with all the extreme dangers, and there was no care of tools, like a student could pick up a gouge for wood carving which are very difficult to sharpen and use it on a block of Mount Gambier limestone. Total freedom for the students but no freedoms for the staff, because the staff had to accept his

philosophy, and I found this impossible. Clive Murray-White was far shrewder than I was, he just said yes to Reg Parker, but when he wasn't there would just teach the lessons as he wished to teach. I foolishly fought battle for battle and never did win. Luckily I escaped to the Gryphon Gallery.

DE: This was the gallery attached to the college?

KS: Yes.

DE: So what was its brief, and what did you achieve there? That took you out of lecturing?

KS: Yes, in time. At first I was half-time lecturing and half-time in the gallery, but eventually I was full-time in the gallery. The gallery was a wonderful situation because it was a small empire where I was totally in charge. I could actually select the artists and plan the exhibition program.

DE: Had there been one before?

KS: Yes, it had been in existence for a very brief period with Stuart Black in charge. But he wasn't allocated any time to run it.

DE: Its main idea was to produce one annual exhibition of students' work?

KS: Well, this was the problem. The students thought they had rights in the gallery, the staff thought they had rights in the gallery, and as much as I felt I had an allegiance to the institution, I wasn't prepared to lower my standards, so I alienated some of the staff when I wouldn't give them exhibitions, and I alienated some students who thought they should run the place. But yes, out of about ten shows a year, the student shows might have been two and the staff might have been one, so essentially I had a pretty free run.

DE: With a budget?

KS: The budget was infinitesimally small. It was \$1000 when I started and 11 years later it hadn't changed. But the situation in those years was markedly different to the present. Melbourne State College had its own printer, its own graphic designer and its own plumbers, electricians and painters. I had to get that within the program, but as long as I planned ahead I could get a vast amount of work done with staff within the institution.

DE: Did you have a strong brief for sculpture?

KS: Yes. One of the most interesting ones we called *Sculpture for Melbourne* and we used the staff photographer, Tony Boyd, who went out and photographed sites in Melbourne where we thought we could place sculpture and then we photographed the sculpture and superimposed them within the catalogue. For example, on the pontoon on the Yarra where the helicopters land we grossly enlarged one of Geoffrey Bartlett's works and placed it on the pontoon.

DE: You were getting to know a lot of sculptors. In fact, you know a lot of sculptors by 1970, don't you?

KS: Well, by the time I'd been around Australia either physically visiting sculptors or writing or telephoning them, I could virtually say, by the time the book was published in 1980, that I had approached every sculptor in Australia. You could in those days. I knew them all.

DE: And what would you say, in a nutshell, were the changes for sculpture from the 60s through to the 70s? I think you've already implied huge changes in art education. What about issue-driven work? You were very strongly politicised in the late 60s, but that kind of politicisation starts to dissipate in the 70s.

KS: Yes, the great disappointment of my life.

DE: To grossly generalise, we could perhaps say that in the 1970s began the introspection which later becomes a form of narcissism, perhaps. Decades of transition from modernist to conceptual art ...

KS: Mildura was the place where you saw it. You didn't see it in Melbourne. Mildura was the place where all of the experimentation that was going on became visible. You know Dom De Clario's scatter of bits of newspaper and string and whatnot, you know, it was almost as if art had ceased to exist.

DE: That's right and didn't you write a piece about going in to see Kevin Mortensen's *Delicatessen*?

KS: Wonderful!

DE: And having a discussion with the butcher? So were you embracing all that yourself? Did the 1970s provide you with conflicts? Someone like Ron Robertson-Swann ...

KS: Hasn't changed.

DE: Yes, Ron established a position in those first years that hasn't changed. But the 70s sees claims about the death of the object and writers like Terry Smith saying there isn't going to be aesthetic quality in artworks anymore. Can you position yourself in terms of those debates?

KS: Well, I suppose that because I had moved out of making sculpture, I suppose that allowed for more intellectual freedom. And the range of things that I encouraged in the Gryphon Gallery, for example, would not only be sculptors such as Geoffrey Bartlett, but also, for instance, Mitsuo Shoji did an installation in the Gryphon Gallery in which he left an ambulatory area around the four sides but virtually filled the gallery, first put down plastic sheeting, and then put down hardboard, I think masonite, then put a thick layer of clay, like it was about five centimetres of clay which filled the whole gallery and leveled it smooth and left the gallery door open, so slowly over three weeks it dried out. So that was a fairly avant-garde installation at that time. And Paula Dawson showed in the Gryphon Gallery the biggest hologram that had ever been produced at the time, and Merchant Builders built virtually the side of a house in the gallery. You stepped into the gallery and here was a weatherboard house in front of you, and you looked into the front window into what would virtually be the lounge room. There was a coffee table, bowl of flowers, coffee cup or a mug, a leather couch and a couple of cushions, a picture on the wall, and you could see the light from the TV set in the room. But when you walked the full length of the gallery, went into the back door, came up the passage and looked into the room, there was nothing there.

DE: Where can I find documentation of everything that happened in Gryphon Gallery?

KS: There were folders for every show but Melbourne University, I suspect, have treated it with contempt. I don't know, but several people have tried to find the archive and have been unsuccessful. Surely it's in their archives. I don't know.

DE: So Melbourne State College became ...?

KS: Became amalgamated with Melbourne University. That was the death of it. Melbourne University acquired the real estate and then they systematically set out to destroy all the courses for the teaching of art teachers and music and drama teachers. Those three courses which were quite valuable for the teaching of secondary teachers were just slowly eroded and now they cease to exist.

Melbourne University has its own archivist, but the Gryphon Gallery ended in a very strange way. I retired – I've been retired for 22 years – in 1988 from Gryphon Gallery. I was 11 years in the gallery. I think I was extraordinarily lucky because I didn't have to make a profit, I just had to balance the books, so that I had some exhibitions ... For example, I used to have an annual ceramics exhibitions which would sell and we'd make a bit of money, we'd have a print exhibition that would sell and we'd make a bit of money, but I could pick up artists who were not known – Jimmy Haughton James, for instance, who was in the advertising field and made a lot of money and became a very interesting painter. He once edited a magazine, a very good magazine, short-lived, for the Victorian Artists Society, but anyway, that's an aside.

DE: You would have known that if the heads of the college weren't happy with the Gryphon Gallery, it clearly fulfilled a function.

KS: What I shrewdly did, I set up the Gryphon Gallery advisory committee. That meant that if a member of staff approached me and said, 'I want to have an exhibition', and I thought, 'Not bloody likely', I said I would refer it to the Gryphon Gallery advisory committee, so that gave me a wonderful basis to say no.

DE: Without animosity, particularly if your head of the college might have wanted a show.

KS: And I had as the chairperson one of the vice-principals, Dr Roger Wook. And I had lunch with him last week. He was an urbane man of wide culture so I had great support there.

DE: If these files aren't around anymore, are there press clippings?

KS: Well, there might be, I don't know, but there were springback folders like that, and there was one for each year.

DE: That's a lot.

KS: Yes, but what has distressed me is that I can go back to the Melbourne University gallery, the Potter gallery [formally titled the Ian Potter Museum of Art], and they'll have in a selection from their permanent collection works that I know were either acquired by Melbourne Teachers' College or Melbourne State College, and they will simply say 'purchased such and such', with no attribution that it was not part of their collection, that they have acquired it through amalgamation. And that distresses me. I was curator of the college collection, of course, as well while I was there.

DE: And so acquiring for the collection?

KS: Yes. We acquired a Fred Williams, I remember, and the outrageous gay, South American artist Juan Davila.

[This is followed by a personal discussion.]

DE: I'm keen to tease out what the shifts were between sculptural production in the 60s and then in the 1970s.

KS: I think the move towards installation is an interesting one; that's obviously very popular and very much in vogue at present. I hope my age is not showing, but I find it a little odd, in that John Davis would make installations in the bush and then photograph them and document them, that makes some sense to me, but installations in galleries where they have a very limited life and are probably unsellable, it's an extreme form of expression. It may be it's almost going as far as you can go in that three-dimensional direction, because it's unsellable, it can't be recorded except by film or photographs. I think it's got to come to an end, but I might be wrong.

DE: But it is the end game, for me, of developments that began at the time, in the 60s and 70s, where the artist's work becomes about a project, where all the process starts to come in, and artists start to view their practice as not based on producing a harmonious three-dimensional object for a foyer in a building but a research project that they are going to articulate in whatever way they like. The artist *project* starts to take over from the end product, if you like. And, of course, when you then have an apparatus like the Australia Council that can support contemporary artists in that way of working, then I guess it becomes viable.

KS: It's to do with the cost of production, the problems of storage ...

DE: And, as you say with John Davis, with the utter fragility of a lot of his works, you start to move into the league of Richard Long. One of the most interesting things about Davis, I think, is that he straddles both. He never quite let go ...

KS: Of the object.

DE: Yes, and yet it becomes very much about process and documentation and an intellectual investigation.

KS: Also I think there is a slight contradiction with John Davis. Remember those little swaps he used to make. He produced a lot of works which were giveaways or swaps or whatever, now very fragile, very ephemeral, and I remember saying to him once, 'You could get that cast in bronze', because it would just burn out. Well, he wouldn't have a bar of it, of course, so in a way he didn't want permanency, but also it does raise the issue of what's the limit; what is the period of expectancy for an ephemeral work? Take an example where just down the road here at Herring Island, John Davis did a work, which was partly a structure up the tree, partly a mound of earth, and a series of saplings with tarred paper on the ground – I think there were four parts to it – and some rocks. From my point of view, it was a very bad decision, because in a public place, how do you stop kids or people from climbing on it or walking on it. John was terribly upset when it was damaged and destroyed. He eventually removed the sapling and the tarred paper but he left the structure up the tree, which slowly disintegrated. Kids climbed up the mound, the conical heap of sand, and soon destroyed that. All that's left is a plaque on the ground and a couple of rocks. It's just desolate. Some years ago, I contacted John's family and Parks Victoria and said, 'This is not doing the artist any good. This is not what was there originally. This is just a shambles'. So John never really quite defined that. He was willing to just let things disintegrate, but I think that does the artist a disservice, I think if it's going to be ephemeral, that's all right with me, but is it there for a day? Is it there for a week? Is it there for a month? And what are your expectations and when do you remove it? That he didn't ever define.

DE: We have a Simone Mangos piece in the [Art] Gallery [of New South Wales] – a salt block with rusty spikes [*Salt lick* 1986]. Not even she knew what it was going to look like towards the end and it looks pretty unattractive, and so it will reach a point where it's unexhibitable.

KS: As the John Davis at the Art Gallery of New South Wales is.

DE: Yes.

KS: I mean years ago, it was in a sad state. On the other hand, the work we've got here is still looking pretty much as he made it, you know, so some of them have survived happily.

DE: So I was asking you if you were seeing real difference between Sydney and Melbourne and you said, yes, in the very strong thrust for the formal, Caroesque solution coming through the polemics and teaching of Robertson-Swann, but did you see other differences? Watters Gallery – it seems to fulfill a central role in terms of Sydney sculpture and sculptural debate at this time.

KS: Well, Watters have been very good, but I don't know that they've continued that.

DE: In the 1970s they appear to have had a great many sculpture shows. You know they had Flugelman's first show and had the aluminum works.

KS: Noel Hutchison has showed there again.

DE: He has been with them for the 30-odd years and I'd say Robert Parr the same, and Bob Jenyns must have been with them for 30 years. Once they have people, they hang on to them. They seem very lively, because there just doesn't seem to have been much sculptural activity in Sydney at this time.

Can I ask you another question, just about the 70s? When did you start to become aware of Aboriginal art? Everyone is aware of New Guinean art in the 60s, particularly sculptors and the Annandale Imitation Realists in Sydney.

KS: In terms of art from Papua New Guinea, Argus Gallery had a couple of big shows of wood carvings.

DE: In the 60s?

KS: In the 70s, I suppose, with Ruth McNicholl.

DE: Is she still around?

KS: No, she died. Going back, I remember seeing bark paintings at the Victoria Museum [then the National Museum of Victoria] at the top end of Swanston Street. They weren't considered works of art; they were in the museum. The first time that I ever saw any Aboriginal sculpture was at the National Gallery of Victoria, and I think it must have been while I was education officer there, so that's going back to the mid 60s or something, isn't it? And they were small works, and assembled, and I remember seeing that they were nailed together with second-hand nails, and that was the first time I had ever seen any Aboriginal sculpture. I've got the feeling that they came from some institution in Canberra, and I'd almost say a medical institution. Well, the National Gallery of Australia didn't exist, but I was shocked and astonished to see these, and they were obviously made after colonisation by the whites, because they were using recycled bits of wood and second-hand nails.

DE: They were part of a temporary exhibition or were they coming into the collection?

KS: They were in a glass case and there weren't many of them, maybe half a dozen. And I distinctly remember them, but how they got there and what they were doing there, I don't know. And that's very early.

DE: Do you think sculptors in the 70s were starting to become aware of Indigenous art and sculpture?

KS: Ken Wach gave a very interesting lecture at the NGV about a year ago, or two years ago, on the link between African sculpture and the cubists, and what intrigued me was that he had a great number of photographs of collections of African art which the artists at the time had managed to collect. And I am just reading [Jacob] Epstein's biography and Epstein talks about the first time he started collecting African art in Paris. Now when it came question time, I said to Ken Wach, 'This is fascinating. We've got a lot of records of artists' studios and living quarters. We know a lot about the sort of work that French artists were collecting in the 1920s or perhaps a little earlier. Now what is happening in Australia? If indeed Australian artists are going to be influenced by our own Aboriginal artists, we know that a lot of our artists are collecting Indigenous art. Have we got any documentation? Do we know, for example, what John Davis had in his lounge room? Which works did he purchase? We don't know.'

DE: And one of the things which I think surreal is that French curators were being sent to New Guinea and Australia in, I think, the 1920s, to acquire Aboriginal sculpture, to acquire New Guinea art, and they went back to France and some of those works ended up in French artists' collections. It is stunning to think that there were French artists who had Aboriginal sculpture in the 1920s.

KS: Before us.

DE: That's right, in the same way, of course, Australian modernists look to 'the primitive' through European eyes, our early modernists also looked to Africa.

Little Bay [referring to Christo's environmental project *Wrapped Coast – One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Sydney, Australia, 1968–69*]. Can I ask did you go there?

KS: No.

DE: *The field*? You saw that [exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria] in 1968?

KS: Yes, I was there for the opening.

DE: Many have said that *The field* was the institutional imprimatur of what was going on, and Clement Greenberg's visit also in 1968. Did you go to any of those lectures [by Greenberg]?

KS: Yes.

DE: Generally the view seemed to be that he was under-impressive.

KS: I started to read some of Greenberg quite recently. He's not easy to read. I was reading about David Smith and I came away in the end and I thought, 'I don't know any more about David Smith'.

DE: He is reputed to have 'rusted up' or textured up some of David Smith's sculptures when he was an executor of the estate.

KS: In a way, one of the interesting changes that occurred over the years ... I like Tom McCullough's attitude. We should really talk more about Tom. Tom McCullough simply went around, found out what was happening, and invited those artists to show. So the Mildura exhibitions were quite exciting and quite wonderful, they were a cross-section of exactly what was happening. Now they were disparate, they went in all directions at once, but that was what was happening. *The field*, on the other hand, led us to believe this was what was happening, we're all going in one direction and we've all got similar attitudes. It was a spectacular exhibition, a wonderful exhibition, but it also, I think, perhaps was a little misleading, and it probably led a number of artists to go in that direction. And then, of course, the Antipodeans were sad because it looked like they were old hat and living in the past.

DE: But how ironic that figuration itself came to be seen as politically incorrect and conservative but later there was a swing back round to it.

KS: Swing around without the basic training. Badly drawn figures. But going back to this notion that Tom McCullough simply set out to show what was happening. There was no one theme. The Australia Council, for example, eventually took the attitude that you couldn't get funding for an exhibition unless you had a theme. And I think that in turn gave a lot of power to the curators and sometimes they enlightened us, by showing us the direction things were going, but sometimes they consolidated a direction which may simply have been more fashionable.

DE: Do you think McCullough's 1981 [Australian Sculpture] Triennial became a casualty to that perhaps?

KS: The one that he did in Sydney?

DE: No, the one that he did at Preston Institute.

KS: Yes, we could get back to that, but I've always thought that my role as a curator is simply to bring to public notice what is being produced by sculptors. I don't want to impose my personality on it. Generally speaking, I want to show what is happening and show the best of it. I think the Australia Council role in demanding a theme has become a limitation.

DE: Your own grants, what were they for?

KS: They were just to help do the research for *Australian sculptors*. Can we get back to Tom?

DE: Yes. I found it pretty poignant when he said that he still has nightmares about that time. I have a strong sense that what happened to him in 1978 was personally devastating [referring to McCullough's conflict with Mildura Council], but a year or two ago they [the council] gave him the second of the Elliott medals [the 2007 Elliott Award for outstanding contribution to the arts], which apparently is a very important medal in Mildura, so he has been welcomed back as a son of the city.

KS: Too bloody late.

DE: Way too late and I had the impression that he had moved completely away from the art scene.

KS: He went to the Melbourne Cricket Gallery, the Gallery of Sport [the Australian Gallery of Sport at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG)]. He said there's no aesthetics in that.

DE: The golden years of Mildura seem to be the 1970s, when that very wide field seemed to be very productive, and he was innovative in the sense that he went on a trip overseas and he saw that there was sculpture outdoors so he introduced that in *Sculpturscape* in 73.

KS: John Davis and Noel Hutchison were threatening to withdraw because he organised a French sculpture exhibition. At any rate, I think Tom's career has been very sad. First of all, he was the local high school teacher, so in one respect he had no training to be a gallery director or curator but then that was of the period as well. And I always feel that the worst thing that could happen to someone is to be promoted just a little bit beyond their abilities. So this was a danger with Tom. He was ambitious, and to some extent perhaps he just went a little bit too far. I think, for instance, the first [Australian] Sculpture Triennial [in Melbourne] in 1981, he overreached himself – it was too big, it was out of control. On the opening day there were a number of works which didn't even have a number on them, you couldn't identify them. The catalogue which he produced fell apart, it was so badly produced. It all just got too big and out of control. But going back to Mildura, Tom's quite wonderful point was that he was in contact with artists. He travelled, he met with artists, he knew what they were thinking, he knew their attitudes and their ideas, and he was with the artists, he was representing the artists. What he failed to do was to protect his back. He didn't make the contacts that were necessary in a country town. I remember talking with him and saying, 'Look, no matter what you do, start classes in ceramics, start classes in jewellery, anything, but get local people involved in your gallery', and this he didn't do. Exhibitions were held up in contempt by the *Sunraysia*, the local newspaper. He managed to alienate the councillors, and the final straw was when they instructed that there was to be no nudity or no blood letting! And then they burnt his book.

DE: How symbolic, how surreal is that? But his mentors on the council, you know, times change, and I think there had been a lot of protection against that for him, with Reg Etherington, and then there was another one. Neil Noyce? So there was about an eight-year period. I look at the 1976 Biennale [of Sydney, of which McCullough was artistic director] and think that was pretty amazing thing to do – take that Mildura model, internationalise it – and he pulled that off.

KS: That was very good, and to get that into the Art Gallery of New South Wales! No mean feat. But from then on ...

DE: A lot of things went off the boil. The government initiative to support the regions started to flake away, and what the Biennale in Sydney showed was that you could have a massive metropolitan event, with audiences that were ten times larger.

KS: And that is what rules everything: the number of people who attend, the amount of money you can raise from sponsors. They are the first criteria for any gallery director. What's your attendance? How much money have you raised? Not a matter of: how have you built the collection?

DE: Certainly the sexy end of gallery practice seems to be exhibitions. The only way that curators have been able, in the past ten years, to deal with the permanent collections is to structure their attention in terms of exhibitions. I just want to ask about you meeting a few people. Did you have much to do with Donald Brook?

KS: No. His intellect was beyond me. I don't pretend to have that sort of intellect so I couldn't cope.

DE: Noel Hutchison. When would you have first met him? Because he is in the wilds of Tasmania in the 1960s, I think.

KS: Well, as I was gathering all this information [for *Australian sculptors*], it seemed to me that there was a very small market for such a book, and I was a little apprehensive that others might beat me to it. But Noel Hutchison has got a very sharp mind, he's got a very critical sort of mind, he has a vast amount of knowledge, and I presumed that he would write something on Australian sculpture, and it's rather sad that he hasn't except for a few articles and one little booklet on [Bertram] Mackennal.

DE: It's interesting. I don't know where he is at.

KS: One of the things you have to realise – and this applies to John Davis and to Noel Hutchison – their time at the Victorian College of the Arts was not good. John Davis developed a big chip on his shoulder; he resented the time that he was giving to teaching and to students. Noel Hutchison, I think, got cornered into an administrative position and spent more and more of his time in writing courses and dealing with triennial inspections.

[This is followed by a personal discussion.]

The other one was Graham Sturgeon.

DE: Did you know him quite well?

KS: Yes, and I didn't know what was going to be the nature of his book. Luckily it's quite different.

DE: So his would have also come out in the late 1970s?

KS: He published just ahead of me [*The development of Australian sculpture 1788–1975*, published 1978]. But he had a wonderful advantage, because he was at Artbank. Someone was paying his fares and his accommodation all around Australia. People keep on asking me am I going to update Australian sculptors.

DE: What a job.

KS: I know, well in my estimate, there are about 2500 people who call themselves sculptors in Australia at present.

DE: And how many did you have in the dictionary?

KS: 450, and that's including those who are dead and buried.

DE: It's a remarkable triumph to have had that published.

KS: That was rejected by 12 publishers before Thomas Nelson agreed to publish it.

DE: I remember James Gleeson talking to me about the trials and tribulations about getting the [Robert] Klippel book published.

[Break in interview]

KS: My very simple definition of sculpture is that it is a human concept. That rules out a group of rocks that are produced by nature being looked upon as art. It might be a fascinating arrangement of those rocks but it is not a human concept, so it has to be a human concept, made manifest. I don't define in what way, as long as it adopts a three-dimensional form, so conceivably that would cover anything from a coin in your pocket

through to a soundscape, as long as the sound was produced in a three-dimensional manner. It seems to be so broad as to cover an extraordinarily wide field.

DE: But that's the telling point about it, so you work with a very open-ended conception of sculpture.

KS: Yes, now as opposed to that, I'm really saddened that when I now organise an exhibition of outdoor sculpture, which I've frequently done, either for Parks Victoria in the Dandenongs or the Royal Botanic Gardens, or Seawinds down at Arthurs Seat, or most recently down at Lorne, because of the prevalence of vandalism, it seems to be that I am now looked at as much more conservative because I've got to choose works which I think are near enough to indestructible, and that's a huge restriction.

DE: And is that becoming a major consideration?

KS: It's a major consideration. *Contempora*, which is an exhibition which has now ceased to exist but was down on the wharves at Docklands [in Melbourne]. One work in ceramics was about one-third smashed, two works were thrown into the sea, a year later another work was thrown into the sea. Other works by Peter Corlett, which were down there permanently, were vandalised to such an extent that they had to be taken out. With the works that I showed down at Lorne ... We had a very lovely work, like a great big sea urchin, and I put it at the end of a pier. The local fishermen kicked it, sat on it, jumped on it; we had to remove it within a few days. There was a little monument in memory of a young girl who died – her family paid for a little bronze to go into a Fitzroy garden – but vandals came in with a grinder, cut her off at the ankles and took the whole thing for scrap metal. These are all recent examples.

[End]