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Oral history interview with Gyorgy Kepes,
1968 Aug. 18

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Gyorgy Kepes on August 18, 1968. The interview took place in Wellesley, MA, and was conducted by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This is a rough transcription that may include typographical errors.

Interview

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing—Gyorgy Kepes?

GYORGY KEPES: Yeah, yeah. Don't try it because you never will make it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughter] Do say it once for us.

GYORGY KEPES: Gyorgy Kepesh [phonetic].

DOROTHY SECKLER: Kepes. And it is August 18th, I believe, 1968.

GYORGY KEPES: That's right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And it is in Wellesley. And it is our purpose on this tape to document your early life, Mr. Kepes. And so I will ask you the obvious question—is, where were you born, and what was the environment of your early life as a boy? What kind of family, and anything about your boyhood that might cast some light on the kind of artist that you later became?

GYORGY KEPES: If you must know, it's not an easy task to scan one's own hidden memories. But I will try whatever I can. I was born in Hungary in a small picturesque estate where my father was the manager of the estate. His boss was one of the good old and the good [inaudible] Hungarian aristocrat whose outlook was very much limited by his caste interest. I mention it because my life was very much conditioned by almost rebelling against these early memories.

I don't have too much very early memory, as I know some of my friends and some other people do have. And I would cheat myself if I would improvise some episodes or details that seem to me a significant key to everything that happened after. I can safely say that I recommend joy in living in what one may call a natural setting. Our own house was close to a game—what is it called?

DOROTHY SECKLER: A preserve.

GYORGY KEPES: Preserve. And so as a small boy, I not only had seen all this, beautiful trees and the blue sky and [inaudible], but also animals who were there by playing and being very close to us. So it was a wonderland that I think every child would have envied. And I almost envy myself having it, and I wish I can reclaim it again.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was it a large family?

GYORGY KEPES: I had a sister who died. And I had a brother who is three years younger than I. And the typical setting in this time—we had a number of maids and servants. And it was somehow an imitation of a feudal existence, which had, again, a certain part of repercussion in my inner world because I began, to be honest, enjoy to be in at a certain level of this micro-society. At the same time, I envied the type of boys who could live freer and, in a certain sense, at least, if I could judge, better than I could live. I had private tutors. And they just went every day to the village school and had their maybe hard life, but lived in a community what I didn't quite have.

I have a few hard-put memories of single people. And it has no real relevance to my work as a painter. But I feel one never knows, and I feel it [inaudible] because it may have something to do of fate with some hidden ideals what one has.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Can we pause this?

[OFF THE RECORD]

DOROTHY SECKLER: We'd like very much to have you talk about these early contacts.

GYORGY KEPES: One person who had some [inaudible], who had some influence on my interest in arts—they are actually family members, two uncles of mine. One was—it's difficult to put in American terms. He was a lawyer, but he was some high official in the Hungarian police in Budapest. But he was an amateur painter. And it's more than amateur painter, an obsessed painter. Not a very good painter, but painting gave a key and meaning to his life, and everything else was somehow just a necessary evil.

And seeing the man and having the chance to get in contact with him, often almost daily, appetized my own imagination that that's really heaven and a haven in life. And this was why he was doing it.

Another man was also an uncle of mine who was a doctor, who was a bachelor. And I assume—and I never inquired what was the complication, because every human being has some complication, why he lived [inaudible] alone in life. But he was a collector of art, not great painting, but some very good painting, some seventeenth century Dutch painting. He had some good Hungarian painters' and sculptors' work.

But he had, again, an absolutely genuine love for what one calls art in these very broad terms. He went every summer for a trip to Italy or Greece or wherever he wanted to go, and came back and told me, "Little boy," all his encounter—and again, seeing and sensing a man, true love affair, there is something which is worthwhile living for.

But actually, I wouldn't claim that their involvement in art made me involved. But I know that seeing two men whom I respected and liked to be so deeply involved is certain to have interested me as a boy. I felt that it's not only my own fancy, but it has, to put in a very dignified, social justification.

I started very young, like I soon managed to just make drawings and paintings. And I was considered a wonder child. I haven't seen these drawings now for 30-40 years, so I cannot really judge now how much I deserved this little halo that I carried. But in any case, I took it terrifically seriously. And I put almost all my play energy in painting and drawing and not in just playing around.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What kind of things—what kind of images—were you looking at things or just creating things from imagination?

GYORGY KEPES: I was eight or nine. They are not anymore really the spontaneous images of a child. I remember that then I went to Budapest for a year, and there I stayed for a year. I was taken by my uncle a number of times to the museum. And I saw two great Goya paintings. And either it was his secret key that he told me how great these paintings are, or I responded to these paintings. This was his extra scaffolding. But I know that some of his paintings are little—whatever one may call attempts. But I did in this time echoed the character of this rather portent, realistic attitude of a warrior.

I remember very well I painted a gypsy boy with his violin under his arm. And now I know that, without then knowing, that it was a religious transformation of the painting by Goya I saw at the museum and translating it into an image which made closer sense to me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were they earlier Goyas or from his later work?

GYORGY KEPES: It was from his later. You may know, one is a girl carrying a jar. It is one of the great—it is almost like a foreshortened photograph. The figure has a monumental quality because it's almost it like it could have been seen just below the eye level and has a very overpowering strength. The other is a knife sharpener.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Inaudible]

GYORGY KEPES: In fact, I just saw them again after 35 years. I was months ago in Hungary, two months ago. I went to the museum, and it was a very interesting experience to encounter again, in an entirely different context of life and experience background, visual images I knew very well in my youth. And these two paintings, they are as strong as impacts today as they were when I was a boy of five, six, seven, eight, or nine.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That must have been rewarding. It would have been sad if they had been disappointing. Goya was kind of --

GYORGY KEPES: I just got a postcard from a friend of mine, an Argentine architect who was learning in Europe, in Spain. And he sent me a Goya of *The Dog in the Sand*. Do you know this painting? It's a dog buried in sand.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, I do. I think I know that one, yes. I was just there a month or so ago. And it's a strange one, and I didn't know what it was. But I remember a strange painting with the dog's head --

GYORGY KEPES: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: -- appearing out of almost nothing.

GYORGY KEPES: I haven't seen the painting. But this Fuska, this friend, amazing experience because it has the enigmatic strength that Goya very frequently has, but here maybe more than in most of his work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: If you had nothing to explain it and you just had to read what you could into this barely sandy background, light okre-ish tones and the head of this dog just appearing out of it—and I didn't really know what it meant. But it was so like a strange dream.

GYORGY KEPES: I see—an enigma. It maybe it was for him, too. But he had to record it because it must have had some—in a repercussion, experiencing it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did it take you on a terror as well as—I mean, something horrible that could have happened as well as this nightmare, through the sands, fantastic thing appearing? Yes, well, I mustn't keep you on Goya too long.

GYORGY KEPES: No, no.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But that was very important and interesting, I think. Then you were doing figures, I assume, since you were taking this [inaudible]?

GYORGY KEPES: It's one of these mixtures of everything. I assume every child goes through similar phases. I was interested in war paintings, whatever it means. I have some recollection that I was terrifically proud of myself for painting some war scene with, oh, 20 or 30 figures, and each was really not, at least, in my experience. Now, what this war interest meant in my childhood, I have absolutely no idea. But again, it's quite possible I have seen some painting which has such theme and I wanted to compete with the painter or I wanted to appear grown up.

In fact, I shouldn't say it, but I will say I remember that painting meant for me as a young boy of six, seven, eight, many things. Much as the joy in expressing my own images, but also, it gave me at least the illusion that I am not a child anymore; I'm in the grown-up community. And I remember very well that in this time, age maybe six or seven, I was dreaming about having oil paints, as my uncle has, with a real tube that I can press and the pigments are coming there. But I couldn't have it because, I guess, my family's floor is very messy and they're not yet ready for such things.

So I made a sack of oil paints I cut out from cardboard, tubes, and painted on each one the colors. And I was painting with watercolor, but I had the illusion that I'm really in the first league and not just in the child league. I assume every child in this early stage had a wide range of ways trying to feel that he is certain steps ahead of himself.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Um-hm. Where—at what age were you or how did the actual event of, let's say, World War I, come into your life? Was this—did events in Europe, and in the world at large affect your life in any way?

GYORGY KEPES: Yes, very much so. Actually, I don't know, whether this field of yours, you know, how much—the field you want to hear about.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It varies.

GYORGY KEPES: And I am quite sure I gave an out-of-proportion of this very early experience, since my whole life was not deeply committed, but involved always in the total spectrum of life. I never was just what they call just a painter. I always felt that when I paint, it's just one aspect of my painting stint in life. And maybe these early so-called war paintings were just a romantic dash of participating in—during the end of the First World War, when I was a small boy, six, seven.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You must have been quite young.

GYORGY KEPES: Then I saw the one with soldiers, and I heard or I have seen newspaper pictures. And I must have been very deeply involved in this situation. And it may have been just, you want to be participating in the total, but later I always had to have a confrontation between the painter world and the man's world who wants to take and has to take it.

That's why I mentioned at the very beginning that the setting goes—caste or the aristocrat, baron, and the peasants, and all what was the background music in my early childhood—had a very great significance in my later years when I took a stand and felt very strongly that one cannot be a man if he is not sticking his neck out for certain human rights or certain ideals, but that that makes sense in life.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was there someone who helped in your family, or among your early friends, who was helping take a stand on social issues of the day?

GYORGY KEPES: Not really. At least not in my childhood. But my mother, who died very early, I was 13, was emotion very much involved in sensing freedomness. And actually, both she and my father was reading to us children, poetry. It's a Hungarian habit for Hungarians still today. Well, I was back just, as I mentioned, six weeks ago. But poetry has a much greater relevance in the Hungarian cultural life than almost country I know or any cultural group I know.

The poet for the Hungarian is like what the Latin poet Demarkus who sees the world and who forecasts and protects and dreams of a better life and fights for it with words. And he sends up to free [inaudible] almost in every Hungarian school, poetry school, a daily pattern of living. And I know that it was a tremendously important thing in my childhood.

The 15th of March was the—or is still the Freedom Day in Hungary. In 1848, that was the day when the revolution began against the Hapsburg oppressors. And in my childhood, every year we went to -- a certain spot in Budapest there was the Monumento, the great national poet Petőfi, who was and certainly is the sparkplug of this revolution. And later in the school, I loved to recite poems, and I was always who was reciting poems of this, freedom poems.

And it has, I assume again, a very broad cultural reason because it was the Hungarian V [ph], but also a very personal reason in my youth, in my background. And later in my inevitable confrontation of generation against another generation, that as a young man I resented my father, what I assumed [inaudible] nature. And as he stood for a peace background, I juxtaposed against this background what I felt the right of the man or the right of the peasant.

And I became very deeply involved in what they called peasant movement in Hungary, which was trying to fight or at least prepare the way for the peasants could have their each share in life.

DOROTHY SECKLER: A program to redistribute the land?

GYORGY KEPES: Redistribute—it actually, had many aspects. Before I left Hungary in the late '20s, very early '30s, there were a number of writers who were surveying of the situation, describing the peasants' conditions in a very almost sociographical or sociological way, very carefully documenting the inhumane setting. And that shows they had also political program, and they were protesting. Many of them were arrested. They are put in jail.

And it's just a footnote that Béla Bartók, who was a great hero for us, was also involved, not in the field, but he—his absolute sympathy for this movement. Then some of the young writers were arrested because of presenting some condition in the midland of Hungary—and it's very accusing and genuine suffering. Bartók and some other writers were writing an open letter claiming that they have absolute identification with what these writers were saying and they realized that they should be arrested, too, because, again, a very typical Hungarian pattern among the social life.

Again, I wouldn't generalize everybody has the same attitudes because, as you know too well, there were a great deal of fascists' overtones and political propaganda and menacing, ugly streams coming in, but had a significant role in the evolution of my generation.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

GYORGY KEPES: Both painters, sculptors—and also, poets.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's a beautiful and –

[OFF THE RECORD]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I believe that you mentioned a moment ago school. So I gather that at some point you were not then tutored, but did go to a school? Where would that have been?

GYORGY KEPES: Yes. After, I went to the regular schools. In fact, the family moved to Budapest after the end of the—actually, I don't remember exactly when. But—and I then take a gymnasium in Budapest, and also the Academy of Fine Art, which was something I did, the University of Arts. A very big chunk of my life was in Budapest.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you encounter personalities or mentors there who affected your ideas deeply or your feelings for art?

GYORGY KEPES: Yes. Again, I'm improvising. You know, when one is just suddenly—has to confront oneself and try to pick up significant memories, you may just pick up the wrong one. But I know of two which are absolutely correct.

I had a professor at the gymnasium who was teaching Greek and Latin [inaudible]. He was a man who came back from a prison camp from the First World War. And I went to Lucharem [ph] gymnasium. And it was not strict, but everything had its set goals. And it was not a revolutionary school. And this man came back, I assume, during his present years and during his war years and reshuffling his convictions and became, not a political revolutionary, but he was just burning with the idea that the world is not cast in its final form, that the society could be changed and the man should be participating in reshaping his setting.

And then I think I was 16 or thereabout. And not only myself, but most of our friends felt a very certain glow that you didn't get from any other teacher. He never talked politics, but sometime, just odd like comments. And some, they are formally being the Homeric legend from whatever he was talking about, but then he was a wonderful teacher. He just felt that there are convictions which we should explore ourselves.

And he was also a courageous man. Unfortunately, he couldn't take it because I knew that maybe six or seven years after I left the gymnasium, he committed suicide. But he had the guts always to stand up and stand for justice.

I had a schoolmate who was the son of the premier minister of Hungary. For 10 years, his father was premier. He had a tremendous [inaudible]. And this boy was a lovely kid, but one of these boys who are what you call a playboy, who had never had any reason to make any commitment. Also having such a powerful father, he just assumed that whatever he does is sanctioned. And he never took studying seriously, and he just played around.

And he came, or his family came from the most—one of the most important Transylvanian historical families. One of his ancestors there was the duke of Transylvania and one of the great historical figures in Hungarian blood, had that big monument in Budapest.

And one day, then, he was [inaudible] gymnasium, so about 16, 17, or 18—depends upon who started when—this boy just behaved as a little boy can behave. When this professor of arts came, "Will you mind coming in front of the class then?" He came out. And the professor asked him, "Can you remember how Bethlem Garbo [ph]"—you know, this famous ancestor—"is standing in the platform in this glass in Budapest?" And the boy said, "Yes." "Could you show it to us?" And the boy was showing it. "Will you mind standing here for an hour like that just to remember that the background is not defining the character and the quality of the man?"

And the boy had absolutely no guts to say anything. And at the same time, his father could really kill—or I don't mean literally, but really, he was the power in Hungary. And such a thing impressed me very much. So he was one of the men who gave me this feeling that courage is very important in life.

The other was my professor in the university, who was the great Hungarian painter. His name was Istvan Csok.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Could you spell that?

GYORGY KEPES: C-s-o-k. I was just proudly discovering in Hungary that one of the stamps is his painting. In Hungary, like in France, the stamps are the artists' work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, yes.

GYORGY KEPES: And his painting was on the stamp. He was a very inarticulate man who hardly could express himself in a disciplined way. But he had an absolute, humble love for what makes sense in art. And he never really taught us in the way a student and teacher should tell you, "Do that one, do that one." But he was just sparking around us.

He had a wonderful system because some of the major professors had big studios in a house in a huge square in Budapest where the art academia was. And as he was director of the school, he had a big house, and he had a very impressive, big studio there. Indeed, some of the more advanced students, he had—the best students—the building was sometimes shared, two or three of us in one studio.

And I'll never forget that one day he came down running. He was a little man. And he was bald, but camouflaged by having his hair combed from the back to the front. And when he got excited, he pushed it back so it was just a funny looking [inaudible]. And he just shouted, "Come up! Come! Something happened to my last thing."

And we rushed up. And he explained, he tried to get this certain quality of the color, just could not make it. And then he explained how he put certain colors together. And suddenly, the paint, the color appeared. And I said, obvious knowledge for everybody. But the important thing was not that he presented an obvious knowledge. But he, age 60 or whatever he was, could be like a young boy, absolutely glowing with joy, because something happened which was stronger and greater than himself.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

GYORGY KEPES: And he really gave us a key of this humbleness that art is not regal. Art is something where, if you are able to stand back and forget your own pushing self, you may find it. And then he had a rough deal because one day, in the time we were there, all involved in the cubist and constructivist movement for my friends and myself. And we had a private studio. And the minister of culture was at the academy and came in and asked what nonsense—well, "What is that you're doing?" Told that what you tried to do and we tried to explain as well as we could. And then he just started to make silly comments.

And we just told him that he just doesn't see the art. And then he got a nice note after the end of the semester that it was—what do they call it?—undignified behavior, he cannot be taken back to the academy.

[OFF THE RECORD]

GYORGY KEPES: -- for my friends that I became professor and the head of the department [inaudible]. Rather an inflated notion for what my role was, but he gave a long interview in one of the Hungarian papers how proud he was that he stuck his neck out for us young generation.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughter]

GYORGY KEPES: So he was another man who gave a very major direction in my life, not because we didn't by ourselves with his artistic ideals, but because he had this really absolute acceptance of the quality and value what he said art should give.

And the last man who had a major impact on me—and I will show you his work. But I just got a book on him just two days ago from Hungary. He was one of the major figures in the Hungarian avant-garde movement. He was a young blacksmith before the First World War, when he began to write very beautiful, sophisticated sonnets. And that's picked up by the literary elite as the great promise.

And he went along for a year or two, but during the First World War, he became a very important fighting revolutionary, not in a political sense. But he was against the war. He became a fighting pacifist, and he masqueraded, de-represented, he was the focus Hungary of everything that went in rescue of cubist movement, constructivist, labor, and everything else.

And he was for 10 years in immigration because after the war, there was a revolution. And some of the people who had anything to do with it had to leave Hungary. But people who didn't have political role could come back after 10 years. And he came back, I think, in 29. And we knew about his work and some of my friends and myself, we visited him. And he started, and I guess, again, in which we were, deeply involved. And he was somebody who was the eye-opener, not just for me. You know László Moholy?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Um-hm.

GYORGY KEPES: He was for me the Moholy. And he was the man who had an intensity and strength of vision. He was not a good painter, but a very exciting painter, a constructivist painter. After, I can show you the book what I just got recently.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah. Had he been associated with the constructivists in Russia?

GYORGY KEPES: Yes, he was—no, he was actually the Hungarian constructivist. And we had a magazine together. He almost groomed us with—just the opposite from this professor I mentioned at the academy.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

GYORGY KEPES: The professor was sweet and humble. This man had a tremendous ego, and he had to fight back. He just didn't want to let us grow up. And that's a very good teacher, because you give a lot to your inner muscles. You have emotional and intellectual muscles. And if we did something, sometime maybe had good reason to say, "It's no good." But sometime, he just didn't want to have that we also become independent agents. And he thought that to criticize us, not just personally, but writing about us, that we are defeatist and whatever else—and so he had to fight back.

And that's a very important experience in my case and also my friend's case because we started to grasp the reality of the art world is a fight also. It's not just an inner confrontation. But you have to assert yourself. You have conviction. And as we had been very young and we had very—had an overdose of conviction. We fought with an overdose of arrogance, too.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughter] That's beautifully formulated. I'm not sure that I—I must confess to my own ignorance as to how the ideas of constructivism developed in Hungary. Of course, we are all familiar with what's happened in Russia. And was this something that was a general movement? Was your teacher then in contact with top men and others in Russia? Or was he—did he arrive independently?

GYORGY KEPES: Actually, he was not really a teacher of mine. He was a leader, what you would call in—forgetting the nasty overtones of leader. I bring the book. Maybe it's a easier to refer to it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah. Wonderful.

GYORGY KEPES: Just one second. I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's okay.

GYORGY KEPES: In 1919, a great number of the younger, braver people, writers, artists, had to leave Hungary. Moholy was among them. I think Brauer was among them. Partly for political thought, but for just cultural reason before the counterrevolution it was victorious. And the younger people felt that it was no chance to grow up under the circumstances.

And Kassák had to leave for political reasons. And in 1919 in Vienna, where he lived -- and Moholy lived in this town for a short time—there was a very strong communication between the Russian constructivists and these men.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Let's get his name on the record. And would you spell it for us?

GYORGY KEPES: K-a-s-s-á-k.

DOROTHY SECKLER: K-a-s-s-á-k, with an accent over the second "a."

GYORGY KEPES: Lajos is the first name.

DOROTHY SECKLER: L-a-j-o-s. Thank you.

GYORGY KEPES: He was a capitalizer. He was a man who had a tremendous intensity and ambition and a real conviction that he sees, has validity, for everybody. I was just reading in this book because, you know, how one forgets many things from the past. And it could have been written to be by some of the more recent group of artists, only he formerly [inaudible], I think, a much freer, much more intense fashion. And I may just find it, and I will translate just a few sentences.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, I wish you could.

GYORGY KEPES: But it could have been literally written today.

[OFF THE RECORD]

GYORGY KEPES: This artistic movement was actually not entirely isolated, insulated from political ideas and the belief that people were participating in this magazine which was called *Munka*, which means "Work." Our duty is also to distribute our new insights to the workers or peasants. And we had [inaudible] I was belonging not here, but I belonged to such [inaudible]. Then we were improvising stage designs and then tried to create a constructivist world philosophy, but we tried to propagate to the people around us.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This of course was after—considerably after your initiation in cubism.

GYORGY KEPES: Yes, it was.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So you had some formal background for that, too?

GYORGY KEPES: Not much after. I was a cubist—or I shouldn't say "a cubist," but you know, we all went through different assumptions.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah.

GYORGY KEPES: And I was maybe 20. And then I worked with these people when I was 21 or 22.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

GYORGY KEPES: I want to find this.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was an exciting time to have been plunged into this at just that age.

GYORGY KEPES: Hm? It has good and bad all wrapped around it, too, because sometimes living in this country and seeing what I feel wrongly harm anything that happens to be [inaudible] with a more honest and more maybe intensity by my generation, I feel restless and maybe arrogant with the echoes. Then I assume that I've

heard the real voice.

DOROTHY SECKLER: We all have that experience at times, I think.

GYORGY KEPES: The quotation that I would like to read, it said that the the rule of art, which is not an image of anything, but it is just bare, you know --

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah. That sounds very modern.

[SIMULTANEOUS CONVERSATION]

GYORGY KEPES: Recently it's a very strong voice for it. And it's not as a new invention, as at least the art present. Just one second. I hope I --

[PAUSE]

GYORGY KEPES: He speaks about picture architecture, which was difficult to find an equivalent English word. Actually, the constructivist image and, instead of calling construction picture architecture, on the picture's surface, he calls it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Um-hm.

GYORGY KEPES: And the picture architecture is a power or a force that doesn't want to demonstrate a strong god or protest against a horrible war or sing an idyllic love, but only wants to demonstrate itself. A picture architecture doesn't resemble to anything, doesn't tell story about anything. It doesn't begin anywhere and doesn't end anywhere. It simply is there. And it's very much the same.

But in this existence—can you—actually, I have to think it over. It's hard to translate. But in any case, it was written, I think, in 1920.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. It sounds as if part of it might have been incorporated into the platform of the minimal artist.

GYORGY KEPES: Yes. In fact, one of the Hungarian constructivists who, until he died last year, a good friend of mine Romano Teri, T-e-r-i, died in London recent, last year.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I've heard of the name, but I don't know --

GYORGY KEPES: He did almost exactly the same as this minimalist artist has been doing. He was dreaming to make huge interacting surfaces, but moving art to space, not just sitting on a flat surface, but interacting. He never could do it. Later he moved to a—oh, first to architecture, then some formal social realism. A very gifted man, but a very restless man who didn't have the consistent inner theme in his life.

But he was, I think, one of the great pioneers. And I wish one day he could be presented as he deserved. I think in this, at Folgers recently, some of the productions of his work, there was a big exhibition on the constructivists in Germany. You may have seen the catalog.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The one in Buffalo?

GYORGY KEPES: No, no, in Germany.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In Germany, I see.

GYORGY KEPES: It's a young woman, Liter Myer [ph], who visited me, organized it. And they had some of the barest work. And I so often reproduce his work. But he did it, made it for three years, and just dropped it. So not much remained left.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Then in '21 or '22, you were still in Budapest?

GYORGY KEPES: In Budapest.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Not Vienna?

GYORGY KEPES: No. I never lived in Vienna. I was short time. Then I maybe just going back to my own life. Through this stage, I had, as I mentioned before, two almost conflicting forces. One, I want to do things visually, which I feel gives me a joy of living. At the same time, I didn't want to do it as a sacrifice of my conscience. I want to be a part of the world, and I want to do things also with my paintings or whatever I'm doing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah.

GYORGY KEPES: And literally from one day to the other, I decided that painting cannot do it. To use visual images or visual thoughts, and the same time culminated ideas which have concrete meaning for the people I'm intending to speak to, I have to accept the new media, and at this time it was the motion picture. And I read Moholy's books, and I wrote to Moholy a letter, a long letter that I gave up painting, I want to make movies, films, which had a good heart to clarify life and maybe stimulate people to live up to their real self.

And Moholy invited me to go to work with him. And I then talked to Berlin. But it was an illusion first. Moholy didn't have any opportunity to make films. He did one or two aspect films. I was working in his *Black, White, Gray*. But the type of films I hoped to do, it was almost impossible to do anywhere.

I wrote a script, a romantic script on a Hungarian Robin Hood type of hero from 1848. And I thought I can make a film where -- the general structure at that time was a film that would be almost like a constructivist pattern. There was very strong juxtaposition of absolutely unrelated areas. But the substance of the film would have an emotional aspect of the patterns in human life, and in its appearance, folklore at its best.

And I asked Kodi [ph]—you may know this composer, to write the music. And he actually was very romantic and said that if I have this film in a certain stage, he will—could write the music. In early days, I was very ambitious to do something which could focus everything what I was dreaming up till then.

Then many things happened. It was a depression Germany. And I worked with Moholy just to make a living. He had to make posters and other advertising and every possible things.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Sure he wasn't much older, was he?

GYORGY KEPES: He was 12 years older.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Twelve years older than you and hadn't made films of a constructivist nature?

GYORGY KEPES: No, he did one film I was working with, the *Black, White, Gray*.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

GYORGY KEPES: And then he did a few documentary films, one on the gypsies. And he wrote some film scripts, constructivist type of film scripts that the young men still in the Weimar—no, I think [inaudible] some done around 1924-25.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Inaudible] began.

GYORGY KEPES: But he was dreaming about filmmaking. Whatever he did was improvisations. He did a film on lobster fishing in London and gypsies in Germany, then a little documentary film in Marseilles on the—what do you call it?—the coast. But it was really not serious film in the way as he hoped to do.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you had a chance at least to learn the rudiments of filmmaking, technically, so you had it at your command?

GYORGY KEPES: Not really, because you have to work with the media to develop the tools. But I had the fortunate, at least to get acquainted with some of the great filmmakers and talk to them and get stimulated. And that was very important for me.

In this time, there was still a communication between Russian intellectuals and the Western intellectuals. And Moholy was the name for some of the Russian filmmakers, Eisenstein], Fudufky [ph], Dovshenko, and Chikovera [ph]. And then some of them were visiting Berlin, I met them, and I made a point to keep contact with them.

For instance, I remember as a very important human experience, going once for a long walk with Dovshenko and his wife in Berlin. I don't know whether you are acquainted with his work. He did a fabulously beautiful film, *The Earth*, maybe one of the great Russian films. And it was his film's premiere in Berlin. And he and his wife came to Berlin. They spoke German, but that's why they first treat it in West.

And I was somehow the little mentor for them, painting around. And it was a great experience to have the chance to see—to learn what motivated them. And it was an important learning time for me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah. That would have been at his film dealing with the earth—was something with a kind of symbolic treatment?

GYORGY KEPES: It was actually the typical Russian collective farm story. But he presented it in a very human

way, so he was accused that he was not really got with the socialist ideas. And he was in a doghouse for quite a long time after.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In where?

GYORGY KEPES: In a doghouse. You know, he couldn't do --

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, yes, I see. Yes. [Laughter]

GYORGY KEPES: He just could not do anything. He was a painter before he became a filmmaker. And he had this wonderful appetite for the quality of the visible world. And his films had some of the greatest shots in filmmaking.

I saw it fairly recently. There was a group at Harvard University, a film society or whatever, were showing it. Unfortunately, the film was as bad as you could possibly be. You know, sometimes they are scratched. But still, it shines.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, it's a shame that we don't have it in the Museum of Modern Art Library.

GYORGY KEPES: I think they do. I think they have it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: They do? I'll have to see it. So that at that point, were you going on with film? Or half doing some work with painting and some with film?

GYORGY KEPES: I was hoping to make films, and I became very sick. And I had to go to Hungary, was a year in bed, almost a year in bed. I had a streptococcus infection of my heart. And that was, again, an important experience, if one can put it in this way, because most young people live, but cannot see what's themselves. And as I—fortunately, I didn't know I will be so long in bed. But staying in bed and staying—I stayed with my sister and brother-in-law, who had an estate in Transylvania—I made acquaintance with the local peasants, who were Romanians, but spoke Hungarian.

And I learned from firsthand an aspect of life what was previously an important poster for me, but really not life. And some of these people liked me or made a study for me. And I had almost every evening a visit to Reisenholt [ph], Battenort [ph], with men and women. And we'd get to talking about everything, but that would find what is the common denominator. And that helped me also to have a key to life what I wouldn't have had if I'm just living this office where everything is just homogenized into this constant excitement.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Someone that I was taping recently—I believe it may have been Hal Rosenberg—said that it seems as though often a genius or very talented people, that you can trace it back to having had a strategic illness at just the right time in life. [Laughter]

GYORGY KEPES: Yes, I think he may have been right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Especially if you're sick enough. [Laughter]

GYORGY KEPES: He's right because if you cannot move back to see yourself, then the next step is really just a random movement. And after, I recall that from my sickness. Moholy was still in Germany and was leaving then to Holland.

DOROTHY SECKLER: At the Bauhaus? Was he at the Bauhaus yet?

GYORGY KEPES: Not at the Bauhaus. He's not at the Bauhaus a long time. Then I went to Germany, but not anymore at the Bauhaus. He had a studio in Berlin. And then I recall that he asked me to go to Berlin, back, and take over his work in the studio. In the meantime, he started a new life or try to build up a new base, first in Amsterdam, later in London. By then, back in '35-'36, Berlin, didn't like it, as you can imagine in all that I've said before.

And then I went in—I think—I just try to remember—'35, I think—yes, '35, I went from—'34-'35, I went to Berlin. In '35 I went to London and worked again with Moholy. We had a commercial studio, doing every possible work, from posters to this underground—to just anything, exhibitions and—then when Moholy was invited to start the school in Chicago, he just sent me a cable whether I want to teach. And I was never teaching before, in fact, never intentioned to teach.

And I had like every work into my relationship—not an absolute harmonious relationship with Moholy. There were many disagreements in every level, personal and cultural, value level. But like sometimes, there are just consideration which makes you decide, I want to get married. And then, I got married, came to this country, started to teach. In rather broken English because I'm always an incurable Hungarian, and this time my English

was not very adapted to communication. But still, I survived.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What year was that?

GYORGY KEPES: That was the end of 1937.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The end of '37. It must have been really, though, an enormous experience of change. Did you stay—did you go to Chicago immediately or stop in New York for awhile?

GYORGY KEPES: Stopped for a night in—in fact, I didn't stop for the night.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You didn't?

GYORGY KEPES: Slept in the train. No, we just arrived and looked at New York and came to Chicago. And I never forget my first look at Chicago—again, like everything, had many aspects. You couldn't sleep in the train. The boat, somebody sold us—some agent—just a very long train from Europe to Chicago. I don't know what it was, but in any case, it was a terrifically long train ride. And very excited and worn out and literally unable to sleep.

And then we approached Chicago and looked out and saw this tail end of the Depression, absolutely corroded sight of the south side of Chicago, you know, the colored area. Dante's *Inferno* was really happening in comparison. And I just couldn't believe my eyes that that could exist in rich America. And that was an impact that I never really forgot.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Um-hm. I can imagine.

GYORGY KEPES: And I still all the more feel the same because this fact that this type of tremendous contrasting lives could coexist, this constantly rushing about, as I feel, is something not yet resolved in our world.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You're feeling the repercussions of it most intensely right now. I had meant, just before we got you so quickly across the ocean, to ask if you had not been persecuted while you were in Berlin, or were you just not known as having that much of a revolutionary background?

GYORGY KEPES: No, actually, I didn't have any political background. And I didn't participate in any political party. And I didn't have any difficulty. Many of my friends there—oh, Herr Drofban [ph], some of them were killed, some of them committed suicide. I knew an old man who was an editor, and then I was looking for him. I heard that he committed suicide in the prison. And it was not an easy experience.

And I never forget one day I was walking on the street in Berlin and I met a man, a professor of history, whom I knew before. And I want to go to him and talk. And he just gave me a sign not to. And then later I heard he was just released from concentration camp and he just didn't want to talk to anybody.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah.

GYORGY KEPES: And it had, again, a bitter schooling in it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah. But did you come across the Hans Hoffman at any point in your journey, experience?

GYORGY KEPES: No. Actually, Hoffman was an unknown name for me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: He was in music, of course.

GYORGY KEPES: And my first encounter with Hoffman's name was through former Hoffman students who were my students at the first year in the New Bauhaus in Chicago. And it's interesting for history.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

GYORGY KEPES: I had students, Tony Smith and Wiltman and Albert[inaudible] and these people.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Really?

GYORGY KEPES: And these people were in this time in a certainly mature people, not as artists. But they went to Hoffman's school, and they had very strong opinion about life. They were upwards of my age. I was still a young man when I started. And I really had to fight for survival as a teacher. And sometimes I got—I don't mean literally, but culturally—quite a beating because some of these boys were very articulate.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

GYORGY KEPES: And whatever I was standing for, they identified with Moholy's stand, which was not always a

fact. And if their disagreement was always—if I'm mentioning, it it was always, "Mr. Hoffman said something else." So I had to learn about Mr. Hoffman in a hard way.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughter]

GYORGY KEPES: Later I became not a friend, what made him very—in very good terms. Let's see. Not, he but Bart Hayes published a little book on him.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, yes.

GYORGY KEPES: And I reviewed it in one of the magazines. And I was very positive about it. And he was very nice to me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's generous of you, considering your ordeal. [Laughter]

GYORGY KEPES: And he invited me quite a few times in Provincetown, serving his wonderful lobster what he usually did.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, he's a wonderful cook and a wonderful man to have in Provincetown for so many years. And of course, he was in Munich and then in Paris, and you were in Berlin. So there's really no reason, as I think about it, why you should have communicated.

GYORGY KEPES: But it was interesting because, as far as I know, he had absolutely no political orientation. In fact, if any, it's not in the direction I would have oriented.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, of course, [inaudible] would stay in Munich during that difficult period and had to see the students, some of them, hauled off by Nazi police.

GYORGY KEPES: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And so she had more reason for developing a strong stand and [inaudible] in America.

GYORGY KEPES: I think he came in '35. Yes, it was '35.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Thirty-one, I believe, yes.

GYORGY KEPES: I had -- again to be frank, first when I saw his work, I was not responding to it. I thought it's a tremendous, exciting vehemence and intensity. But I saw great discrepancies between his teaching values and the expressed form. But later I developed a strong liking for his work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Hm. I think we're almost—oh, we only have another moment or two to go.

[END OF DISK ONE]

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[OFF THE RECORD]

GYORGY KEPES: -- formation with the Kashok [ph] cover.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, yes. That's a shame. I guess this --

GYORGY KEPES: Sometimes I didn't know the whole background.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughter]

GYORGY KEPES: But now seeing this book.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I'll just identify this again as—this is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Mr. Kepes, in order to avoid your first name again. [Laughter]

GYORGY KEPES: [Laughter]

DOROTHY SECKLER: In the Noelle Suite in August 1968, and this being our second reel, and discussing the period soon after you had first arrived in Chicago to work with Moholy-Nagy. The school was not at that time, I

think—it was called --

GYORGY KEPES: It was the New Bauhaus.

DOROTHY SECKLER: -- the New Bauhaus. Yes.

GYORGY KEPES: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And could you give us a little idea of, well, how large it was and how many people would have been involved, enrolled at this time, or how many courses and so on?

GYORGY KEPES: It was a very small school. The faculty was a real conglomeration of everything and everybody. Moholy was the guiding spirit and the vital force. And he asked Archipenko, who was one of the teachers. Then besides Archipenko, I was there. And the man Breedendick [ph], who is now in Georgia Tech, a former Weimer student, we were the core from the visual education.

And then Moholy made fast friendship with some of the professors from the University of Chicago, non-artists or non-designers, and invited Charles Morris, the philosopher, and Eckhart, the physicist, and Roger Hart, the neuro-physiologist, and some other people, to give the courses in the general background.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah. Continuing the Bauhaus idea.

GYORGY KEPES: Yeah. That was the idea. For the second year, which never realized, Moholy mobilized a number of people to come; invited Herbert Byer, I think Santi Shavinski, Elian [ph].

DOROTHY SECKLER: Elian?

GYORGY KEPES: Yes, um-hm. But these people arrived, but then the school collapsed. You may have read Sybil Moholy's report about these years. I don't know the details.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I don't—didn't know it that well. And I should have, I should.

GYORGY KEPES: I don't know the details myself, and so they are basically irrelevant. It was some conflict between the trustees and Moholy.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah.

GYORGY KEPES: And after the first year, the trustees withdraw their funds. And so we were confronted with a rather menacing life without any funds. And not only this one, but we didn't get our salary for awhile. They claimed that the money was disappearing in the stock exchange. So we decided Moholy, Breedendick, I and a few other people, later Bob Voll [ph], to start the school without taking any salary and donating whatever we had to make the school.

I had the lantern slide machines as a compensation for my non-arriving salary, with chairs—the school chairs. And I gave it to the school. Moholy had some other whatever, equipment. And we rented a place, an old bakery, wonderful space, huge, in the center of Chicago. And we started the school without having any salary for a year.

I was giving evening course for the Art Directors Club of Chicago, I think, four evenings a week, plus every day full-time at the school. Did some designs for the Container Corporation. And it was a hard labor, but we survived because we felt that really life worked as much as the [inaudible] because you could have good job individually. But if you are defeated, then the idea is defeated. And it was rough going, but we survived in the [inaudible].

DOROTHY SECKLER: Fascinating. So you really supported yourself by other means.

GYORGY KEPES: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Designing and --

GYORGY KEPES: But still had an absolute full teaching load and desired—I don't know whether you ever were interested in teaching at [inaudible], you—to have five days a week teaching, the whole day, plus four evenings, is no joke.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. [Laughter]

GYORGY KEPES: Plus doing some design work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You must have been very strong and very dedicated.

GYORGY KEPES: And we just made it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, your ideal of the school as you re-formed it, then, was it primarily to do a school of design, with practical application? Or I assume, knowing a little about you and Moholy, that it must have had a deeper philosophic general foundation.

GYORGY KEPES: I assume that was a conflict because the school was launched and supported by a society—I don't remember the exact name—of industrial arts, some Chicago industries who very justly felt the need of a school that could feed them these competent designers.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Um-hm.

GYORGY KEPES: And then they discovered that Moholy is a visionary who is not really quite competent—I don't mean it in an accusing way—to deliver the goods. They got discouraged. And I think they had other reasons, too. I think there are some personality conflicts, which are not my business. But the fact was that the school was not really clearly defined in its targets.

And many of the young people came at the first year, like Tony Smith, Bultmann, and [inaudible]—oh, I don't remember the name. They had their own idea, sometime very wrong idea, what the Bauhaus should be. They thought it's an artists' community; there is no teaching. But they're invited there, or they got there, and they write their own ticket.

Sometimes they were very important, and they had maybe a clearer vision of tasks than we had coming from another continent. But they were a very disruptive influence. And I know they had a very low opinion about Moholy and me, and we had a very low opinion about them. But it was a tension which just didn't quite work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did it go on for at least a year?

GYORGY KEPES: Just a year, a year.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did it work? Did it have any fruitfulness for either of you at all? I mean, did you feel that you gradually saw something of your [inaudible]?

GYORGY KEPES: Oh, I'm quite sure for me it was, again, an eye-opener because I was utterly uninitiated in American existence.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Hm.

GYORGY KEPES: In fact, to be very honest—and it shouldn't go on the tape—I came as great for salvation because, growing up in South Europe, or in Hungary, America really didn't mean a cultural place. It was mostly the poor Hungarian immigrants who come back with very bad manners and just—I knew a few—nay, I knew Walt Whitman's poems because there was the Hungarian poet, great poet, who translated them. And I know Lincoln and Washington as just a kind of vague symbol. And I know Upton Sinclair, which didn't give quite the right key.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughter]

GYORGY KEPES: But I had a very distorted image of the American existence. And --

DOROTHY SECKLER: By this time, you had a chance to see other aspects of Chicago besides these.

GYORGY KEPES: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Of course, I don't know Chicago, and so I'm really talking out of the top of my head. [Laughter]

GYORGY KEPES: You know, we fell in love with Chicago, my wife and I. Again, on the surface it was a perfectly discouraging experience because, talking to my wife who grew up in a rather beautiful place in the southern part of London, after this beautiful green or the English landscape, to face the messiness of Chicago. But we describe, both of us, the strengths of the lakes. Actually, it's a tremendous landscape, Chicago. It's a fantastic place.

And also the people have its strengths, but you're not quite sure you know. And we never met such people before. And we still feel it was really the key to American human landscape.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you have any of this sense of America that one really didn't—Léger had in coming here, you know. I mean the—such a highly industrialized country, and the sense of machinery being very important in life? And also the sense of a kind of vital vulgarity—I gather what this point of this --

GYORGY KEPES: I assume we always see what we want to see. Léger needed this power, this intensity, and the mechanical energy.

DOROTHY SECKLER: He had it for a dream, of course.

GYORGY KEPES: Actually—yes. And I know—I read once in [inaudible] by Gibeon about Léger's confrontation with America. I say I'm not open to it. If I saw it, I assume I closed my eyes. [Laughter]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughter]

GYORGY KEPES: I didn't want to see that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But so far, you had not been particularly involved, even perhaps as much as Moholy had, with machine art. Do you remember that Moholy had constructed this light machine at the Bauhaus and so on? Had this been anything that you had been involved with at all?

GYORGY KEPES: Yes. I did with Moholy the film of this light machine.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, really?

GYORGY KEPES: [Inaudible] in Berlin. But I had always some reservation. For the reasons that I tried to explain before, that I always had two worlds, one the human solidarity, and the other the acceptance of twentieth century with its mechanical ways.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah.

GYORGY KEPES: I couldn't just say yes to one and say no to the other one. So when I was working such projects, I had always some doubts in my mind. And my real acceptance of a new world in a—I hope in a new and honest way came at MIT, not at the School of Design, not in Chicago. When I faced the sciences as a scientist and I saw the—oh, the foundry of the new world, then I started to think about it. And it was there that I really crystallized my—whatever you like to call it, philosophy of life.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Yes. Well, to get back to Chicago, how long did you—were you there, and how did this develop at the school there?

GYORGY KEPES: I came end of '37, and I stayed there until '42. And I developed conflicts with Moholy, and mostly on details on the surface. But I assume for the same reasons I mentioned before.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, yes.

GYORGY KEPES: And I decided one day that it just torture for both parties to appear friendly and collaborate, where there are some basic ideological conflicts existing in my design, in 42 or 43—I think 43. And so it was during the war. And I went for the third time to Denton, Texas, to teach. I expected to be drafted, but because of my heart I was rejected at the last examination.

Then I stayed in Texas for a half a year, or whatever it was. And I was invited by Chermayeff, who was in at this time in Brooklyn College, the teaching Brooklyn College. And from there I was asked to come to MIT. And I've been there since '45 or '46.

DOROTHY SECKLER: From the end of the World War II?

GYORGY KEPES: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were at MIT? That's beautiful. I wonder if that was –

[END OF INTERVIEW.]