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Oral history interview with Otto Piene, 1988 Aug. 4-1990 Feb. 22

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 recorded interview with Otto Piene from August 16, 1988 - February 22, 1990. The interview took place in Cambridge, MA, and was conducted by Robert F. Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

August 16, 1988

ROBERT BROWN: [00:00:00] Otto Piene of MIT. Robert Brown, the interviewer. I'd like to begin with your talking perhaps a bit about childhood and early memories, and particularly those that may have led to what you eventually did. I know you went on several tracks as a young man, in your education. What do you recall of early childhood? You've mentioned, um, wartime, I know, in past accounts.

OTTO PIENE: It's easy to simply say I was born in 1928, on the 18th of April, in Laasphe, Westphalia, [Germany] where my father was director, uh, headmaster, something that one would say here, of a gymnasium, gymnasium being academic high school, what they call, lycée in France. Six months later he was transferred to Lübbecke, Westphalia, to build another, um, gymnasium school system there.

ROBERT BROWN: Were these a system that was fairly new to some of these towns?

OTTO PIENE: The system in Lübbecke was new because it was geared to, it was to be geared to the region. Lübbecke itself, at that time, was a small town. When my parents moved there, the population was about 4,000, which is interesting in view of the fact that it received city rights in 1175. It's an historically very rich territory. Uh, it's territory in which, for instance, the most intense events [00:02:00] uh, during the Christianization of the Saxons happened, and one of the local heroes was Widukind, the last duke of the Saxons who resisted uh, Christianization. The background of my family was widely in Westphalia when much, much later, I received a prize of the uh, the—meaning during my mature years as an artist, of Westphalia. I accepted it, saying that I probably deserved it more than most people because I was born in Laasphe, Westphalia and I was raised in Lübbecke, Westphalia, and my father was born in Werdohl, Westphalia, and my mother was born in Peckelsheim, Westphalia, and I'm from there.

ROBERT BROWN: So to have been so long settled a family, was that fairly unusual, at least among educated people in Germany? Would they more likely have moved?

OTTO PIENE: No, not necessarily, there were lots of Westphalians in Westphalia, and uh, the, the points of orientation were from Laasphe, south towards Hesse, from Lübbecke, west, towards Ascheberg, which was some geographic fluke, is actually Lower Saxony, also a very old town. South is Bielefeld and west of Ascheberg is Münster, equally a very old town. My father went to the University of Münster, um, so did his son, meaning my brother, [00:04:00] my only brother, and now his children are going to the University of Münster. So again, there will be ties to Westphalia. The part I grew up in, Lübbecke, is on the northern slope of low hills that border the northern plains of North and Northwest Germany, and south of Lübbecke, meaning south of the Wiehengebirge is the hilly part of Westphalia, or one hilly part of Westphalia. So on the northern slopes, particularly when my parents built their home, a rather beautiful and very well designed house—meaning designed by a very competent architect—I could actually look out at my parents' bedroom windows and see what felt like the entire northern plains, sunsets and all, and I could look out of the windows of uh, my brothers and my own bedroom and see the town of Lübbecke with a church that also dated back to the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries, in its core. The way it appeared then—it had been built in the 13th and 14th century, so it's an old, very massive, beautiful, strong church, gothic inside and outside essentially built of sandstone and uh, it prided a fairly substantial spire of about 180, 190 feet of height, rather prominent [00:06:00] in the area. It looked out from the south, from the hills, as well as looked at from the north, as you approached it from the plains. So, sky and sunsets were rather prominent in that setting. Now, um, the background of my father's family was mostly estate owners and millers, and the background of my mother's family was, um, estate owners on the one side and ministers on the other side. My mother's father, who I should say I have never known my, or met my, uh, father's parents. They were dead already when I became a boy, to same concede [ph]. And my mother's parents lived with us during World War II, and I was very close to them when they were moved from their home in Bielefeld to live with us, just like a lot of other people from the uh, the war-struck areas in Germany—moved to our house, and it became a kind of asylum for the um, the emigrants from the cities. My grandfather, a retired Protestant minister, meaning moderate Protestant minister.

ROBERT BROWN: Sort of an evangelical or a reformed church this was?

OTTO PIENE: I think it was evangelic. His father was a minister and his grandfather was a minister and three of his brothers were ministers, [00:08:00] so it was a fairly Protestant family, although my grandfather himself was more a philosopher and thinker, a global thinker, a man of considerable perspective who had spent much of his time in retirement, as well as during his active years, one, running his own private school in Westphalia where he was a minister, and two, writing books that dealt with the nature of mathematics and its relationship to the history of culture and uh, ethnic history. So, when I was 10, I was taking dictations for my grandfather, while he was writing books on Aztec math and how they related to um, the forming of mathematical or numbers, languages. And he also spoke Latin fluently, according to his education, and he spoke, um, Hebrew fluently, and he coached me in my studies of—studies in school, in gymnasium, of Latin. He was the most ideal coach, he knew everything.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he discuss such—for example, when you were taking dictation for him, would he explain to you?

OTTO PIENE: No, he wouldn't explain anything. He was always groping for words and he had kind of his own language in describing the phenomena that he was dealing with, and he was characteristically alone in his pursuits. Everybody loved him, but [00:10:00] nobody really talked really seriously about his concerns and his involvement in, and his pursuit of cultural philosophy.

ROBERT BROWN: Was he a fairly authoritarian figure?

OTTO PIENE: He was a very benign figure. He was authoritarian but very benign. He was really somewhat removed from the practical world, without, um, being alien to it, and he was somewhat contrasting. My father was a more practical and more energetic, more active man, who was essentially expecting to move beyond being a gymnasium builder in a small town. Um, I think my mother and others expected him to go on to whatever—the school administration, or whatever you call it, on a somewhat more global level. However, then the Nazis took over and put everybody they liked into higher office and that essentially determined that my parents were in Lübbecke and stayed in Lübbecke and that's where I grew up. And I was very happy in my parents' home. It was not without, um, edge so to speak; it was a very intense and very involved life. My parents mostly dedicated to education, but I was surrounded by woods, [00:12:00] by forests, by nature, by animals, by sky and um, other kids with whom I shared the marvels of the trees and the animals. And I played soccer and I was like most other boys, except I always drew and was encouraged by my mother and grandmother, I guess my father too, to draw and paint and so on, so forth. My, my—the other—

ROBERT BROWN: From the imagination, excuse me, these things, or would you draw what you saw?

OTTO PIENE: I would draw mostly from nature, I would draw mostly what I saw. During the Third Reich, which is when I grew up, my parents had interesting books in the house. They had art histories that indeed dealt with art history on a national, international level. So I learned, when I was past 10 or 12, about modern art, although it did not agree with what was then the official art propagated in Germany. There were pictures in the house by a cousin of my mother's, who had been a young artist during the days of German Expressionism, so that uh, those were not radical pictures, but they were highly professional and rather beautifully inspired, so they were, in retrospect, they were very good to have around. My mother's family had strong connections to the great big world out there. Her brother was an architect and city planner, one of the inventors of city planning, was president of the German Academy of um, of [00:14:00] City Planning and Regional Planning.

ROBERT BROWN: What was his name?

OTTO PIENE: His name was Reinhard Niemeyer.

ROBERT BROWN: Niemeyer.

OTTO PIENE: My mother was a Niemeyer and her sister, my aunt, was married to um, a doctor who became an Air Force general doctor. He was from a military, essentially Prussian family. His father had been a general before, in World War I, and he built the first German Air Force, including the zeppelin force before and during World War I. This uncle of mine also impressed me. He was a very intriguing man and very, um, fond of his nephews, and he had an interesting history. Oh, he engaged in interesting history. He retired from the service in his mid-50s and in either 1940 or 1941, because he resented the system. Ironically, he was killed by a stray bomb from the emerging, the beginning aerial war, in his house in Wiesbaden, in I think 1942 or 1943 or so. There's an interesting anecdote that that one stray bomb, obviously from a wounded bomber, in the house [00:16:00] in which they lived in Wiesbaden, I think it killed four generals at once, all of them retired, all of them somewhat directed against the ruling system. So those are the ironies of war that one experienced and heard about in those days. Now, one reason why I mention that family is that when I was 11, I was at my grandparents' house in Bielefeld, that was you know, a typical visit of a grandson with his grandparents while my parents were on vacation, or something like that.

ROBERT BROWN: This is before they moved up to be with you.

OTTO PIENE: Right. And um, during that vacation with my grandparents, my mother appeared, and I was very upset, because I liked it at my grandparents' and I didn't want to go home yet. And she said, "You must go home with me because there will be a war." And um, at the same time, my uncle and aunt appeared, and my uncle was in civilian clothes, and they took me and my mother to the railroad station in Bielefeld and my uncle said—asked a soldier in uniform, "Where are you going, where is this transport going?" The soldier said, "I can't tell you," and my uncle gave him five marks because he was—could sort of, he could tell. I was very much struck. I had seen pictures of books of World War I, and I was very struck by the appearance of the trains that took the soldiers [00:18:00] or reservists, or whatever they were, to the front, and they had such chopped [ph] slogans on the train cars as "Off to the maneuver ball in Warsaw." So, this was actually modeled after the habits in World War I, when they indeed had slogans like that on the trains to the front, and wherever else. So, this was, I guess a habit that was also inspired by books people had read about World War I, or that's what I think, or maybe it was just spontaneous. Anyway, even then, I was 11 years old, I was somewhat awed by that false exuberance.

ROBERT BROWN: Why awed, do you suppose—

OTTO PIENE: Even when I was 11, I couldn't imagine that whether it was in Warsaw or Poland or anywhere else, any war would or should inspire that kind of naïve sense of excitement.

ROBERT BROWN: It didn't. You were not so inspired or excited by this.

OTTO PIENE: No, I wasn't particularly, I mean I was not. The—it was federal or state law, whatever you want to call it, that you had to be a member of the youth organization, so every boy of age 10 and above had to wear a uniform. But unlike a lot of kids in my classes in gymnasium, I was never a leader, I was never a whatever, a shining performer in the uh, Hitler Youth, and if anything, had very strong reservations which agreed with that kind of a spirit around my parents' house—very strong reservations about this kind of boyish [00:20:00] rah-rah in the name of whatever, including in the name of Hitler Youth. Anyway, as the war continued, boys were drafted into the flak, as a matter of the—as a result of the aggravating war development. So as of 1943, 1944, the government started drafting entire classes from gymnasiums, into the flak service. Initially, they were drafted along with two teachers that were attached to them, and then later on the teachers were sent home because it was impossible to continue instructing the little child soldiers, kindsoldaten, while they were in the antiaircraft service. But I have indeed, experienced a somewhat absurd situation. We're sitting, literally sitting on the guns, um, hand on the—hands on the trigger, with an old teacher standing next to it and teaching us Tacitus and the values of male valor, or something like that. As I said, things got increasingly serious and there was no room any more, for any of that.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you serve basically fairly near your home?

OTTO PIENE: We were drafted, meaning my entire class, my father accompanied us and another class, when we were shipped off on a choo-choo train, to the uh, the military units, [00:22:00] the flak antiaircraft units. In retrospect, I probably have never seen him more moved than when he delivered us off to the service, who were 15 years old, 15 and 16 years old. My father died of a heart attack six weeks later, um, just essentially worn and worried over the course of events and uh, he died of a sudden heart attack one Sunday night, and that was the first time I was sent home on furlough from the flak, to go to my father's funeral. Although funerals were quite common in our family then, because many of the old people died and you know, my uncle and aunt had been—had died and um, of course a lot of people in the—all around, were dying in the war, but there were lots of deaths in the family. So, I was somewhat accustomed to funerals. I drew my father on his death bed, just as I had drawn my grandmother on her death bed, and it was a different life than what we understand to be life now, but it was very intense because every minute counted, every hour counted. And very soon after we were drafted into the antiaircraft in Minden, where we—the flak was covering the waterways and the Melitta Factory.

ROBERT BROWN: Melitta Factory?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, the same Melitta Factory, those filters you use today. It was then, like many other factories, a whatever ammunition producing factory. [00:24:00] And um, you know, shooting started very soon, and war became real war, and kids were killed, and grownups always were killed. And we were transferred to Gütersloh, to the airbase, the military air force airbase in Gütersloh, which is south of, or southwest of Bielefeld. To this day, it's a military airbase. It's one of the major British Air Force airbases in Germany. There, life was essentially exciting, despite the war, for boys, because there were airplanes and flyers and the most exotic stuff, like the first jet fighter planes and stuff.

ROBERT BROWN: This was a very forward airbase then, wasn't it?

OTTO PIENE: It was—well, in the end it was the, one of the major airbases during the uh, the Battle of the Bulge, in early—around the turn of the year, 1944 to 1945. However, it was also a time of the most massive, early um, ground level air raids with ground level, low-flying fighter planes, with whom we often just engaged in constant, sometimes hours and hours of battle between attacking planes and defending cannons. I was a head gunner of a four-barrel flak and um, life was very frightening, and on the other hand, even through the frightening experiences, you could see a great war theater going on [00:26:00] in the sky, particularly at night.

ROBERT BROWN: And that had its own different fascination for you.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, I mean again, the thing about it in retrospect, kind of, in all you see, all you have to do, is stare at the sky. Um, that's what you do if you're a flak soldier. You try to see the tiny points approaching, where they are, and try to identify them, so on, so forth. And there was the irony that you know, of course we would, as things got very serious and bombs fell straight into our um, positions, the dugouts—at one time there were 40 bombs right in the field right in front of us, a 20 to 30-foot distance. So, things were very serious, so to speak. Today, I mean at a grown age, we'd probably even be more frightened than we were at age 16, when somehow, one is too, too much involved in the daily business to think of all the consequences and see the entire perspective all the time. And we, we experienced lots of grown soldiers who just kind of conked out. Anyway, the irony was that in those days, the clear sky and the most beautiful sky was the most dangerous sky, because it was well suited for large scale aerial attacks. What we did like was the crummiest weather, that was the safest, the rain, mist, low clouds, everything. And one of the major experiences that I think really had a lasting effect on me [00:28:00] was when finally, I was discharged from the flak, because I was past the age in which one could be a child soldier, was drawn into the so-called labor infantry or Labor Corps Infantry, went there, went through the last six or seven weeks of ground war in North Germany, then were discharged a couple of days before the official capitulation. Went towards home and on the way, had crossed the Elbe, and on—at the Elbe, I had written about that, I was held up and so on, so forth. I finally got on some tug, um, up the dike and saw, for the first time in my life, saw this huge body of water that was almost as big as the North Sea, meaning the Elbe mouth, the mouth of the Elbe. And it was the smoothest, the largest, and the most incredibly glistening and reflecting waterplane mirror that you've ever seen. It's entirely a huge expanse of glistening quicksilver under a flawless sky, and I became very suddenly aware of how the war was over and how this was not a great threat, but this was just the greatest beauty that didn't mean an invitation to death or disaster. Well, it took a long time until death and disaster were really going away, but nevertheless, it was a real kind of turning point in my youth. I was then—this was in—

ROBERT BROWN: Forty-five.

OTTO PIENE: Thirty days of May in 1945. [00:30:00] I was then—I had just turned 17. Then we gathered up, like so many Germany discharged soldiers, and organized and camped into prisoner of war camps, first by the British and then these kind of internment units and, and worked on farms, uh, throughout the year of 1945. Came back in early 1946, just in time to go back to gymnasium, that had reopened the day before I got home.

ROBERT BROWN: So it was almost ridiculously a return to peacetime.

OTTO PIENE: That's right, it was very funny, it's really funny. Um, there's a really fine story, fine story here. I think the mail kind of reopened, only admitting postcards of three lines each initially and then, after another couple of months, I guess you could write letters again, that were also restricted in format. So, um, my mother's back home in Lübbecke, surrounded by these old people. At one time there were, besides younger people in the house, and my father had just died a year before, secondly there were at least four, at one time, at least four people in the house; my grandparents and then one of my grandfather's sisters, meaning my great-aunt, and another great-aunt, who was my grandfather's sister in-law. And like all people, they of course knew about the war, but they also led their lives, told—told stories and every now and then fought, fought with each other. So, one time, my mother went in there and said, "Together you are way above [00:32:00] 300 years old and if in those 300 years, you haven't learned how to get along with each other, then you should start learning now." That was the kind of situation that she was surrounded by, while at the same time her two sons were out in the war, she knew nothing, for anything she knew they were dead and she would never see them again. That was a very dramatic situation, however.

ROBERT BROWN: And there were the old people arguing.

OTTO PIENE: And there were the old people, arguing over old stories, and having nothing to do but uh, but et cetera. So, I mean that was a metaphor all over, to so speak, except it wasn't metaphor it was real life. However, I think in July, '45, my brother, who was three years older than I am, returned from uh, U.S. war encampment in Bavaria essentially alive and well, um, after an initial, whatever, crisis, or something like that, as it usually happens once people first get taken over as prisoner of war. He was essentially well treated in Bad Aibling, they called it, in Bavaria, and came back alive and well in July, and then started working, because universities weren't open yet. At about the same time, my mother got the first postcard from me, saying that I was alive and well, and on from there. So, then you know, news at least, reluctantly became trickling in again, began trickling in again. And um, during the rest of 1945, railroad traffic was picked up again, except it was not passenger traffic, it was all freight trains. But you could travel on [00:34:00] freight trains, so sometime in October or November, my mother, in 1945, got on the freight train, and came to visit me in my internment camp in North Germany, with the intent to get me home. Now, the, um the sub-administration within the British internment system, was executed by German prisoners of war that held charges similar to the ones that they had held during the war days.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean they were administrators during the war as well, they had been.

OTTO PIENE: Well, they were—God knows what they were after—soldiers.

ROBERT BROWN: Or they aren't.

OTTO PIENE: But then later on they were then, you know, used in administration. So, one of the higher ups in the, the internment administration that had responsibilities as far as recommendations for release of some of the ex-soldiers, uh, one of the higher ups there was a German general. So, my mother went to the German general and said she wanted her son back, and the general said to my mother, "Frau, why do you want your son back?" And she said, "With your permission, general, he has to go back to school." [They laugh.] So, the madness, the madness of how it was, that in January, '46, I did—I was discharged. I came home, came home right in time for school to reopen. So, I had to go to gymnasium again, with a whole lot of other people who had also been in the war, for another year and a half, then did my uh, my you know, graduation, my habitur [ph], my mature, my whatever it's called, from academic high school, and was then ready to go into um, [00:36:00] higher education.

ROBERT BROWN: And some of the boys you went back to gymnasium with much younger or not, not much younger?

OTTO PIENE: No, I was—no, I still was regular gymnasium age, when actually I was still even slightly below age, because um, they—the one thing that happened during the war or after the war, is that they gave away um, they spared us one year of regular education. But there were other people together with me in my class, who at that time, when they should have been 18, were actually 26 or 27.

ROBERT BROWN: [Crosstalk.]

OTTO PIENE: Some of them were up to five or six years of war on their chest, meaning they were just like the most experienced veterans. But the, the very—I mean school was very weird because you know, the original teachers weren't there, only some of the original teachers were there. A lot of new teachers, emigrants were there, and so the whole school was different. But of course, the purpose of the school and the system are the same, so we still had, you know, gymnasium education, with the emphasis on math and sciences, but also, uh, one emphasis on foreign languages such as English and Latin, and so on.

ROBERT BROWN: And that all made sense, to come back to that, or if not so much.

OTTO PIENE: The spirit was excellent, because after all that war and after all that, that pressure, force, extremely depressing experience of losing war, and the hardship and the nonsense and the danger and all of that, it was supreme to be back at school and have nothing to do but learn. So, these were all very, [00:38:00] very involved learners and that part was very nice. We had—you know, we liked being back at school and uh, did whatever we could to uh, you know, make up for time lost. On the one hand, these people are very mature in human terms because they've seen everything. On the other hand, you know, they were very positive about learning and I think the uh, I think finally my class graduated in, I think what was it May of 1947. And then that was the time when slowly, the universities reopened, most of them with strong restrictions and very limited admission numbers, but step by step, things went back to normal, particularly when, what was it, the twentieth of June, or something like that, 1948, the currency reform happened and there was our currency reintroduced in Germany, and people could work for money again, and things kind of gradually went back to whatever you want to call it, normal. It wasn't quite normal but—

ROBERT BROWN: Was the um, the occupation administration apparent to you at all, or was it very uh, very hard —

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, it was very apparent.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you with the British zone?

OTTO PIENE: We can stick—we can stick with the semester. Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You were in the British zone.

OTTO PIENE: I was in the British zone, in the headquarters of the British zone. We were located in Lübbecke, Westphalia, because they liked it there. First of all, the town was intact, the town was—I mean there were a couple of bombs that fell during the war but otherwise, the town was intact, it was a neat, you know, Westphalian rural town, which at that time had a population of 6[000] to 7000. Um, and when the British moved in, [00:40:00] towards the end of the war, conquered it, captured it, something like that, it was in the middle of springtime. All the apple trees and all the fruit trees and everything was blossoming, and the British liked it there a lot. They took some of these East Westphalian towns that were intact, like Lübbecke, Bünde, I think Lemgo, something like that, and established the British headquarters there. So Lübbecke, the town, was hollowed out, it's vacated, the people in town were relocated. My mother had to leave her house, like most of the other people, and go into temporary quarters for, I don't know how many years, while British people lived in her house, which was beautiful and moderate, a beautiful house. Some houses were administration, some of them were mainly offices, others were just living quarters, some of them were, you know group quarters, and so on and so forth. There is another funny story, that before we had—I was there when we had to vacate it, meaning when the headquarter moved in full force and full size. We had to leave the house furnished and my mother had, she had very strong ideas, so she asked me and my brother to write, under all the furniture, a quote from Julius Cesar: "Brutus is an honorable man," we presume. And um, it didn't help though, because the first thing we saw before they even really moved in, the British, they had already removed all the clocks and all the silver, and so on, so forth. They took everything that wasn't nailed to the floor, so to speak. [00:42:00] And we weren't exactly at war with them, you know, because my mother spoke English and I spoke English, and we weren't to, we were not to enter the garden without permission of the people, so we asked permission. When they weren't there, maybe we went into the garden without permission. One time, my mother was picking some plums from the plum trees and a British officer went up to her and said, "You can't do this, you have no access here," and my mother said, "Why?" He said, "My house is my castle!"

ROBERT BROWN: He said that. [Laughs.]

OTTO PIENE: He, the British occupation man who lived there, probably had lived there for a week or two, showed my, my mother off the premises by pointing out that his house was his castle. I mean these things do happen, that's not just uh—

ROBERT BROWN: So as you finished up gymnasium, you were living, boarding somewhere, so to speak.

OTTO PIENE: I was living in uh, well, in assigned, you know, cramped quarters in other people's houses, that were not occupied. My mother's house was returned, uh, six, seven years later, something like that, but for my mother, it was a very difficult time. For us too, but you know, really for her. So, she got her house back when? Between '46 and maybe '61, maybe five years or so.

ROBERT BROWN: Fifty-one. So, it was quite a long time.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. But for you, it was less important. I mean you were studying and uh, and then went off.

OTTO PIENE: We—I, somehow, I had my teen [00:44:00] years during the war, I mean I was 13 in what, in 1942.

ROBERT BROWN: Forty-one.

OTTO PIENE: Forty-one, yeah, 13, that was '41, that was when the Russian campaign started. We had all these debates in school of whether there would be a Russian campaign, because so many kids had heard about all the transports that went east, and I said in school that nobody can be as crazy as starting a Russian campaign, after what happened to Napoleon, and it happened anyway. So anyway, that's when I was 13, and when the war was over, I was—'55, uh, '45. I had just turned 17 and when I started going to school, to art school in Munich, that was in December 1947. Uh, I was—

ROBERT BROWN: That's before you went to the Academy of Fine Arts?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, I was, in '47, I was 19. Um, in the meantime, that's a different chapter, when I went to Munich, meaning around the time of—I graduated from gymnasium. I got married at age 18 and three months later I had a daughter, Annette, who was obviously quite a rare phenomenon of somebody who is just graduating from gymnasium. So that was kind of the, whatever, the kind of biological explosion that happened after the war, because we had had absolutely no teenage. I mean, this whole what you hear about teenagers in the United States is something that now I know a lot about it. I have a daughter, an American daughter who is 16, but it was totally alien to us. We had no—we knew no girls, [00:46:00] just knew them from a distance, although we had known them when we were younger, because the gymnasium I went to was mixed. It was a gymnasium for boys, but we had girls in the—in class, and girls liked that very much, because there were always, you know 20 boys in the class and maybe four, four girls, so that, that was fine. But then when we were sent off to the flak, I was 15 and the other kids were 15, some of them maybe 16. There was no such thing as, you know, typical teenage experiences that were also, of course, very much restricted by how there was a war. There were no discos or all this stuff that you are surrounded by these days didn't exist.

ROBERT BROWN: Nothing like that.

OTTO PIENE: Nothing like that. No cars, nothing.

[END OF 1 OF 7 SIDE A.]

OTTO PIENE: [00:00:00] So despite all the, you know, these years right after the war were really pretty bad, you know food was pathetic.

ROBERT BROWN: But you had met a girl and when you came home there were girls.

OTTO PIENE: There was very little to eat, there was very little to live in, there was very little to—there was nothing to buy. There was essentially schoolbooks and you know, song and dance, so to speak, so we learned how to dance, for instance, after the war. It was fantastic, I mean when you learn what social dancing school is like in those days, it was hilarious. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Why is that?

OTTO PIENE: Maybe a hundred people in one class, and it happened in the backyard of some, some rundown pub or something, because you know, the architecture of houses were deteriorated, everything was deteriorated, everything was closed, everything was occupied, everything was somewhat provisional, so on and so forth, so social dancing classes were really funny, like you know, boys on one side and girls on one side, and then say "now," and they would you know, race towards each other. [They laugh.]

ROBERT BROWN: And develop friendships as well, very easily.

OTTO PIENE: Right, and we had—yeah. Well, we still had our house, my mother you know, started—you know, got us to kind of have little dances and stuff at home. It didn't last long because you know, we just had a couple of months until the house was taken over by the British. But still, it was nice, despite the curfew and all these things. We had nice boys around, we had some nice girls around, so that's really quite nice; very different from what we understand to be, you know, teenage lives in the United States or Germany too, these days. So this is a very, it was a very strange discrepancy between, on the one hand, people being very mature, instead of—having seen just about everything, [00:02:00] and on the other hand, being very, um, inexperienced in other ways. So, anyway, despite it all, or because of it all, I was a married young man when I went to—my then wife and our child, lived with my mother most of the time, while I went to school, when I went to school in Munich. Inevitably, my mother developed a very nice relationship to the little kid, and the little kid, Annette, you know obviously my oldest daughter, who is now, um, well married, so to speak, in Munich and a mother of two herself, took a very strong liking to my mother as well and is still telling stories that my mother told her when she was little. So people were very close in these cramped quarters and uh, and things were very human. In other words, there were very few neutralizing factors in people's lives. There was no television, there was hardly any radio. There weren't obvious distractions that people have now like, you know, outside sports or outside recreational facilities. No shopping, no shopping malls, a lot of landscape around. There were no cars, or practically no cars. It was quite a different life in many ways and life was full of stories, of the war, of emigration, of being refugees, of people coming and going, of people hoping for people to come back.

ROBERT BROWN: Emigration, you mean people being shifted in, or coming in from other parts of the country.

OTTO PIENE: From other parts of Europe.

ROBERT BROWN: From other parts of Europe.

OTTO PIENE: Refugees from Poland, from East Prussia, from West Prussia, from Silesia, from the Tyrols, [00:04:00] from the Balkans.

ROBERT BROWN: They were coming and living there.

OTTO PIENE: There was a constant migration of people coming and going, settling, resettling.

ROBERT BROWN: And in an old community such as your small town, that was very apparent wasn't it?

OTTO PIENE: That was a lot of—yeah, that created a lot of commotion, with the British sitting in the middle of it all, and the only people who had everything, of course, were the British. They had all the cars and all the uniforms, all the food, all the dances, all the music. Looked at from today's perspective, you know, there are now very few people who would want to live that kind of life that the, that the uh, troopers and the officers and the masses, and the um, the uh, fraternization organizations the British engaged in and promoted with, you know, busing in their, their WACs [Women's Army Corps] from one place, to meet with young officers from this place, and creating all these dances. Even then, we had a sense of how absurd that was in many ways, but on the other hand, you know the British had everything, just as the Americans had everything in the American zone in southern Germany. It was the time of the secret currency, you know black market and all this stuff. Very few movies have ever depicted the time, those times fairly and sensitively and without exaggeration one way or another. But, we didn't have it all that bad, because we were out in the country, we had a lot of landscape around, we kind of had freedom to, to move.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have access to farm, foods?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, kind of. Two relatives, I mean the main staple of nutrition was grain; [00:06:00] grain that we traded in from people we knew in the country for the family silver, that's essentially what it amounted to. Um, but you know, since we were a small town, since it was rural, it was not quite as bad as it was in the big cities, and on the whole, you know the British were not a bad occupation force. You know, as people were raided, they weren't any worse or less good than the Americans. They weren't quite as rich as the Americans were and black market practices weren't quite as developed as they were in the American zone, but on the whole, you know they were an occupation force, but they were not inhuman, as opposed to the Russians, that everybody dreaded. The Russians were absolutely dreaded by the people on the Russian zones, they were terrible.

ROBERT BROWN: They thought they would be and they were.

OTTO PIENE: Partly because the Russians had, you know, the Russians had suffered severely during World War II. They were full of anger and full of suffering. The Russians had suffered just as badly as the Germans, in some cases I think worsely [ph] so, whereas, you know the Americans moved in there with their smiles and cigarettes and tanks, and huge equipment and, and uh, General Motors and um, creased pants and um—

ROBERT BROWN: These are all pretty—

OTTO PIENE: Had plenty of everything. The first impression I ever had of the Americans was when I was discharged as a prisoner of war, and was on a lorry, lorry as the British call them, [00:08:00] from North Germany to Münster, which was another kind of discharge center, and on from there to another place. In route, the convoy moved to an area in which the British had been, in the area between, roughly between Menden and Hanover, where the British had been um, blasted at the end of the war by the Germans. And obviously, the British couldn't handle it alone and they brought an American Engineering Corps to help them with building whatever emergency bridges, or rebuilding the bridges, something like that. And here was this American equipment, that was my first impression of Americans; these huge, absolutely huge bulldozers and super trucks and cranes, and stuff I had never thought stuff this massive and this, this materially overpowering what exists and would be part of a war machine. So, my first impression was that the Americans, they couldn't but win the war because they were just materially superior, and I'm sure there was some truth to that, because if you translate all that into um, whatever area of power, and an enormous, enormous war effort that was mobilized, you realize how that had a very strong effect on the outcome of the war. However, I certainly don't think that essentially made any difference, because it was a bad war to begin with, and it couldn't end in any way but very, very badly.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you think many of the people through this time, that you talked with, and your family felt the same, [00:10:00] or you can't quite generalize?

OTTO PIENE: Stories of my aunt and my uncle.

ROBERT BROWN: When you were a child.

OTTO PIENE: When they were still in Berlin. Yeah. And my uncle, who worked in Berlin, at some time he was part of the Speer ministry. He also retired during the course of the war.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, the city planner.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. They were telling these stories behind closed doors, except the closed doors weren't closed, about how Hitler was incompetent, the man was a madman, was out of his mind, and so on and forth. These were mature people and they were very—you know, they had bad [ph] judgment and so on. Um, and I do know that towards the end of his life—I mean, I know it was towards the end of his life, my father listened to, to uh, British radio, which was entirely criminal, by the Nazi standards, and fined, or the death penalty. So he, being essentially born Prussian and essentially a loyal man for a long time, to the system that educated him and that he was serving, he must have been pretty desperate about the, the uh, the course of events. I think for the sake of completeness, I should also say that the only time that I had—there were two times in my young life that I heard about concentration camps. One was when one of our neighbors, who was, I think a communist social democrat, was, as people said, drafted into [00:12:00] a concentration camp mid-'30s, because he was a political suspect, but he came back. Later on, after the—I mean, he came back after a year or two, or something like that. Later on, after the war, I learned that he was, um, thrown into a concentration camp again, towards the end of the war, and then eventually died in the concentration camp. That's a portion of the story that I did not know at all during the war.

Anyway, in the '30s, the people kind of joked about it because they didn't think he was particularly reputable and so on and so forth, but that's the one time when I heard the term. It obviously had little to do with the, the incredible things that happened then later, during the war. The other time, I heard about not a concentration camp but a work camp, um, was when we were serving at the—with the antiaircraft in Menden. One night, we came back from a very—a heavy alert, although I'm not sure whether any shooting, any firing of guns happened during that alert, and being totally overtired and over, over-alert. In the dark, some of the kids in our two and three-story beds, from a village outside, men started talking about how ridiculously brutal and uneducated, inhumane the Baltic SS guards were in the labor camp near their village. [00:14:00] And I didn't know these things existed and I asked them questions, in the dark, in this very weird kind of Surrealist atmosphere, and they went on this kind of bragging, disdainful tone about how subhuman these guys from, from Latvia, or Lithuania were, that were volunteers in the SS and served as guards in that labor camp. Although, um, judged from what we now know about camps and killings and extermination and so on, that must have been a relatively modest outpost camp that belonged, I don't know to what. And, I do remember, and this, you know, I'm reporting this, so to speak, as soberly as I can, that was—it was like a hit in the stomach. I was so incredibly upset about these stories that these kids told, as I said, in this kind of weird tone of boyish excitement, about how ridiculously subhuman these guards were. And I thought, God, any system—and I quite literally cried in my pillow in the dark. I thought, God, any system that permits this kind of thing is really on the decline. We are serving—it's very difficult to kind of formulate that for yourself when you're 15. We are serving the wrong war here or we're doing the wrong thing.

And then, you know from then on there were also some really disdainful remarks about authority and so on. Of course, we had a pretty strong set of weird, [00:16:00] kind of off-key morality in that—during those flak days, which is somewhat understandable if you deal with a bunch of boys that are doing men's work, age 15 and 16, and are constantly faced with the threat of death and the threat of extinction. On the other hand, we were surrounded by all this stuff. I mean, we had, in the flak positions, adjacent barracks, we had Russians who worked for us, that would build balalaikas for us—so we, you know, played the balalaika that the Russians made out of cigar boxes and stuff like that. Those Russians had, you know peeled the potatoes and had cleaned the guns. I mean, they were prisoners of war, lived in, you know, in a barracks, with a little barbed wire around them, next door, but they were just part of the whole, the story. There were French prisoners that worked as mechanics in the arsenal, in the gunshot, so on and so forth, so a very weird kind of—

ROBERT BROWN: But you thought of them practically, as part of the same war encampment.

OTTO PIENE: It was all part of the same war.

ROBERT BROWN: I mean they were part of the same machine.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. I mean, for instance, in Lübbecke, when, before I was drafted away, we had—there was a war camp of Yugoslav prisoners of war, and they, you know, they would—they could move around freely, visit people on Sundays, and walk around freely, and so on and so forth. I looked at them. They had very nice uniforms and I was amazed. I'd never seen a Yugoslav before [00:18:00] in my life. I was amazed at how attractive these people were. They were a very beautiful people. They were these kind of tall, dark-eyed, dark-haired, very slim, trim, beautiful people, and I was very impressed by just the appearance of those people. We had, as of—at home, as of, I don't know, 1942 or so, '42 and '43—at home, as a maid, so to speak, like other people have a French maid, we had a Russian maid. The Russian maid, she came to us from like 53 years old. Her name was Anna—[inaudible]. She was the wife of a former white Russian officer who had died in a Russian concentration camp. She had a, um, brother, who was a doctor in Brno, meaning Czechoslovakia. And she had volunteered to be a force labor foreign worker in Germany, out of Russia, where they—I think we assumed that many of these people were herded up, but there were also many volunteers who wanted to get out of Russia and work in Germany. There were labor force replacement, because all the men were gone at the front and many of the women were gone, serving in the, the uh, searchlight flak and stuff like that, and in the ammunition factories. So the Russians were there and many people, quite a few people had Russian maids, because they were the only ones [00:20:00] available. They were, of course, organized through some kind of, you know, tight organization, and supervised and so on and forth. So, we had Anna—[inaudible].

Anna was, I mean she was a fact in my life. She was, when I was 13, no maybe 14, 15, she was there at home, and she would tell lots of stories and she would, you know, speak broken German and teach me broken Russian. And I would take her to, you know a meeting with her friends, the other Russians, and she was dedicated to our family. She loved it where she was, and, you know, obviously was a woman of education herself and from some background but suppressed in Russia, and her purpose was to find and go to her brother in Czechoslovakia. Which of course didn't work out because nobody could go to Czechoslovakia, nobody Russian could just get on a train and go to Czechoslovakia and visit her brother. Anyway, she had lots of friends, many of them also former white Russians, and they met in our house. They would have coffee and baked cake, of potatoes and stuff. And after the war, when I wasn't back yet, the British wanted to repatriate Anna, Anna—[inaudible], who went through an incredible set of shenanigans to keep the British from liberating her and sending her back to Russia, because the one thing, the last thing she ever wanted to happen to her was having to go back to Russia. There are stories and stories of how she fainted on the spot, how she faked, God knows what kind of disease, so the British couldn't [00:22:00] just drag her off. And, the next step was that some of the Russians were then—this is after the war—housed and fed, and concentrated, quote unquote, in UN, well it was UNRRA.

ROBERT BROWN: The Recovery Administration.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. And they had it very good. They had nothing to do and they were walking around freely, and they had the best food and so on and so forth. And they invited us to visit them in this camp in Minden. It was like a victory party. They treated my mother and me as if we were the kings of the camp and made seven meals and were singing songs, and so on and so forth. They were very, very beautiful people and very warm and very polite and very, very Russian in a very—in a somewhat aristocratic way.

ROBERT BROWN: These are mostly people with good background.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Right, you said.

OTTO PIENE: And in the course of things, first of all, Anna did stay with us for another year or so. Then she, she uh, managed to get herself immigration papers and stuff to go to England, and when I had my first one-man show in London, in I think 1962, I did visit Anna in London. And again, it was like you know, the old relatives, and I was the young—I was the son, I was the young man, and she was the old lady. Visit her there, except she said she didn't like her life there as much anymore as she had liked it in Germany and all that. So, I mean these are kind of reverse stories, they are a kind of a counterpart to, [00:24:00] you know, the incredible stories you hear about you know, what the Nazis did, all of which stories are true, but the stories that I experience, also some are explained that there were still pockets of humanity left, so to speak, in, in—with some groups, wherever you went, there was still, despite it all, underneath and above it all, despite all the destruction, the killing, the incredible stories. There was also a somewhat humane side to the war which often expressed itself in humor, or at least in gallows humor, some of which is very interesting. The German language is capable of gallows humor to an incredible degree; something I never hear anything about but it's very—I mean, some of the language then was really funny. However, to come to the conclusion, the um, the entire story of the persecution, the extermination of political prisoners and Jews in World War II did not come to my generation until after the war. We essentially, I think it's fair to say, knew nothing about it. It's almost impossible to understand, for somebody in this country or somebody in other countries, that that was the way it was.

ROBERT BROWN: Things can be kept so segregated.

OTTO PIENE: Entirely. It is how things happened in Poland or in Silesia or in places that were at least you know, so much—so far away from us, and what we heard, the two only incidents I had heard about it, were of course considered insulated or isolated incidents.

ROBERT BROWN: [Crosstalk.]

OTTO PIENE: That were typical of nothing, [00:26:00] if anything of, you know how weird people were. And the whole story about the total disaster, came to us in newspapers, the first newspapers that were printed after the war. And I, in human terms, I understood what happened when I had one of my best friends in Munich, was a young woman. I was quite—although I was married and was loyal to my young family, I was quite popular in Munich when I was a young student there and I had lots of friends, including very nice women friends, and three of them were half Jewish, very pretty girls from very, quote unquote, good families, whose parents or some of their parents had been in concentration camps and the girls had been educated under forced conditions, and one of them—her name was Alice Lowenstein [ph]—she was, she was working in a labor camp in Czechoslovakia, in her hometown or near her hometown, in front—I mean, at the uh, the ceramic kilns, work for which she was much too young, much too fragile, entirely unsuited, and that was a real brutal form of forced labor that these kids were subjected to. And she indeed, she survived, but she had a liver ailment forever as a result of that, of that um—years, those years of forced experiences. Her father was killed in the—her father [00:28:00] was Jewish, he was killed in a concentration camp. Her mother was Christian and living with her, in Munich, and I followed the whole story then. Somebody who, at some point, channeled them out of the Russian influence zone in Czechoslovakia, after the war, into the U.S. occupation zone in Bavaria and Germany, was a Czechoslovakian man whom, out of gratitude, this Alice, I think, wildly held gratitude, befriended, and they became engaged and later on, he, uh, he became—then they got married. Then he became an airline employee in the United States and they immigrated to the United States. I was in touch with them for a couple of years, but then from a while on, never heard from them again. But that's the kind of human stories that, you know told me, that taught me the full extent of the, the impossible, impossible human catastrophe during the war. So in a certain way, the war never stopped, it really went on and on, as the full extent of the disaster became more apparent, increasingly, year after year.

Anyway, we haven't said—I haven't said a thing about art. Well, during all the years at the antiaircraft and at the labor corps months, during the labor corps months, and during the months of internment, meaning while I was a prisoner of war, the one thing I always had with me was sketchbooks. There was a time in—you know towards the end of the war, we were chased around by the Canadians and the British, as they were advancing. We lost all our stuff, [00:30:00] eventually had no rifle, no bazooka, no toothbrush, no money, but I still had a sketchbook and a watercolor box. So that part has always been with me throughout all those years, at home, you know, at the—around the flak, and on through the years while I was still going to gymnasium. So the—I think the idea of becoming an artist was with me when—I guess as [ph] all the time, and I stopped playing soccer—I must have been about 12 or so. And while my father was still alive, I expressed to him that, yes indeed, I wanted to be an artist. And my father said, "I think that will work, and I think that you are gifted to do it, but do me one favor, study art teaching as well, so you can make a living that will enable you to do the work of an artist without being distracted by fear of not making a living." So he, he had this kind of strong educational outlook of a mature man and wanted his son to have a reasonably balanced life.

What happened is that yes, besides studying art, I did study art education, which is an academic track in Germany, and indeed, went to all the schools, did all the exams, actually did very well in those somewhat morally imposed subjects as well, and once—the instant [00:32:00] I had collected all these exams and was ready to go into any kind of um, channeled teaching position, in other words becoming—essentially becoming a civil servant or an academic, um, person, to start a, um, pre-structured teaching career. The minute I had all these qualifications, I dropped the whole thing and never did go into—onto those tracks. So on the one hand, I felt I had done what my father had, had asked me to do. Now that I had all the qualifications, I didn't have to go through with it, because if the worst would come to the worst, I could always do it later. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Right.

OTTO PIENE: Ironically, I ended up, in the end, I ended up doing a lot of teaching anyway.

ROBERT BROWN: Only after 20 years though, you know.

OTTO PIENE: That's right. So, anyway. [Audio break.]

ROBERT BROWN: Continuing the interview with Otto Piene, Cambridge, Massachusetts, August 16, 1988. Your father had urged you, not only to improve your growing as an artist, but he urged you to get something in art education as well, which you said at one point in Germany, is an academic discipline. I gather, it's distinct from here, where it was rather a vocational trade, avocation [ph].

OTTO PIENE: In, yeah, Germany.

ROBERT BROWN: Or a learning sort of thing.

OTTO PIENE: In Germany it's the, uh, well it comes in several layers, but the, the most appropriate education for art teachers or art teachers-to-be is similar to the education of gymnasium teachers, meaning they study, quote unquote, philology, [00:34:00] and they have, meaning the candidates at the time included me, they have to study philosophy and pedagogy and they have to study one scientific or humanities subject, plus art practice, plus art teaching, plus art history, plus arts and crafts, that's the whole picture. So it's a fairly comprehensive course of studies, actually an interesting course of studies, particularly if you have no burning artistic ambition, it makes you a fairly interesting person. Then you have to go into um, several years of teachers training at gymnasiums, and after I don't know, five years or so, you can finally be elected to be an elected gymnasium teacher with a civil servant career in front of you like other gymnasium teachers. Again, the gymnasium teacher education is a fairly complex and fairly complicated education, a high-level education. The only teaching education above it is that of um, an academic career, so you will be a university teacher. However, for that, you do not have to be educated as a teacher. There, you just have to excel as a scholar or a scientist.

ROBERT BROWN: Rather similar to here.

OTTO PIENE: So the highest level of teaching does not require any teaching education, which isn't always so good. [00:36:00]

ROBERT BROWN: No. [They laugh.] As we know here, it's fairly similar. But then, in art education, you got a very broad sampling of many things.

OTTO PIENE: That's right, and the—I mean, what I elected to do, together with my friend, Heinz Mack, who then became my friend in forming Group Zero several years later, we found out that we could elect philosophy as a humanities topic for teaching at gymnasiums, which meant we had to study as if we would be studying as a full-time, full occupation, um, maybe what in this country you might have called major, which got us, got me involved in extensive studies of philosophy. So, I did do—I studied philosophy as much, or actually longer, than arts. Ended up going to school partly because I had to pay for it myself and I had a young family, as I mentioned before. Already, I went to school for 19 or 20 semesters. I did pass all my exams, most of them with, with uh, considerable success. And once I had collected all my exams, I decided not to go into the uh, teaching training years, and dropped it right there. So I never obtained the eventual, the ultimate qualification to be gymnasium teacher. I just stopped at the academic level, after having [00:38:00] finished all my academic exams. I think I was the first teaching, art teaching student, candidate, graduate, who finished in the state of North-Rhine Westphalia, after the war, with summa cum laude in it all, partly because I finished philosophy with great flourish.

ROBERT BROWN: This was at Cologne?

OTTO PIENE: Cologne, the university, and I went through—I went to various art schools. One, I started in Munich, at a school called Blocherer Schule, which was a private art school.

ROBERT BROWN: That was before you went to the academy.

OTTO PIENE: Then, yeah, because the academies had the most classes, they couldn't accept students at that point. They only accepted people who had been to the academies before, during the war.

ROBERT BROWN: Right. Was that about 1947 or '48?

OTTO PIENE: That was 1947. I did my habitur in 1947, I traveled to Munich and was accepted at the art school, started in January 1948.

ROBERT BROWN: In this private art school. What was the name of it?

OTTO PIENE: It was a very good school. The Blocherer Schule. B-l-o-c-h-e-r-e-r. Schule. There are several like it in Munich, it still exists, and it had existed for quite a while. They mostly accepted people in fine arts and applied arts, and various forms of applied arts, including design. I was a phenomenon inasmuch as I was the first student there who got accepted into what you might call the graduate school of painting, the graduate class of painting, immediately I didn't have to go through all of the basic instruction. [00:40:00] Then, two and a half semesters later, I applied for the Art Academy in Munich. As of, I think the summer of, um, '49, I went to the Art Academy in Munich. Then, applied, because of the teaching requirements in Dusseldorf, and went to Dusseldorf in the summer of 1950. Semesters there run differently.

ROBERT BROWN: Could I get back to the Blocherer Schule in Munich. How did you know of it? Was it a fairly well-known private school?

OTTO PIENE: I was recommended by a woman painter I knew around my hometown, Lübbecke—actually she lived in Herford—and I went there. And this was due to the recommendation of what you might call the first and only gallery in Lübbecke, which was not really a gallery. It was a craft store, but a superb one, a somewhat unique one, and they, after the war, took on making exhibitions, because one reason, there wasn't all that much else to sell but a fledgling artist's work, and routine artist's paintings, and stuff like that. So they recommended me to a painter who had exhibited there, who was a highly professional painter. She was at home in Herford, and a very interesting lady, from a rich silk weaver's family in Herford, with a great broad interest in the arts, which is typical in the silk weaving towns such as Wuppertal and Krefeld, the post-World War II [00:42:00] major collectors of quite a few in Germany, came out of the traditional silk weaving people who were interested in the arts because of their interest in um, patterns and designs.

So, this Englander invited me to visit in Krefeld and bring a portfolio, which I did. Now, her daughter was also a painter, a very gifted one, and she was married to one of the Munich, um, shall I say, prominent painters. His name was Adolf Hartmann. He was the brother of Karl Amadeus Hartmann, who was a composer, who was, I think known in this country too. And I think she took my portfolio with her to Munich, and he saw it, and the man supposedly said, this man has got it, bring him here. He must have said this young man. [They laugh.] And so he, because nobody could get into the art academies, he, I think, showed the material to Karl Blocherer, the painter and head of the Blocherer Schule, and they said, come on over, start right now. So, under these very difficult circumstances of travel and food and so on, so forth, I set out for Munich in January of 1948. And after two weeks or so, found myself some miserable hole in the wall to live in and um, it wasn't actually quite as miserable as it was [00:44:00] far away. Munich was all bombed out, it was very difficult to get any place to live. And I started working in the painting class, which was out in Nymphenburg, near the Schloss, near the uh, chateau.

[END OF 1 OF 7 SIDE B.]

ROBERT BROWN: [00:00:00] The Blocherer Schule was then run by one man, Karl Blocherer.

OTTO PIENE: Karl Blocherer and his wife, who was a very, very spirited lady, and his daughter was also a very spirited lady, and they had lots of interesting students and beautiful girls, and gifted old students who had come out of the war. It was a pretty active place and I was kind of welcomed into it. I did a lot of work there and learned a lot about living in a town like Munich.

ROBERT BROWN: Was Bavaria very different from what you'd known, or Munich certainly was, even war damaged. You had never lived in so large a place, had you?

OTTO PIENE: No. That was the first time that I lived in a, quote unquote, big city. I think Munich is a big city in a way, but with a very strong tradition, and you know, despite the ruins and everything, I went to the theater and I went to the symphony and I went to the museums, spent my Sundays going to museums. [Audio break.]

ROBERT BROWN: The Blocherer Schule then, was run like at atelier. You have a master, but he sets you up each week, worked closely with you?

OTTO PIENE: No, there were classes. There were classes and there were teachers in the classes, but most of the teaching was done by the members of the family. You know, they had drawing classes and they had paint—they had one painting class, out of Nymphenburg, the drawing classes and the design classes, the graphic design classes and all that stuff was being held in Munich, in the place near the technical university at Gabelsberger Strasse and Arcisstrasse. And the, the painting class was out in Nymphenburg, in the house actually, of [00:02:00] a gentleman who had been the uh, director, the president of Munich University. He was a very fine man, he had a fine family, slightly um, extravagant in terms of their foibles and follies and preferences, but I, I was very warmly welcomed to come into that, that house, initially just as a student in the class, but then later on also, when I ran out of rooms to live in and stuff, I was also invited to live there for a couple of months, in that house. And that was interesting because Professor Escherrich 's [ph] wife, um late wife, had been the sister of a painter, a man who was an important painter, although not one of the famous ones. I'm forgetting his name right now, of the Worpswede circle, before World War II. So they had paintings around the house and they had stories around the house. And I had always been for some reason, interested in Worpswede, because it's not very far from where I was born, where I was raised, in Lübbecke. So I had, somewhat strangely, I found a situation which I heard more about Worpswede. Later on, I learned much more about it and what the various um, schools of thought and art had been around Worpswede but at that time in Munich, I was just happy to see paintings on the walls.

ROBERT BROWN: You had not visited Worpswede yourself.

OTTO PIENE: I had.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh you had.

OTTO PIENE: I had already. I had, [00:04:00] kind of had a little delayed, I think actually around that time, when I first was in Munich, not a honeymoon but a kind of wedding trip, post-wedding trip, with my young wife, to

Worpswede, to walk around in the village, in the town and you know, see some of the old places and see the landscape. I was very attracted to that landscape of moors, and peat, and puddles, and little rivers and uh, and how do you call that, trundling? On the, on the little moor canals.

ROBERT BROWN: Punting along or a brook?

OTTO PIENE: No. What they use, horses as, or yeah, just punting along.

ROBERT BROWN: Trekking or something.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. So anyway, that landscape, which is a typical, or one of the most typical north German landscapes—that always interested me, just as I—although, I think I know more about South Germany than about North Germany, my favorite landscape in Germany was always in the northern plain. So, anyway.

ROBERT BROWN: It's very expansive. You mentioned the day of the uh, end of World War I, you came over a dike and there was a sheet of water and a great sky.

OTTO PIENE: That was the area, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: And so in Munich, you were getting really, a sort of grounding in various aspects, very basic training, would you say?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. Yeah, I wasn't all that thorough in terms of basic training, I mean they didn't really teach you how to stretch a canvas, and how to size it, and how to buy the best paints, because there was no canvas, and there were no stretchers, there was no best paint. [00:06:00] People had to make do with what they could get. People were drawing on newspapers and, and uh, using charcoal and using really literal, really bad water-soluble paint and stuff like that, and only slowly did, you know, materials come back, such as oil paint or quality oil paint—come back into the picture. But I learned about such things as first of all, figurative drawings, secondly, portrait drawing, about which I knew more already, something already, before I came there. And um, composition and you know, a kind of systematic approach to painting and drawing. Also, when I had been there for, I think three months or less than three months, I was offered a job to teach drawing in a competing school. A competing school was a graphics private school, applied graphics mostly. I took the job and that's how I paid for my ah, materials and things. It was mostly—my teaching hours were mostly in the evening and one of my duties was to teach life drawing. So I was there teaching life drawing, I was definitely the youngest in the class, the teacher was the youngest. And then there were other people there who were, you know 30, 40, 50 years old, but I got along fairly well with it.

ROBERT BROWN: You found you liked teaching?

OTTO PIENE: I didn't mind it. I mean, I've never been somebody who thought that teaching is it. I think teaching somewhat comes naturally and um, I've always considered [00:08:00] it an important part of you know, whatever I do. Although when I don't have to, I don't want to teach. I've never been addicted to it, just like I've never been an addicted smoker, you know? I've had enough time not to do it, that was just without thinking about, stop it and not miss it. Unlike some—a lot of teachers I've known, particularly art teachers, who really express themselves teaching and become these kind of walking clouds of teachers. Anyway, so that's how I earned a living while I was a student in Munich, and then also, when some people wanted some graphic designs, I did graphic ads and stuff like that, that was another part of things that I was learning.

ROBERT BROWN: Were there quite a few art—uh, artists in Munich by then, had they returned?

OTTO PIENE: There were plenty of artists, there were plenty of exhibitions. I met a lot of artists. I was introduced by friends to some important artists' pastimes, one being at artist pubs and artists talking to artists, and um, artists talking importantly and interestingly and somewhat warmly, as well as critically. I met a few Munich artists, young and old, and the other part in Munich in those days was Carnival—Fasching, that is. So, I think I was introduced to the art of celebrating Fasching, a lot of dancing, initially very little drink because there was no drink, or practically nothing interesting to drink. And then [00:10:00] I think the second Fasching, um, season in Munich, I counted. I went to 13 Fasching costume parties with, you know, other students, and most of them artists, most of them young, and also was involved in doing one or the other Fasching decorations on the small scale, and playing the piano at one or the other—at one or the other Fasching party. I had played the piano since I was 10, that's when my—I still play the piano, since I was 10. At one point, when I was 18, so I had to be very serious, kind of personal quiz with myself as to whether I should be a visual artist or whether I should be a pianist and do music, and in my mind, I still compose songs and stuff. So, music has always been an interesting part—interesting to me.

ROBERT BROWN: What was it about Fasching that was so captivating?

OTTO PIENE: The first time I ever knew a party, and these parties were very—they weren't wild parties as some people would think. No, they were essentially social parties, but people with costume, people were—there was music, there was bands, there was young people, um general vitality, general bounce, and an enormous joie de vivre, because this was 1948, 1949, the war was over. People had an enormous sense of how they had survived and how that was worth celebrating, and how it was worth—they are enjoying themselves. And uh, you know, young people were as they always are. [00:12:00] People are young, they're beautiful, they're pretty, they're lively, they race around. Um, I had, for a while, a friend of mine from Lübbecke, who also, who was a war veteran—wanted to become a painter—joined me in Munich. He later, and I, went to Dusseldorf and to Hamburg, and he didn't—I think he has never become much of a painter, certainly not a famous painter, but he was around, and I made other friends, somebody whom I later brought to Dusseldorf to teach at the fashion school there, and I had some platonic girlfriends there who I guess liked me because I was talented and, and uh, promising. And there were, I think I mentioned one of them, three half Jewish girls who had survived the war and one of them was really—I became fairly close, fairly close to and learned about all her stories and the terrible stuff that had been going on in the war, and all of this in a landscape of an essentially destroyed city. So, things were, on the one hand, very sad and very depressed and very traumatic and very, um, ugly. And on the other hand, you know, young people are young people and there was love, and dancing on the ruins, so to speak, going on. And you know, the first cigarettes you could buy freely, after the currency reform in June of 1948, and the first beer you could buy, and uh, wine. [00:14:00] [Audio break.]

ROBERT BROWN: Then you went from the Blocherer Schule to the academy by 1949 or so.

OTTO PIENE: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have examination?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, I had to apply. I mean, when it opened for applications, I had to apply, submit a portfolio, then I was invited to undergo what, I think a three-day practical examination, meaning you had to draw this and you had to draw that, and then you had to make a composition, and I was admitted.

ROBERT BROWN: Was all that fairly routine for you? Were you a bit more advanced?

OTTO PIENE: No, no. No, it was pretty exciting because there were so many, I don't know they would admit maybe five or 10 people first. For some of us fairly—

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned last time, that the classes were restricted.

OTTO PIENE: Fairly exciting. Well, it was in no way this kind of history or this culture, history of that, your experience around here, when people applied to college. Now it is much more—what, topical, so to speak. It was really, you know believing in your talent and believing in what you were doing, and expecting that some other people would notice, but there was no choice. Later on, there was. I think that when I was at the academy in Munich and because I had to switch because of, um, state laws, state rules on employability and exam grants, I think you could only take exams where you were expected to be employed; in my case, in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, so I had to switch later, from Munich to Dusseldorf. And at the same time, I think I also applied in Hamburg and I was accepted in both places and [00:16:00] chose to go to Dusseldorf, which was probably fine. So as of, what was it, May I think, of '49, I was at the academy in Munich, which was yet another step, because now I was in a painting class that was run by somebody who had been a really good, strong figure in the art scene in Munich in the '20s and the '30s, and he was some sort of anti-Nazi, and um—

ROBERT BROWN: What was his name?

OTTO PIENE: He had a very international—relatively, I shouldn't say very. Relatively international orientation. His name was Willi Geiger, and Willi Geiger later became more famous because he is the father of Rupprecht Geiger, who is a very well-known painter in Germany now. Rupprecht Geiger, I think just had his, I don't know, 75th or 80th birthday, whereas the father, Willi Geiger, when I was his student, had his what, also had his 75th or 80th birthday, something like that. So he was somebody who had taught beyond retirement age, because good teachers with a good political record were in demand and there were some good teachers at the Munich Academy then. However, then too, Munich was still kind of this Blocherer town, with the Blocherer Academy.

ROBERT BROWN: Basically, rather conservative.

OTTO PIENE: People made art that came with certain definition, much of it Christian inspired, much of it inspired by the Bavarian landscape, much of it inspired by Munich, the city with a very strong artistic tradition. The reason why I [00:18:00] looked at it a little bit tongue and cheek—although I learned a lot and I enjoyed it a lot and I painted in Munich and I began to like the town—um, but one reasons I looked at it a little critically is that this was the city where Der Blaue Reiter had emerged, before World War I, and there wasn't too much of that, um, highest level of art around when I looked around. There was more of a kind of professional, eye-level, consumer painting going on, meaning people making very professional, semi-Expressionist or semi-abstract paintings, that would fit very well with a lot of sofas, particularly sophisticated ones, but it didn't have the spark that this town must have had before World War I, partly because people just were too busy surviving or getting resettled in life.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. Was the teaching rigorous or was it liveliness?

OTTO PIENE: My teacher wasn't rigorous, and nobody else's teaching was rigorous. It was all pretty, pretty um—

ROBERT BROWN: You could do somewhat of what you wished?

OTTO PIENE: Well, yeah, it was quite liberal, it was pretty tolerant. Tolerance was something that people tried to teach, and it did not—it was not strict in any sense. You didn't really have to do anything that you didn't want to do, so it was very much in the tradition of teaching [00:20:00] art at German art academies, which is very different from how we know it here. One of my first good impressions, when I came to the United States, teaching art, is how students would ask straight questions and expecting straight answers, and were really expecting guidance in a certain way, whereas there, in those old art academies, there's a very kind of free spirit, um, very cultural, intellectually informed, wildly oriented towards the knowledge of history and the history of art, but not anything that deals with the way I felt, with direction or with the more demanding portions of inspiration of vision for ideas; that, I somehow felt was really lacking. However, I had a lot of inspiration in other ways.

After a while in Munich, I was invited to live in the basement of um, a family that knew my parents, which my parents knew, and that was a very intellectual family and the house, which was packed full because there wasn't enough housing around. Lots of publishers and writers and uh, in which the professors would walk in and out, and they would have soirees where people gave private lectures and presentations and concerts and stuff. So that was a very nice family to live in and again, I learned quite a bit about the good parts of Munich and Bavaria, and intellectualism as it survived, [00:22:00] essentially, and the sort of intellectualism that had very little to do with the kind of education orientation that the Nazis had tried to impose. Here were old families that were essentially—there may, they might have been, um, unaggressive in their criticism, but they certainly lived apart from the "official" Germany of the '30s, and maintained their standards and maintained their work, and somehow maintained their sense of life as they saw it. So that was pretty much, pretty strong in Munich, because Bavaria, particularly Munich, had always been somewhat opposed to—the better portions of it, to this loud and brassy brouhaha of the, of the Nazis; no matter how Munich was involved in the portions of it, in the history of the Nazis early on.

ROBERT BROWN: So it was like being in, where you were living, almost like being in a little small university community wasn't it?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, the university was right by, the Art Academy was right next to the university and um, every now and then I went to art history lectures and I was surrounded by students, art students and art history students and other students. As I [ph] said, the old Art Academy in Munich is right next to the university, in Schwabing, and there was a very strong climate of liberation, so to speak, but lots of the, quote unquote, old Munich was really evident and in a good way.

ROBERT BROWN: This was still under the occupation I guess.

OTTO PIENE: The occupation is still there.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, because it was American, I think.

OTTO PIENE: No, the occupation is still there [00:24:00] but Germany was still a, um, a non-state, a non-nation.

ROBERT BROWN: Right.

OTTO PIENE: Until finally they reformed it.

ROBERT BROWN: But was it very evident, the fact that—you've mentioned how it was in your hometown with the British, who had people move out and they occupied homes.

OTTO PIENE: Americans were quite evident, but they weren't sitting around in Schwabing very much. They would, you know, drive up and down the boulevards and uh, but I'm not sure that at that point, there was very much true fraternization going on between the better parts of say, Bavaria and the Americans. The Americans were really, more or less an occupation force that had the cigarettes and the food, and the GIs, and the um, collecting point. They also were involved in somehow reorganizing cultural aspects of history and um, the inventory.

ROBERT BROWN: Right.

OTTO PIENE: So, some of the best early exhibitions that I had seen were organized by the Americans, the collecting point of authority, that pulled things out of the mines and out of the vaults where they had been stored, and took first steps to make them available to the public again. So that was the good part. And I saw, for instance, I saw, at the Haus der Kunst in Munich. [Audio break.]

ROBERT BROWN: So you were there with your family then, in Munich?

OTTO PIENE: No, no, I was—I had my family in Lübbecke [00:26:00] and they were living mostly with my mother. I would go to school in Munich and then come back, go back to Westphalia for the uh, for the vacations. And it was a somewhat unusual way of life, but it wasn't that unusual because everybody was so young.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure. Well, then you left in about 1950. You went to Dusseldorf, and that was to be in the region, North Rhine-Westphalia, where you might become a teacher.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, that had to do with exam guidelines and stuff. So I went to Dusseldorf, went to the class, actually to the teaching program, whereas up to now I had been in the, whatever, free arts programs, and that just meant that I had to take some extra pedagogy and classes that were related to teaching, but otherwise, there wasn't that much of a difference in terms of what I did. And I instantly met uh, new friends in Dusseldorf, one of them being Heinz Mack, who was then, I think 19 years old.

ROBERT BROWN: A bit younger than you.

OTTO PIENE: I was an old man already. I was already 22 when I came, came uh, from Munich. And some others, who are still my friends, notably Heinz Mack, with whom I later formed Zero Three, no Group Zero, out of which came Zero Three, which was then the support publication we did, and Hans Salentin, who is still in Cologne, who also participated in the early Zero activities. That was the kind of the narrow circle of people involved in the uh, in the teaching programs, but then there were other classes, [00:28:00] such as sculpture classes and painting classes.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you like the teaching classes much?

OTTO PIENE: The one or the other I didn't mind. I mean, I didn't mind studying pedagogy. There had been a lot of pedagogy around my parents' house, so um, that was in a certain way, the history of pedagogy, studying the history of pedagogy is not that different from studying the history of philosophy, so that's kind of okay. It still gives me the advantage that I know something about pedagogy, in an academic institution where nobody knows anything about pedagogy. That doesn't mean that there aren't quite a few people around here for instance, at MIT, who don't know how to teach, but there are also plenty of people here who know nothing about teaching and psychology and all these things. So, there are many ways of looking at the value of learning these things. Another thing we learned was um, aspects of child psychology and how they show, in children's arts, activities, and that's a perfectly fine thing to know. I hear that now, you have big heroes around, I mean these kind of seasonal [ph] heroes around Harvard—not so much MIT, like Piaget and all these fellows that have made a lifetime's occupation to go into these things that were actually taught to us in a somewhat rudimentary but reasonable form. Because we were interested in you know, children's drawings and all that stuff. That was interesting, that was worth looking at and worth being involved in, so I learned something there that wasn't all that dramatic but definitely part of kind of human instruction all together.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have to go into [00:30:00] classrooms?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, every now and then.

ROBERT BROWN: But what you really liked was your painting and sculpture, your continuing classes.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. A couple of things happened. First of all, there were the uh, the teacher, the main teacher I had, we had, was a former wartime um, chief of a company of painters, um, visual arts reporters, propaganda company, is what they were called, and he had elements of, of being insensitive to art, modern art. Although he was from Dusseldorf and knew something about the history of modern art in Dusseldorf, which is after all, another city somewhat comparable to Munich, except livelier than the more traditionally bonded Munich. So, he knew something about the history of Dusseldorf, but otherwise he had, as a teacher, had nothing to give, and we kind of despised the man. We were very arrogant to the man and never really communicated. Um, I think he was afraid of us, he may have been, particularly afraid of me because I was probably the most articulate of those guys. He didn't exactly have a good time with these young guys, but he didn't deserve a good time either.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, what in painting were you continuing?

OTTO PIENE: Well, he did one good thing, and I think for that we have to be grateful, because maybe on the one hand, realized that we were independent and talented, and on the other hand, he maybe, he wanted to isolate us from—meaning three of my friends and myself—from the rest of the classes. He gave us our own painting studio, so we had the luxury of having our own big studio [00:32:00] classroom, and you know, painted through the ages, so to speak, meaning the ages of modern art, about one style every month or so. Not that that's the way we saw it, but we were influenced by say, Cubism and Braque and um, another day we were influenced by Picasso and his more expressive figurative periods.

ROBERT BROWN: This was on your own.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, we went through these things kind of on our own, painting, painting through the uh, layers of, of modern art, as a form of learning really.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that conscious?

OTTO PIENE: I don't think it was, no.

ROBERT BROWN: On your part?

OTTO PIENE: No, no.

ROBERT BROWN: You're making up for lost time?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, we were making up for lost time. We were also being attracted to certain things that were around. There was no easy survey of everything modern art had done. You know, all these things we know now, all these books we have now, all these collections of images we read now, we see now, didn't really exist. There was just a modest library in the uh, in the academy in Dusseldorf and you know, we found books about Bauhaus and got increasingly drawn to that, and found books about design, got drawn into designing, first designing exhibitions and commercial exhibitions and stuff. So I was also kind of catching up with life and learning what there is out there to do for artists, particularly when they are forced to earn some money and in whatever modest fashion, make a living.

ROBERT BROWN: Could you seek collections in Dusseldorf?

OTTO PIENE: Dusseldorf, the museum essentially—and I saw these fabulous exhibitions in Munich, for instance, of the uh, the pictures from the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, because [00:34:00] the collecting point authority had bought these out of the mines and made them available in exhibitions. In Munich, in Dusseldorf, there's a good art museum. Dusseldorf had a very lively, um, period in modern art, I think throughout the 20th century. Dusseldorf is still one of the world's leading towns, strange as it sounds, but still one of the world's leading towns in terms of feeding artists to the world and receiving artists from the world, who liked to live in Dusseldorf. It's amazing how many artists live in Dusseldorf today, for instance, many Americans and lots of people from all over the world. And uh, in the museum there was really interesting stuff. The first modern art exhibition I ever saw, I saw in Dusseldorf, while I was still a gymnasium student, right after the war. So yes, there was, there were things to see. And then the necessity of going to university came up. First, we studied—and I keep saying "we" because there was always a little herd of people there, meaning three, four, five people, who came together and just loving this class. First, we started geography together and made rather pretty pictures of geological charts and stuff, and um, then decided that was really boring because the teachers were too boring.

And then, Heinz Mack and I went into it more seriously and we found out that, beyond the obligatory philosophy and pedagogy exams, we could teach philosophy as a major, quote unquote, although that's not really what applies here, because [00:36:00] these weren't—there were no longer college-level studies. We were working towards whatever master's degree exams. Then, you know, we studied philosophy, first at the Academy in Dusseldorf, where at that time, the ruling taste was existentialism and philosophy of existence, and that was fine, learned quite a bit there. And then onto Cologne, where we went into real heavy philosophy stuff. I studied philosophy as long as spring of 1957, at which time I did my exam, and during my exam, my philosophy, my main philosophy teacher, offered me to stay on as PhD candidate, and work on aesthetics, since I seemed to have ideas that nobody else had. That was very tempting, and I thought about it for about 48 hours and then went back to my studio, and that's a different story, and started painting again and never really thought about going back to the university again. So, that settled that, but I was, I was interested, very interested in philosophy and worked very hard.

ROBERT BROWN: What was it about it that particularly captivated you, do you think?

OTTO PIENE: Well, um, my field of study in philosophy were mostly, you know Kantian theory of perception, and aesthetics, meaning critique of judgment, and then on to things that kind of followed, Hegel of course, and Hegel's aesthetic. Husserl, I was very intrigued by Husserl, particularly the way he writes and observes and writes about it. [00:38:00] And on to philosophy of existence, but not—I was never much of a Heidegger fan and not so much um, interested in the—I've never studied Nietzsche very much, I always thought he was too thick.

But as I said, I was very interested in Husserl and um, Nicolai Hartmann's aesthetics, theory of aesthetics, and value theories, anywhere between Max Scheler and you know, the German philosophy of existence and the existentialists. So that was my—my field you can't say, because I've never had, really had a field, but I came close to aesthetics and closer to having something to say about it than most philosophy students—I think that's what interested my teacher, and um, that was that. However, there's another part of the—besides exams and all this stuff, there's another part of the Dusseldorf history which is important, because as of um, 19—what was it?—1953, we did some group work essentially designing an exhibition about art and science, in Dusseldorf, art and science and technology. That was interesting because we dealt with a lot of top notch—we, the group of students, we were 25 then, dealt with a lot of top notch scientists and engineers, so that was interesting.

Then, as of 1955, [00:40:00] for the first time ever, I had had my family in Dusseldorf, built a little apartment, learned something about how to make furniture and how to paint walls, which I had to, actually. I painted a lot of walls for money in Munich. So I had my family since 1955 and then also, in 1955, for the first time ever, I had a shared studio in a learners [ph] building in Dusseldorf. Initially, I think there were six of us, and we paid some nominal rent that was really ridiculous, and then kind of one by one, the others peeled away, and I ended up having a studio essentially with Heinz Mack, which led to the Night Exhibitions and to Zero eventually. When all the others were gone and I only—I had the main studio space and he had the second to main studio space, that's how the Night Exhibitions happened and that's how Zero happened. That's the way we did exhibitions that are now in the art history books. And um, that happened at the same time—now, the preparations for that, when I first had the studio, that happened at the same time when I was still a student. I did my final exam, the last exam was in philosophy, so I could have my all over, um, appropriation to enter into the service later, which as you know, I never did. I did that in, I think February 19—February or March 1957. On the first or second of April, meaning only six weeks later, I already opened, together with some of my friends, the first [00:42:00] Night Exhibition. It took only that long to make it all, um, pop so to speak. Also, the things that had gone on kind of in parallel for a while.

A few more things about that time. As of the fall of 1951, in Dusseldorf, just responding to an ad, I got what started out as a job, teaching figurative drawing, and then very soon, history of art, at a fashion school, the Fashion Institute of Dusseldorf, where I stayed while the job was spreading and intensifying, until July 1964, meaning two months before I came to the United States, I gave up that job in Germany, finally, gladly, happily so, with a great sense of relief, when I had the prospect of going to the United States and I had decided after all now, I'm going. So I was in the Fashion Institute of Dusseldorf for 13 years, and I have many—there was many lovely students and it was very serious and a very professionally taught school. And my former students, they were mostly, um, women, still appearing to my openings, wherever they happen, whether it's San Paulo, Brazil or New York City, or Karlsruhe, Germany, there are always some former students there from the Fashion Institute. Now, you know, they're grown ladies, they bring their kids, they bring their husbands, you know. Because I taught in that school, not only drawing and, and basically as I am also art history, and anatomy, and developed there, the field of whatever, cultural history, and history of costume. [00:44:00] So these kids learned a lot from me. They got an outlook on life and culture and spirit, so to speak, that is not being provided commonly in most fashion schools.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you lecture, or were you a lecturer primarily?

OTTO PIENE: Both, both. I lectured, yes, but it was kind of classroom lectures, and the other parts were drawing, and you know, design stuff. I started out teaching incredible, um, teaching loads. I mean, it took me a while to get a little smarter and find out that this is really too much. Initially, I taught something like 32 full hours a week or something like that, just crazy. Then it went down to maybe 28, and then maybe eventually to 26 or 25, or something like that, but I did that for, essentially for 13 years, and the school only had one three-week block of vacation in the summer, and there were just little vacations, like Christmas and Easter, so it was quite a commitment. But, during that vacation in the summer, major things happened much of the time. For instance, a major development in my painting towards the stencil paintings and the Light Ballet, happened in one of those three-week vacation blocks in Dusseldorf, actually at the same time when my third child, my little big daughter, Claudia, had just been born. So you know, these things occupy the same time period we are talking about, beginning in Dusseldorf in 1950, ending in Dusseldorf essentially, in 1964, when I [00:46:00] went to the United States. However, the studying, the going to school, ended in the spring of 1957. After that, I was still teaching, but I became a very independent and very um, productive and, and lively artist, doing things that had nothing to do with going to school.

[END OF 2 OF 7 SIDE A.]

ROBERT BROWN: [00:00:00] You were able to continue, complete your academic work, or at least carry it as far as you would, in '57, despite the tremendous teaching load.

OTTO PIENE: Yes. And the other things that I was doing.

ROBERT BROWN: And with the family.

OTTO PIENE: There's something which is also interesting, in terms of the Dusseldorf Academy. No matter what we think about Dusseldorf, there was enormous ferment at the art academy at the time that when we were there. Although we happened to have a really uninspiring teacher, there were uh, important teachers at the academy elsewhere. There was Mataré, the uh, sculptor, and there was Pankok, the painter and draftsman, and there were some other interesting people, such as—wait, now I don't remember his name. Certainly, he was the most important painting teacher, and he also became somewhat well-known later on.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it during this time—you mentioned last time, you met Günter Grass, people such as that.

OTTO PIENE: Yes. In the other classes, there were kind of different groups of, or groupings of, of people. We were called KL, as in künstlerische lehre [ph]. We were generally considered the ones who were in the teaching program, which in the minds of the liberal artists, free artists, was some kind of a stain. But um, they also knew [00:02:00] that we were pretty bright and pretty talented and very confident. Then there were, there were some painting groups that we thought weren't so strong artistically, although they thought of them highly as artists, thought of themselves highly as artists. And there were some sculpture groups, with particularly Mataré class, and in the Mataré class, you had a one time, boys [inaudible]—and then some, then one way or another, all were being considered by their fellow students as being talented. And then there was another sculpture class where you had Günter Grass, who at that point was a kind of boring sculptor, and the next thing we knew that he was going to Paris and staying there for a while because he wanted to write a book.

ROBERT BROWN: Were these people with whom you had some contact?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, we all had contact. First of all, it's a small school. When I went there, the numerus clausus, meaning the total number of students admissible, was 130, all classes, all together, was 130, so there were maybe 12 or 15 classes and there were five to 10 people in each class. Then, I think while I was there, the total number rose to, somewhere of 230.

ROBERT BROWN: So quite small.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. Even in Munich, they had more when I was in Munich. I think they had something like 300 or 400. Um, and then there were these, you know these academy occasions, [00:04:00] such as the uh, now in Dusseldorf they weren't called Fasching feste, but Karneval, Karneval feste, and it just so happens that both—that Munich is Bavarian Fasching and Dusseldorf and Cologne are Karneval, and they are important. I knew nothing about Karnevalwhen I grew up, because it's essentially, it's the business of Catholic regions. Protestants don't celebrate Karneval, they couldn't care less. So, I happened to go to these places and learn something about it and, um, we usually kind of managed to make it a general exciting time that had nothing to do with the ritual of Karneval, and had little to do with the ritual of either the commercial aspects or the church aspects of, of Karneval, but it's still around in Dusseldorf, it certainly is around in Cologne. So that's when the students got together, no matter which class they were in, and boys who I met mostly because I had again, I had some kind of platonic girlfriend who was some kind of a mascot in our class, um, who cried on my chest every now and then, and one person she cried about on my chest was this man, Boyce, who was so difficult. So, that's how I knew something about him, and got to know more about him and met the man, so on and so forth, and we all thought he was okay, but he was a very Catholic artist. He was doing Christian art, he was doing crucifixions and uh, sculptures of saints, and [00:06:00] working with Mataré, who was a kind of a church artist of an archaic variety, and Mataré, at that time was doing the new portals for the Cologne Dome and stuff like that; there was a sense of excitement about that.

ROBERT BROWN: Was there—you mentioned it already in Munich too. Was there a religious streak among a few of the students?

OTTO PIENE: Some, and not very much in Dusseldorf.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, not too much.

OTTO PIENE: That was mostly with the sculptors, some of the sculptors, because lots of churches were being rebuilt, or built anew. You know, there was money there and there were commissions there, coming out of that, out of the churches.

ROBERT BROWN: But Boyce was someone who sort of stood apart from the other students—[crosstalk].

OTTO PIENE: He did, and he didn't. I think he did, yeah, I think he was somewhat apart. He was not a very gregarious person. And bars, I mean then there were the pubs of course, people would, you know drink beer in the pubs and talk big. And whenever we got some—I mean first of all, um, there's no tuition there, the tuition is nominal, compared to what we understand to be tuition in the United States, and whenever we got some extra money, because we had been good or we were entitled to it or something like that, like 50 marks or 100 marks at one time, we would, you know, um, we would congregate in pubs and spend some of the money drinking beer or wine. That would always produce important thoughts and vision and ideas, and so on and so forth. Some of the artists that we were with became interesting professionals.

I remember being—standing in a pub with Grass at one point, and said we haven't seen you in a while, where have you been, and he said, "I've been in Paris," and I said, "What have you been doing?" He said, "I've written a book." Are we going to read the book? Yeah, it's going to be published. The next time I saw [00:08:00] Grass in Berlin, that was 1960 already, where I had my second one-man show and he was at the opening, I said, "How about the book?" He said, "You've read it." Yeah, I said I read it, um, that was the Tin Drum, and it was an instant big success, everybody was talking about the Tin Drum. I said well, "Actually, I've read the whole book, it's kind of long," [laughs] and he said, "Well, you know, a book has got to have its length." Um, so.

ROBERT BROWN: Was he rather self-important?

OTTO PIENE: No, no, he was fine, he was much less political then, and he was much less an aspiring statesman then than he is now. It was way before he got involved with party politics of Willy Brandt and all that stuff. But I think Günter Grass is still okay essentially, I think he's still fine.

ROBERT BROWN: Your close friend there, I gather, was Heinz Mack, right?

OTTO PIENE: That's right.

ROBERT BROWN: Who was somewhat younger. What was his background?

OTTO PIENE: He came right out of school in Krefeld.

ROBERT BROWN: He was from the uh, same district as you then.

OTTO PIENE: He came from—no, no, he was—actually, he grew up in Hesse, and then his parents moved to the Rhine and they lived in Krefeld. He went to gymnasium there, and then right out of gymnasium, he went to the art school. So he didn't have much of a life to point at, which I think is something that probably affected him for the rest of his life, because he's made—in order to, to be respected by his fellow students, he always made up these stories, you know, the gruesome things he had seen in the war. At some point he said he had served with the flak, and all this stuff that was just really made up, because he couldn't possibly, he was much too young. Anyway, different kind of ambitions with different people. He's still doing it, [00:10:00] he's still making up stories, but essentially, he's also a very substantial artist and he's been one of my closest friends ever, despite all his weird little shortcomings.

And um, another person we met together was Günter Meisner, who was then a student with Gründgens, the uh, actor, and he was running the Schauspielhaus, the theater, the main theater in Dusseldorf then. Do you know who worked with this man? He was the figure after whom this film that was fairly notorious some three, four, five years ago, it was made. The man who was a wild talent and never knew whether he should play for Hitler or against Hitler, and did all sorts of manipulations to stay in power, and so on and so forth. I don't remember the name of the film. Anyway, Gründgens was Günter Meisner's teacher, Günter Meisner was an aspiring actor. He was also an aspiring artist, later on formed and ran a gallery in Berlin, where Heinz Mack and I, and then Zero, had an exhibition, and one of the exhibitions—the Zero exhibition we had there in 1963—I think is now being reconstructed in a Berlin museum, to open I don't know, late September or so, something like that. So, Günter Meisner was a different sort, a different kind. He was not a good visual artist, but he had great affection for the visual artist. He became a very independent and somewhat untypical German actor, who also did a lot of TV and um, was noticed in this country lately, when he played Hitler [00:12:00] in the um, The Winds of War. So, he is somebody who every now and then pops up in my history and he—I think his birthday was the same as mine—um, and he is the one with whom I cooked up these plans for the theater. And in context with him, I wrote the two plays I've written. So, he was an interesting figure that also meant some friction and some inspiration, and so on, so forth, over the years.

ROBERT BROWN: And this was—

OTTO PIENE: I met him at some Karneval party at the Academy in Dusseldorf, in maybe 1950 or '51, something like that. So there were all these words [ph], you know walking in and out. Another person I met at the Karneval—as I said, they're really great social motives these things—was Schmela, who then later on formed the Galerie Schmela where um, Group Zero had its first kind of international manifestations and so forth. All of that happened around this initially very small circle of students at the art academy in Dusseldorf. In those years that were poor years, people had practically no money ever, but were full of spiritual, intellectual, artistic, and just plain vital ferment. I mean, much of this was really in whatever sense it was directed and cast and formed intellectually, or in terms of style, in terms of orientation towards life, or in terms of how eventually people learn how to make a living or something. Much of this was really inspired by the sense of [00:14:00] being alive after this miserable war that threw everybody into lifelong depression, and some, sometimes I think every German in his right mind was thrown to a defensive mode for life. But on the other hand, there was this whatever, awakening spirit. People were alive, and they were young, and um, how there was indeed a possibility for a new life, partly out of the very near fact that um, there was a lot of energy around, just kind of looming out between the cracks of the ruinous buildings that were essentially the main picture; the academy was literally surrounded by ruinous buildings, that the Academy of Munich was a ruin. As I stepped in the first time, towards the Willi Geiger class, the first thing I saw after the first 10 steps, this big hole that went through three stories. Um, the studio we had in Dusseldorf—where later on the Night Exhibitions happened—was still a ruin; it was just a corrugated tin roof on it, with the rain raining through on the sides and stuff like that. So that was part of the story and partly a long, long struggle through the contrast of enormous [00:16:00] um, rubble and on the other hand, the kind of unsuppressable signs of life in a whole lot of people.

ROBERT BROWN: In particular with the young, I mean as children, you had almost been suppressed, without knowing it perhaps, and now there was a release coming out.

OTTO PIENE: Right. Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And you yourself, just as young people, weren't particularly depressed by those physical ruins about you.

OTTO PIENE: No, no, when we were, no, I mean um, boyhood years were essentially intact as far as living conditions are concerned.

ROBERT BROWN: At least where you grew up was.

OTTO PIENE: But the uh, you know these teen years, and that's really ridiculous to apply these terms, because people were just essentially alive, whether they were 17 or 26, um, were really determined, to a great deal, by the rubble literally, that World War II had created, and the fact that people were alive yet, at least the ones who were. You know, one of the pictures, the very common pictures in Munich and also in Dusseldorf, was these endless convoys of lories of trucks filled with rubble, that were carted to certain places outside the city. As in Munich, for instance, the um—I saw the clearing, the gradual clearing, year after year after year, of the city of Munich, and much of the rubble was trucked to the place outside Munich [00:18:00] which later became the Olympia Park, the Olympic site upon which the stadiums were built, and so on and so forth. But that was later again.

ROBERT BROWN: In '72, yeah. Well you then, and Mack and Meisner and all, began now and then collaborating on various things in Dusseldorf. Now you said shortly after, you um, passed your examination in philosophy in '57, within six weeks you had a collaborative shop for exhibitions and so on.

OTTO PIENE: Yes. Okay, that's another factor coming to this as of, I don't know, '54 or so. We joined, meaning Mack and I, and then some other people, joined what had uh, formed itself to be Gruppe Dreiundfunfzig, as in Group 53. There were some interesting artists there, some not, and they formed the first exhibition of young artists, the first group of young artists to show their work. Some of that was influenced by or familiar by Abstract Expressionism, and exhibited in the reemerging exhibition spaces, bigger exhibition spaces in Dusseldorf, such as the Kunsthalle or the Kunstverein, which was also in a ruinous building. Um, so we were invited in there. People, the people who were in that group were people like Brüning, and at one point we were thinking about either doing something separate from the Gruppe Dreiundfunfzig or forming our—um, before we knew about Gruppe Dreiundfunfzig, forming our own group, [00:20:00] essentially with the purpose of finding a place in which we could exhibit our work. And that was a kind of interesting grouping. It was Heinz Mack, myself, Johannes Gecelli, who later went to Berlin, and Peter Brüning, and we, at one time, also tried to reach Boyce, except we couldn't reach Boyce, because he was in an institution or something like that, he couldn't be reached. And I think that grouping didn't happen because we didn't get a response from the authorities who were supposed to give us some money. Instead, we joined the group Gruppe Dreiundfunfzig, and exhibited there a couple of times when, in 1957, I opened the Night Exhibitions, which were just essentially openings, one-night exhibitions with no duration.

ROBERT BROWN: You opened that where, in your studio?

OTTO PIENE: In my studio. And then I organized that together with Heinz Mack, in my studio; sometimes he used his studio too. We had, for the first two exhibitions, we had artists mostly from Group 53. Then I think we had one or two exhibitions, and then the—one exhibition, and the fourth—yeah, I think that was April, May, maybe June, I think June. And then the fourth evening exhibition in September 1957, was work by Peter Brüning, Heinz Mack, Otto Piene, Hans Salentin, and it is that exhibition that was the size of the exhibition that led to the forming of Group Zero, because it's there that I showed, for the first time, the raster paintings, the stencil paintings that I had developed during the summer. That was the summer when I had my three-week vacation and Claudia was born at the beginning of the vacation, and then I did all these stencil paintings [00:22:00]. And then, um, in September, there was the Night Exhibitions of work of those four artists, and it was there that the stencil paintings, among artists, had an instant response, a very strong response, pro or con. And it is there that Schmela—and that's a different story—saw the stencil paintings and said, "I have to exhibit these, you have to have an exhibition." Um, and on from there.

In the meantime, what also had happened is that first Night Exhibition opened in April. The first important and intellectually and artistically high-level new gallery opened in early May, that was Galerie 22, run by Jean-Pierre Wilhelm, who was a real cosmopolitan spirit, intellectual friend of the artists in Dusseldorf. And a month later, I think on the 30th or 31st of May, the Schmela Gallery opened, which was another of the most important new galleries in Dusseldorf, dedicated entirely to "new art," an entirely new outlook on the arts. So as of the summer of 1957, Dusseldorf was changing from something that had been turned provincial capital through the war and had been busy kind of recapturing its own understanding, turned into the most promising and the most productive, very lively new art scene, [00:24:00] entirely new for Germany, that then almost overnight also became very international. So, there was a decisive turn there in 1957, 12 years after the war.

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned a little earlier, Abstract Expressionism. This, you people became aware of fairly early?

OTTO PIENE: No. The first time I heard about Jackson Pollock was when I was at the academy in Dusseldorf and I read LIFE Magazine. I got, I got my hands on a copy of LIFE Magazine—at that time, this must have been about 1952 or so. LIFE Magazine had an issue that half of which was dedicated to Jackson Pollock, and you should read what it said about Jackson Pollock, that he was between madman and—

ROBERT BROWN: I think it was monkey.

OTTO PIENE: And monkey, and so on, so forth. But nevertheless, that's the first time I—and we, you know, were very impressed by this, although we had no experience in looking at anything.

ROBERT BROWN: The American work was particularly of great influence, is that right?

OTTO PIENE: No, it wasn't there.

ROBERT BROWN: Your stencil work, why was there such controversy over some of them?

OTTO PIENE: Because well, the, the let's say the interest of the day was in Art Informel, meaning the European version of Abstract Expressionism, meaning work mostly advocated by such people as Jean-Pierre Wilhelm, that came straight out of Paris—represented so, let's say Fortree [ph], who you know is a very good artist and Wols, who was a very good artist, and some others. And um, the group, Gruppe Dreiundfunfzig, was very much impressed by that and some people in Gruppe Dreiundfunfzig were really creating a German version called Tachismes, inspired mostly by the Art Informel. And we went through a period in which, in the name of, let's say, experience in Baroque, [00:26:00] I went through elements of um, shall we call it Abstract Expressionism, or should we call it Art Informel, which I then went with and refined, and that's where things were at the first um, Night Exhibition, in April 1957. Over the summer, the rhythmification was somewhat purified and um, subtler and more poetic, and that's when I began my stencils, which I used to um, make the paintings, as well as to shine light through them so they became um, the Light Ballet in a dark space. So, simultaneously, the painting became stencil raster paintings, and the Light Ballet happened out of the blue, so to speak, the Light Ballet. Although I had done a lot of work with lights and even designing lamps and so on, so forth, so it was not anything that, that was you know, surprising to me. And, whereas Jean-Pierre Wilhelm opened his gallery with the Art Informel group, two Art Informel exhibitions from Paris, then went on showing German and Tachisme people, and then eventually also some Americans, like Rauschenberg and um—

ROBERT BROWN: Johns? No?

OTTO PIENE: No, not Johns and not Allen [ph]. Oh, what's the liquid, uh, the liquid paintings, the man who was—

ROBERT BROWN: Louis?

OTTO PIENE: Oh no, no, no. Who always borders on kitsch. I don't remember his name right now, but we'll get to him. [00:28:00] Now, the other people you're talking about, Morris Louis and Noland, were shown subsequently, although much later, by Schmela, um, he picked up the, the—

ROBERT BROWN: Schmela had been a classmate at the academy, right?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, not at the academy. He was a friend of a classmate at the academy and walked in one day—no actually several days, several times—walked in to borrow five marks from his class—from our classmate, who was his former classmate, in a private art school in Dusseldorf. Schmela opened in, as I said, in late May, the last day of May or something like that, with an Yves Klein exhibition, which he had been alerted to by Kricke, who was an important man in Dusseldorf outside the academy, also young, relatively young, and uh, I think Ruhnau, the architect. So, I mean as I keep talking, you know the whole thing becomes a web of people and energies and visions that kind of form the fabric with the threads running from here to there and there to here, and all sorts of places, among other things within Germany but particularly also from outside Germany. Paris was blossoming or beginning to blossom again, um, people were coming from, from England every now and then, the Italians were coming. So, by the time we had Zero, so to speak, meaning as of April 1958 or more yet, the fall of 1958, Zero One happened in April [00:30:00] 1958 and Zero Two in the fall of '58. There were people coming to us because, first we had Zero, we had the Night Exhibition, and mostly to me, because I guess I was the chief organizer of things. I did, you know, all this correspondence in the name of the Night Exhibitions and Zero, after a day of teaching at the fashion school, and then once I was done with correspondence, all these things, I would go painting. I mean, I would leave the house at 10 o'clock at night and paint until two in the morning, and go back home and then be out again so I could teach school at nine o'clock in the morning. It was pretty, it was a pretty involved life. Anyway, I think the Zero, um, development and the stencil paintings, the raster paintings, the Light Ballet, the groups, the Night Exhibitions, all that, that's kind of a chapter in itself.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes. One, this one last thing. Dusseldorf had presumably recovered a good deal by the late '50s. Was there a local market that the local cultural community at least had an interest in buying things?

OTTO PIENE: I think it's a good question. One is that you know, the—[inaudible]—started after June 1948, after the currency reform, and what happened is as that then there was a reforming of a state in West Germany—meaning the federal republic under Adenauer—with the help of the Marshall Plan, industry, mostly industry, was rebuilt. People started eating again, ate themselves fat, um, and started building cars again. So, here was the reemergence of such famous items as the VW or the Mercedes. Um, [00:32:00] and the electro industry and the steel industry started building things again, and as a result, Dusseldorf became an industrial administration center again. So there was money in Dusseldorf but more yet, in the surrounding centers. As far as the arts are concerned, I mentioned that before, that in Krefeld and Wuppertal, there were traditional art collectors that started buying things from the galleries. And very soon after I appeared in the galleries, the only other thing [ph] that was sold initially, precious little, but it picked up fairly fast, so that by say 1960 or 1961, I had um, the chance to build more—with the money to build, say, more light sculptures for instance, with the money I earned from selling my work. And I was you know, using bigger canvases and making bigger paintings, and we traveled more and all that. So along with the emergence of the art and the language of art, there came a modest beginning of um, reward for the art, so that it expanded, it could expand further, and as of 1964, I already had been invited to the United States several times and finally accepted because three things came together, all of them also bringing in or providing a modest amount of money that enabled me to do these things. So yes, there was somewhat of a forming [00:34:00] of a new humus that did not only look at the arts but also support the artist in a certain way. [Audio break.]

ROBERT BROWN: Continuing the interviews. This is March 6, 1989.

OTTO PIENE: I was invited to go to the United States a couple of times and then in, I think in 1974, several things came together. One of them was that sometime in May or June, I received the first transatlantic phone call ever. It came from Howard Wise.

ROBERT BROWN: Your dealer, who had been your dealer in New York.

OTTO PIENE: Right. Um, then the fact that I got invited to um, to be a visiting professor at Penn, that was mostly upon the doing of Piero Dorazio, who wanted me to take his place, at least for a semester, or a year, or so.

ROBERT BROWN: And was he somebody you'd known?

OTTO PIENE: I had known him in Europe for quite a while, and then the ICA in Philadelphia, at Penn, invited me to have a one-man exhibition there, and because so many other things were happening already, and because I thought it was a good idea, I turned that into a Zero exhibition, which became a Zero exhibition in which more [00:36:00] artists participate, participated than in any previous Zero exhibition.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that by the accident of ample space or the timing?

OTTO PIENE: I think it was the timing, meaning in the fall of '64, there was the uh, the exhibition called Group Zero: Mack, Piene, Uecker, at the Howard Wise Gallery in New York City, and shortly thereafter there was the Zero exhibition at the ICA, in the Furness Building on the University of Pennsylvania campus in Philadelphia. While I was teaching there, I also had a studio in the, in the attic, so to speak, of the Furness Building. Um, this Zero exhibition provided a chance to have considerable number of light sculptures in the exhibition. Now, I had a room in it that also housed, um, collective works that I had done with Mack and Uecker, called the Light Mills, in a darkened room, along with my light sculptures. And Howard Wise came to see the exhibition in Philadelphia and he invited me to have, the following year, a one-man exhibition of my light sculptures on the spot, so that happened in the fall of '65.

The Zero exhibition migrated from Philadelphia to Washington, D.C., where it opened, I think in February, at uh, the—what was it called? The Gallery of Modern Art, I think it was called, in Washington. [00:38:00] Quite a beautiful space, quite a beautiful, um, gallery museum, for temporary exhibitions, that unfortunately didn't last very long. I think it didn't last for more than eight or 10 years all together. Um, I spent—after the, um, Washington exhibition, after I had served somewhat, um, rather positively for one semester, I was invited, at Penn. I spent a lot of time in New York City and um, was invited to give a lecture at the Carpenter Center early in 1966. That was the result, among other things, of my exhibition at Howard Wise Gallery called Light Ballet, which happened, I think, in November 1965. Uh, one day—I think I've told the story—some distinguished gentleman came into the exhibition. It turned out that one of them was György Kepes, and he did invite me, right there and then, to give a lecture at Carpenter Center, Harvard University, on the topic of light, because there he was um, designing an exhibition called Light as a Creative Medium. And I did go. I think this was in February 1966, and the day after the lecture, he um, invited me to visit him in his office at MIT. I went to his office at MIT, he told me about [00:40:00] how he was planning a Center for Advanced Visual Studies, and would I want to be a fellow there. So, as early as um, say February 1966, I knew already that uh, that was going to be center and that most likely, if I would make up my mind accordingly and if Kepes would be able to realize his plans as he had laid them out, I would be um, at this new center at MIT.

In the meantime, quite a few other things happened in 1966, '67, some of them in Europe. I made a big architectural sculpture on a storefront, a brand-new stainless steel façade in Cologne, in the summer of 1966. And soon thereafter, uh, what was possibly the largest exhibition on the subject of light as an artistic medium, opened at Hofun [ph], sponsored by the Phillips Corporation, because it was the Phillips Corporation's 75th anniversary. So that was one event. Another event was that in 1966, I wrote and produced a second play. The first one had happened in Berlin, in 1964. In 1966, I was invited to present this play and produce it for the Experimenta Theater Festival in Frankfurt, which I did. It had a somewhat scandalous opening and not [00:42:00] much more, I think one more scheduled performance thereafter, was a participatory play. It was very bold in its concept, difficult to produce, and I don't think anybody really understood how it was supposed to work and on the other hand, I and my troop didn't understand that easily, how to truly and easily and somewhat vitally engage the audience, although the concept was fairly clear and clean.

ROBERT BROWN: So the scandal was one of what the—[crosstalk].

OTTO PIENE: Well it was essentially a puzzlement of, uh, of mutual misunderstanding, um, but I still stand up to the concept and I would probably produce it again if anybody would ever be crazy enough to want to produce it. It was called the Light Auction, or New York is Dark, and um, it happened in part, in the form of an auction, because I had—an art auction—because in New York, I had come to know the world of art auctions, which was then very new to the artists and to the contemporary artists, and um, the other momentum was that someday, a couple of weeks into my exhibition Light Ballet in New York City, the New York blackout happened.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh right. [Laughs.] That was in 1965, or so.

OTTO PIENE: That was in '65, November, '65. There's a lot of funny anecdotal stuff around that, because my exhibition was all light sculpture and it drew more power than the Howard Wise Gallery on West 57th Street would normally draw, and when [00:44:00] the lights went off that late afternoon between five and six, people in the gallery thought it was because of me, because they thought I had effected a short out. Then, I was interestingly, I was waiting for the junior Tishman, who was supposed to commission a light sculpture for Tishman Buildings, but the junior Tishman did not show up. Instead he telephoned. He said that the elevators didn't work in his building, so he couldn't make it. In the meantime, it turned out that the lights weren't only out in the gallery but also in the building and then in the block, and so on and so forth. So, I was exonerated, people agreed that it couldn't have been my fault that the entire blackout happened because of my light sculptures.

[END OF 2 OF 7 SIDE B.]

OTTO PIENE: [00:00:00] The junior Tishman, by the way, never made it to the gallery, and also never made it to the gallery later. I guess he had understood that the commission was an omen, never commissioned anything, et cetera, et cetera. So I had written this play, the Light Auction, and all of New York is dark, and I still think that had interesting elements, but it obviously wasn't very well, either understood or received at the Experimenta Theater Festival in Frankfurt. And the great New York blackout really became an internationally known event only much later, and the phenomenon of light—of art auctions also became a phenomenon in Europe, regarding contemporary artists later. I think it was much more now, it's generally accepted, exists and is generally accepted that artists and dealers and collectors go on pilgrimages to Christie's, and Sotheby's, and London, and it's a big thing. But initially, it was quite exciting to see um, Barnett Newman happy as a clam because one of his paintings made it through the auction and sold for $42,000.

ROBERT BROWN: This was in a real auction, not the one in Frankfurt.

OTTO PIENE: This was real auctions, this was in New York, um, and I think one time, there was very big excitement there that Pollock had, had auctioned for something like $80,000. Somebody who was also in the auctions—I saw him at least twice there—was Andy Warhol. We also thought that was a fairly interesting, somewhat [00:02:00] mentally or intellectually less serious event that uh, the auctions turned into.

ROBERT BROWN: Now that was New York.

OTTO PIENE: That was New York.

ROBERT BROWN: How were you beginning to compare this with Dusseldorf or with other places in Germany?

OTTO PIENE: I think the um, the auctioning of contemporary art migrated to, to uh, Europe, because the auction houses in Europe paid attention increasingly to contemporary art. And then later there were these big talks in London of course, but also in fairly prominent auction houses in Germany as well, in Munich, in Dusseldorf and Cologne, and so on.

ROBERT BROWN: But was there—I mean in general, did the artworld seem considerably different in New York, from that which you had been—you were leaving?

OTTO PIENE: Well, the years I was talking about there, we still had this enormous wave of initial enthusiasm about contemporary art in New York City. That was the time New York City was the great, um, gilt navel of the artworld during the days of Pop art, as it was called, and then for a short while Op art and kinetic art and so on. But at that time, it was not common that that would be reflected in the auctions. The auctions were mostly about classical, modern art, or art before that, and it was only after those great years of New York City, as the great mover, um, and the great switching station, that contemporary art, meaning contemporary modern art, the modern art of the day, [00:04:00] penetrated the uh, um, auction market and the auctions more and more became a tool of art dealing, and art collecting. And investment in modern art increasingly became a serious business so to speak, after those years. Those years, I mean 1964, '65, '66, '67, maybe '68. Um, quite a few things emerged then, things that are more or less taken for granted now.

ROBERT BROWN: Sixty-eight is when you came up then, and gave your talk. Were you beginning to—

OTTO PIENE: No, that was '66, when I gave a talk when Kepes came up to me and said—no, he came up to me in my exhibition, then I came—I went to Cambridge. Then I gave my talk at Harvard University, then Kepes invited me to become a fellow at the center, but the center didn't exist yet. It took another year and a half until the center came into existence. In 1967, I had a big retrospective exhibition, this was—I was 39 years old, in 22 rooms of the museum in Dortmund, Westphalia, Germany. The first one in that exhibition, I had most of my work, meaning that most of the kinds of work I had done up to that time.

ROBERT BROWN: Mostly painting?

OTTO PIENE: No. Paintings, light sculptures, fire paintings, gouaches, um, graphics, meaning prints, [00:06:00] posters. We even had some kind of a store in the exhibition. Environments. I had a heat environment, I had some fire environment. I had an environment called New York, New York. I had um, environments of sheer light sculpture, or the so-called Light Ballet, and I had a schedule, a fairly busy schedule of events, um, as part of the exhibition. The exhibition opened with what you might call a multimedia play. The title of the multimedia play was Deutschland, Deutschland, and it was kind of a reflection of contemporary and recent history, back to the '30s in Germany, involved a lot of groups, social groups, from the city of Dortmund, such as school classes, some actors, some people from the theater. Also, a whole social dancing school and um, I had inflatables in there, and I had several layers of events that reflected '30s and '40s, World War II. [Audio break.]

The Dortmund exhibition was a really exciting event, mostly because of the events, and I kind of did most of the exhibition myself. I did all the trucking, I did all the uh—a lot of the hanging of the installations. It became a rather intense affair and it had its clientele, and the events in a certain way, such as this [00:08:00] multimedia play, Deutschland, Deutschland, um, were quite to the point.

ROBERT BROWN: And this was your first retrospective?

OTTO PIENE: That was my first retrospective.

ROBERT BROWN: You got quite a lot of publicity, didn't you? Favorable?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, I got—well, I didn't get only favorable reviews, but it got a good share of reviews, some of them good, some of them not good, and it really was a fairly substantial affair all together. I don't think that I've really had a show of that volume since. I've had retrospectives since, but I have not had a retrospective that, on the one hand, had that many artworks in it, and on the other hand, had this kind of intense program of, um, of events. At some point we also had some auctioning nights in which we auctioned posters and catalogues and all sorts of things, because we needed extra money for the posters for the exhibition and stuff, and it was pretty active, it just kind of went up. But we, I mean the museum director and I, and some of the curators involved, and it worked out fairly well. So that was in 1967.

Around that time, I also went to Hawaii, I think, for the first time, because I had this—no, that was a year later, I think, because I had these architectural works coming up there. However, at that time, I knew already that I'd go to the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, because I kept in touch, stayed in touch with Kepes, who would write to me and uh, I think the show in Dortmund must have been over and had other performances in other places as well, and [00:10:00] formed some other alliances with other artists, composers, writers, and by December of '67, I was in New York again, and early January of '68, moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, with a lady who was then my wife, Nan Rosenthal, who is now a curator in 20th century at the National Gallery in Washington. And I guess that I was about the first person here, to come to the center after Harold Tovish, who was local and the first fellow-in-residence at the center.

ROBERT BROWN: Did Kepes explain what he had in mind in some detail before you got here, or was all still fairly free form?

OTTO PIENE: Some of it had been explained, that it was about art and technology and that the artists will have studios and would be residents and could work with people they assigned at MIT, so they could do work that they couldn't do elsewhere, work of course somehow leaning towards science and technology, science, engineering science and new media science, specifically as they were—art specifically as it was understood then, um, and the nature of kinetic art. People here were kind of kinetic artists. Harold, who was dealing mostly with human figures, but human figure within a technological world. Myself, dealing with light, light sculpture, light performances, performances, events. Then thereafter came Takis [00:12:00] and then um, I brought in, recommended to Kepes, Tsai. Then, Kepes had invited Stan VanDerBeek, and then I also recommended Jack Burnham. That was the first group of people and then later, others joined. But during the first about two years, these were the people, the interesting but small population.

ROBERT BROWN: And primarily interested in some aspect or another, of kinetics. Even, you said a moment ago, as it was understood then, or as it was done then. What do you mean by comparison with larger scale work later, or small scale?

OTTO PIENE: In May 1968, I did my first sky event which certainly wasn't call sky event. I think it was called Light Line Experiment, but that opened up an entirely new field. The total length of helium inflated materials, which I first had to find and kind of invent, was 1,000 feet, and 1,000 feet certainly was an important sculpture; it was kind of longer than what we were used to in the studio work. And the life of—the lives of most artists here initially was somehow um, directed at exhibitions. Harold Tovish was preparing his exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, and Takis was preparing a show at the Howard Wise Gallery and at the Hayden Gallery, and um, Stan VanDerBeek, who was different, who was preparing work [00:14:00] at WGBH, and Jack Burnham was preparing his book, Beyond Modern Sculpture. He was the first artist who brought a typewriter to the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, which at that time I thought was some kind of a blasphemy, not blasphemy but I viewed it slightly ironically, that he didn't know anything better to do with himself than pounding a typewriter at the studio. But you know, I was very good friends with Jack Burnham, I brought him here, and um, so it was all very much within a sense of, of uh, friendship or collegiality, or certainly camaraderie, and we, everybody felt good about the work we were doing.

It was kind of an instant center, because Kepes had invited people who were at least what you would call in mid-career. They were all grownups, they were around 40, they were over six feet tall, each one of them, and uh, these people were highly motivated and knew what they were doing with themselves, and they all had the prospect of recognition within the area. I mean, they came with the recognition to begin with, but one would have a show in New York, and the other two, then the Hayden Gallery, and it all somehow lent itself to certain legibility for the center, and I think that, that indeed, was Kepes's view of the center as some kind of an elitist, modest size, but nevertheless shining ivory tower, in which the idea of interaction, [00:16:00] or integration, of art, science, and technology, would be practiced and would become manifest in a legible fashion. And it is true that all these people did find MIT scientists or MIT engineers that they worked with. So uh, the first two years, the center indeed was there almost instantly after three years of preparation that Kepes had accomplished. And um, the one thing that did not happen is what Kepes had used as some kind of carrot, that there would be this integrated work that would become the "Boston Harbor Project." And he later said that was more of a deck [ph] model, you know, a whatever, essentially a paper project, that would integrate minds, although not necessarily hands. So, there was—

ROBERT BROWN: It did not come to pass or—?

OTTO PIENE: Well, I think it had to do—to be fair—I think it had to do with the fact that the bicentennial wasn't really celebrated much in, um, Boston, but in Philadelphia, so there was never a great concentrated and coordinated celebration in Boston. That was one of the reasons why this great Boston Harbor Project never happened.

ROBERT BROWN: Was Kepes very clear in what he wanted you all to do or did he just say here's the facilities, here's the potential for linking up with scientists?

OTTO PIENE: I think it was fairly clear what uh, Kepes wanted to do. He wanted this, [00:18:00] this integration, this synthesis. He thought it wasn't even entirely clear whether the result would be art or something different, something new, something of a new, um, definition. We were all pretty critical of the fact that Kepes was a preacher but not a doer. In other words, he didn't do the work that he was advertising. He didn't even understand the work very well, that he was advertising, and so we all felt that we were uh, quite confident that the work that we were doing was way beyond, as we were seeing it, the design work that Kepes was used to, or the kind of flat surface work that he was used to. But otherwise, everybody had honest respect for Kepes. Everybody felt honored to be here and there was a sense of mission in the center that is undeniable, and uh, has stayed, I think with everybody who, who uh, was at the center at the time. I think essentially, it has continued throughout the uh, the lifespan of the center, which is obviously reaching into the very present. So, this was 1968, '69.

ROBERT BROWN: What do you think accounts for that sense of mission at the time?

OTTO PIENE: Well one of course, was Kepes' personality. You know he, everybody knows that he has—he's some sort of a missionary.

ROBERT BROWN: He's an optimist, you've once said.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. And um, [00:20:00] Kepes had, probably had, throughout his life and he has it to this day—I just saw him last Friday—a good amount of charisma, and he was a fairly determined ruler of this little place. He occupied the, the largest space in the place, with an enormously long desk and not much else in the space, and um, he had established excellent relations with the MIT senior administration. He occupied a very onerous [ph] place in such institutions as the American, what is it, Academy of Arts and Sciences, and stuff like that. So he had, to begin with, he had a very prestigious academic place. He also had a prestigious place within the community of cultural um, philosophers and essayists. The place, I think where he was most critically viewed was the arts and the artists. I've heard very, very critical um, assessments of Kepes, from artists who never went near, near the center, you know, who were doing different work that was essentially similar, I think, with the mission of the center. So that things almost become, our philosophies almost become a matter of taste or a matter of personal preference so to speak, rather than of cultural, intellectual sobriety, or um, fairness. [00:22:00]

But then, Kepes was also the author, is the author, of many books, a series of books that have been most influential in the world of American, particularly American, art education and art orientation. And I think this, the appreciation of Kepes as an author, is as strong now as it was then, if it isn't still expanding. It's hard to tell because I don't go out to the Midwest and ask the young students how much they read his books. But I think as I see that very much of his, his teachings has taken hold and was actually correct—that so many art schools and so many institutes, um, are taking up his message and are indeed following his lead and following the lead of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, seems to indicate that not only has Kepes been doing well, but he's also been right historically and that's interesting.

A week ago, I talked again, he's a friend of mine, to the twice commissioner of the Documenter, which after all is the most coveted international art exhibition of our days, and has been just that for the last 25 years. He said—and we talked about new centers and new colleges of design, new colleges of art and media, [00:24:00] for art and media, and he said, without any solicitation on my part he said, "There is only one model in the world for this, for these new places to happen, for these new centers to spring up, and that's the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT." So, this is 21 years after and um, I have no hesitation saying that Kepes' vision and his instinct and his tactical skills, created the place that has really been a beacon, a light beacon, if that image is permitted, to many other institutions that came later and that are now springing up in many, many parts of the world. Every now and then, I also have to remind myself that uh, I have been here all this time. I have been a director of this place since 1974, so I guess some of the credit is shared, so to speak. [They laugh.]

I should also say that—and this is somewhat more personal than talking about Kepes—that very similar ideals were, um, at work in Group Zero, that I founded with my friends, Heinz Mack and—and no, founded with Heinz Mack, formed with Heinz Mack, in the year of the Lord, in 1957. And later on—was it three, four years later—Günther Uecker joined us and then we became increasingly active internationally and spread the word, [00:26:00] and then finally also came to the United States. So it certainly was not um, the Chicago impulse alone and it was not the uh, the—

ROBERT BROWN: Chicago impulse, you mean?

OTTO PIENE: The New Bauhaus, where, where many of these ideas that led to the forming of the center were first formulated.

ROBERT BROWN: Kepes had been there first, right.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. Uh, and it was not the ideas of the Bauhaus had moved from—as the ideas moved from Berlin, to London, to Chicago, to elsewhere in the United States. It was also, in a certain way, just plain German and European tradition that, um, carried some of these ideals and some of these impulses and momenta, as in the case of Group Zero, and that can now be considered part of the seeds that led to developments as you now see them in Europe, and see them in particularly—particularly in Germany, particularly in uh, in France.

ROBERT BROWN: So you're saying that uh, your Group Zero was, to a degree, somewhat like the center here, or isn't that what you mean?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, that it was not institutionalized, it was a much looser but also much more flexible, in a certain way, much more spirited affair, in terms of artistic ideas and artistic, um, dissemination and liveliness than the center. The center, from the start was, because it was a university institute, was always at least with three toes of one foot, an academic [00:28:00] institute, where somewhat Group Zero was, you know, a fairly loose but very highly motivated, very energetic grouping of artists who were always flying somewhere, spiritually, creatively, intellectually. And when we—and as I said before, that was 1964—came to Philadelphia, we had already had, I don't know how many dozens of exhibitions, in how many European countries by the time we arrived in Philadelphia, which is only six years after Zero one, the catalogue magazine, had been published by Heinz Mack and myself. At that time, there were already, and that was probably the largest group of participants; we had already made it to 32 artists in the exhibition. These artists were from, from many different countries. By that time, we also had already made contact with artists similarly inclined in Russia and the socialist Balkan and obviously in the new world, in the United States. So in a certain way, you know, Zero was this enormous, enormously elastic and enormously um, penetrating movement of increased sensibility via very reduced means, because the uh, on the one hand, the language of Zero was very subdued. On the other hand, the expansive spirit was [00:30:00] most vital. So, what I'm saying is that the fact that I'm an advisor to some of these new creations in Germany—I just witnessed that again two weeks ago—is based as much on the fact that I've formed Group Zero with my friends—particularly my friend, Heinz Mack—as it is based on the fact that I've been director of the center, um, for so long, as it is based on the fact that you know, the center was a creation by György Kepes. There's a geniality of ideas and geniality of, of activities, and visions involved, which is much more complicated than most people have it in writing, and that's just fine. As a matter of fact, that gives you more—supports the belief in the complexity of um, whatever spiritual evolution, much more than believing in simple facts that [inaudible] kind of seed catalog.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, what led—you love and still do, the experimental free, um—the lack of organization, so to speak, in Group Zero. What led you, in the early '70s, to decide that yes, you would stay on in an academic institution? Because you became a professor, I think in '72, of environmental art, at MIT.

OTTO PIENE: Well, several things. One is that um, first of all, I thought that [00:32:00] Group Zero was fast becoming a cultural factor which went beyond just producing or inspiring culture, but also became a political factor. However, I had problems with that, with my closest friends, meaning Heinz Mack and Günther Uecker, who thought that art was, by definition, unpolitical, and therefore it should not show any kind of political color. I also had formulated what I called a new idealism, and they didn't really agree with that too, because they thought the concept of new idealism, which essentially was almost a technical term, because it had to do with the fact that much of what we thought and what we did was based on um, traditional idealism, meaning Hegel, Kant and maybe later, phenomenology, if you want to um, address philosophical currents of the past. But they thought the formulation of new idealisms was too optimistic, and there wasn't that much reason to look at the world optimistically, therefore it would—at some point, Heinz Mack, in Bonn, actually, towards an exhibition we were having, just the three of us, called Zero in Bonn, without consultation of the other artists, he announced that Group Zero was to be dissolved. And that was just essentially a vain personal move, because he had always advocated a kind of solipsism as the ultimate goal of the artist's [00:34:00] mode of work and sociological position, and a kind of faith—saying that this is nice, it was nice and good that we worked together when we were young and didn't have too many other ways to go, but eventually, he would want to be a long distance runner on his own, which is kind of a common theory about artists and groups. It's kind of the theory that I still think is naïve and somewhat um, limited. However—

ROBERT BROWN: Was he a romantic then, do you think, in the end? He wanted to—?

OTTO PIENE: No. I think unfortunately, he became a kind of very highly motivated materialist. He's a very successful artist now, calls himself the busiest sculptor in Germany, meaning the one who has the most—the largest number of commissions, and all of that. I still communicate with him in a somewhat genuine fashion, but the way he has organized his life is very different from what I see as my organization or my uh, dream or even fulfillment of dreams, as to how I want my life to be. Um, so in '66, Group Zero indeed did disband technically, although there were many other Zero exhibitions later, organized by other people, to this day, um, one. Two, the um, advent of ever new and interesting media seemed to be more likely [00:36:00] to invite artistic pursuit at a place like MIT. Because in the meantime in New York, I had—I think this was 1966 too—I had formed a very strong alliance with Aldo Tambellini and we were uh, we were giving performances at the Black Gate and expanding our media, Zero [ph], video.

The Tambellini phenomenon was very interesting because what happened there was kind of almost like a, a uh, reflection of Zero in Europe. He, having been born and raised in Europe and having lived through World War II by chance, in Italy, had um, similar beliefs as I had, and had obviously been inspired by things that he had heard about Group Zero, but on the other hand, had, had um, brought into it, somewhat more—maybe not more violent, but certainly more, um, physical and um, forceful, bodily forceful elements, than what I had known to be the practice and conviction of Zero artists in Europe. So, I did form a very strong and very sympathetic, empathetic alliance with Aldo Tambellini. We did the Black Gate and um, came closer and closer to the new media, what we now call the new media; video, beginnings of the use of computers. [00:38:00] And um then, somewhat surprisingly, I launched into Sky Art as I had somewhat abstractly formulated it before, and then I was out here on Briggs Field and I did, started doing these big sky events. I hardly knew myself that it was happening, because it was so surprising. No one had seen any, anything like it and ah—

ROBERT BROWN: You had the concept and you then sought to find the venue to realize it.

OTTO PIENE: And all of a sudden there it was, I was doing it. Um, so there was a very strong lure of just continuing and expanding, and I met Doc Edgerton and I met other people at MIT. So this place, academic or not, became a matter of—became a place in which things could be realized, and that was different, quite different from Zero in Europe. It took a long, long time for people to realize that beyond ideas, beyond um, abstract concepts, beyond the abstractness of art, there is reality that art comes close to, that art even um, consumes or at least penetrates, influences and all that. MIT, not surprisingly, turned out to be a place in which ideas, thoughts, concepts, visions, can be realized, and that, I think is part of the charm, or part of the characteristics of MIT.

ROBERT BROWN: There were the technical means there.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. So, another thing that happened in, in late 1968, meaning within the first year that I was here at the center, I continued doing work at the Black Gate [00:40:00] with Aldo Tambellini. I did the first sky event and I did, just a couple of months later, the second sky event. Um, then moved—then was invited by WGBH, to join the artists for The Medium is the Medium, the first, the first U.S. video TV program. However, I should say that was only after I had done the first artists' TV program in Germany, with Aldo Tambellini, was also 1966. No, not 1966, 1968.

ROBERT BROWN: This was video within video.

OTTO PIENE: No, that was video performance, produced in a big television studio. So, right from the start, we moved towards television, although video was certainly just playing itself out as artists' video. So we worked with WDR in Germany—something that I initiated because I knew some people there. Um, and we did a big live studio production that was broadcast later, then, back in Boston, at WGBH, started the first production of artists. And all of a sudden, we were dealing with the media. Um, in 1969, I also had a, um, another one-man show at Howard Wise Gallery in New York, and I made new sculptures for that, some of them inflatable, one of them to deal with heat and fire, which never quite came together, [00:42:00] the others working with light, um, with timed, interactive inflation and deflation processes. I worked with young engineers at MIT, I worked with strobes, started working with increasingly, Doc Edgerton, um, who was very responsive then.

ROBERT BROWN: He was a pioneer in that whole thing wasn't he, Edgerton?

OTTO PIENE: He's generally considered the man who invented the uh, the electronic flash, meaning the strobe, and all its various manifestations. And he still walks in here once a week, or so. Also now, how old is he, 87, 88?

ROBERT BROWN: Something like that, yeah.

OTTO PIENE: He just brought me his book, new book, that came out, was printed in, re-published in Europe. He's very proud of it because it's so well done. So, those were the first two years at the center. I was in and out, I was doing things in many different places. All this time, I also kept going back to Europe. I mean in those days, I kind of established a pattern, um, that my life still holds—that is, I would go to Europe about once a month, keep my studio there, actually expand my studios there, and do work there, do work here, and also then go to Hawaii and do a lot of work there. One thing that is—for instance, in part, because of the sky events, in part also because I experienced it at the right time, I was immediately drawn to the nature and the large scale beyond just doing architectural sculpture and doing kinetic sculpture. So all that stuff, [00:44:00] dealing with the medium of light, dealing with the medium of air, dealing with the expansive lure of Sky Art, was really a combination, a combined effort of working with, with things you make in the studio, using modestly modern means, using expansive media, that would definitely fit into large spaces as much as they could be domesticated interior spaces.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, I was going to ask now, when you had mentioned your show at Howard Wise Gallery, things had to be on a tiny scale compared to your thousand foot long—

OTTO PIENE: I've kind of, from the start, understood that to be just a piece of dialectic, so to speak. In other words, the one not precluding the other, the one not ruling out the other, but the one just kind of kicking the other, and I think that's the way it has been.

ROBERT BROWN: Why is—why did the sky so affect you? You told me somewhat earlier in our interviews that the view of the sky you had was, I think practically the day of peace, when World War II ended. There was the sky, therefore always—

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, a kind of mind [ph] day of peace, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: How great uh, intrigue and great love, you have great love for it.

OTTO PIENE: Well I think I told you the stories. I had been you know, drafted.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, you told me about those experiences.

OTTO PIENE: The gymnasium, flak kinder soldier for—

ROBERT BROWN: But did this love continue?

OTTO PIENE: About three years in, the sky was you know, fascinating, threatening, there was kind of this fear of life and death, and then in May of 1945, all of a sudden that threat was gone, and the sun was shining, and the sky was blue, and the sea was smooth and silver. And [00:46:00] it became a kind of perennial—not a symbol, just a um, a world of peace, so to speak, a sphere of peace. Um, at the same time, kind of suggesting that that's the way it should be, or it ought to be, rather than this kind of battleground for all the crude forces of industry, technology and what have you. And it's very ironic. I mean right now, I don't whether you—yeah, you know Larry Bridges—um, he may have his first payload flown in the shuttle, to go up in eight or 10 days, and there's the irony again, of this enormous expenditure of industrial might, kind of all the fire you can light without just blowing up the place. You know, stuck under that rocket that goes up. But then, you know, one of the things that rocket carries, besides all the satellites, is this little box that Larry's got, has all these poetic potions in it, and there, they have this enormous contrast between this grand industrial effort and the artist's little quiet statement that kind of travels along, but carries a lot of meaning. So, um, the sky also became increasingly important to me because it was, um, clean, potentially, and large and unencumbered, and hence, inviting. We have this kind of metaphysical urge to go into places that are empty or that are, that are um, limitless, and I don't think I'm the only one who has it. [00:48:00]

[END OF 3 OF 7 SIDE A.]

ROBERT BROWN: [00:00:00] The Sky Art conferences all lay somewhat in the future, but you were first doing these things in the late '60s, as you've just been saying.

OTTO PIENE: One theory that I'm guarding within myself is that I came back to the center because I wanted to do the Sky Art conferences, as one of my plans, that um, if indeed I would follow Kepes' temptation to become the next director of the center, that would be a means of doing that—would be a position out of which I could do the Sky Art conferences. And that, I think there is a likelihood that that was not—that is not a kind of post-factum construction, because Kepes had made um, some form of indications very early on—that he would see me as the next person to lead the center. I do remember that one time, I think I wanted—I think it was after one year, when I wanted to leave the center because I had so many other things to do in other places, and many of these things were projects, were somewhat, um, tempting, because one thing that everybody found out after having come to Boston is that it's one thing to work here and one thing to find means and companionship to work, but making a living as an artist in Boston was very difficult. [00:02:00] Anyway, at some point I said that maybe I would not stay for another year, and Kepes said, "You can't leave, you can't go away, because you are the center." What else can you say to pin your young friend down, and so on and so forth.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you sense that you were a leading figure here? You said, you commented earlier, that Kepes himself was in a sense more literary than artistic, more the essayist.

OTTO PIENE: Well, I was very—I mean, I had developed a lot of initiative. I was doing, I mean I was doing things that nobody else was doing. There were excellent artists here, I mean Takis to this day is a beautiful artist, and so is Tsai and all that, but I was maybe somewhat more of an activist towards new art forms and new media and, and art that wasn't there already, um, when the fellows moved here. In other words, um, many of these artists have done beautiful work and Tsai, I think has probably received the most important impetus of his work here or before, certainly at MIT, whether he was here already or not, through dark edges and all that, but they haven't changed that much, these guys. Whereas I open up a lot of things. So, in that respect—

ROBERT BROWN: The others seem to be here in their studios, getting ready for exhibitions. This was sort of like a sabbatical or a nice place to work.

OTTO PIENE: Another one who was, in that respect, like me—and we have been very good friends until he died—was Stan VanDerBeek. He was also very enterprising. And what Stan did in terms of developing his vision [00:04:00] about media and the use of computers and all that stuff was really pretty, pretty uh, enterprising. Um, anyway, so.

ROBERT BROWN: How do you compare, excuse me, the center with the, the Bell Labs group down in New Jersey, and New York artists, like Billy Klüver?

OTTO PIENE: E.A.T. [Experiments in Art and Technology] Well, I think they were important, and I think they got a lot of things going or rolling, and they had a very strong, inspiring effect on a lot of people and they did some beautiful projects, such as the Osaka Pavilion. I had known Billy Klüver, um, from the days of Group Zero. When we published Zero Three, Jean Tinguely brought in an article that described at great length, his project at the Museum of Modern Art, written by Billy Klüver. So I had known Billy Klüver since—or I had known of Billy Klüver since 1960 or so. Um, and I had known, sporadically, Rauschenberg in New York City, but I was never close to them. So that was a really parallel development. Um, I don't think Kepes was influenced by them, and it's not clear whether they were influenced by Kepes. I don't think so. I think they didn't like each other, but they certainly had somewhat related ideas about the future of art and um, it's difficult to assess. On the one hand, E.A.T. had a very strong vitalizing effect on a lot of people and a lot of people were part of the E.A.T. local organizations, because initially, they were pretty good, organized, Billy Klüver. Later on, they became very disorganized, I think, um, [00:06:00] whereas Kepes was really capitalizing on his artistic—his academic standing, and was really playing it to the scientists and to the engineers. Versus Klüver and Rauschenberg, who were essentially playing to the artists and did Nine Evenings with the help and support of Bell Labs, but they didn't want to turn Bell Labs into an artistic set of studios.

Kepes' trick, if that's not too dirty a word to use in this context, was to tell people at MIT that we're all alike. It was not written—it was kind of in the spirit of the UN, the United Nations. That I,s you know, after devastating experiences of World War II, the scientists and the sociologists and the architects and the planners and the artists, all have very similar interests and we should all aim for integrated effort towards a very kind of Hegelian, idealistic way, towards uh, greater insight and betterment of, of human experience and human life. That's essentially—that was his, his um, credo, and in many ways, he was right. But he was not so much directing it towards artists. I think, psychologically, he had real promise. Kepes was not very popular, to this day is not very popular among artists, except the ones who really sympathize with his set of values, such as me, such as, you know, the artists who were here at the center, and some others. Whereas, [00:08:00] I kind of feel that Klüver and Rauschenberg thought that to a degree, all arts would really kind of move in the direction that E.A.T. was, was paving, and nothing much happened. I mean the artists who joined the local chapters of E.A.T., they're all elsewhere these days and essentially doing the same thing, um, including Rauschenberg, who was, you know, a wonderful artist and very openminded. He does this and does that and here's another thing, but he does not even practice what he practiced in the '60s, meaning, I don't think that Rauschenberg does events and performances and you know, technologically-inspired and supported work.

So you could say that, in some way, E.A.T. was a somewhat momentous—let's not call it the fashion, but it was uh, it was a tidal movement that kind of came and went, and when it was over, meaning after five or six years, everybody sat in the same kind of world that it had addressed—that kinetic art is dead, and art and technology is dead, and video art is dead, and it was all dead, which is not what we thought. We heard it too, but it's certainly not what we thought of, practiced or preached at all, Because, you know, what we did here was somewhat more serious and somewhat more existential than to just pick up elements of art and technology and work with some [00:10:00] local companies and then when it was dead, you know, go back to, I mean, the way it was before. And I'm not—as I said, I have great, great respect for Billy Klüver and I certainly have great respect and love for Rauschenberg, so I'm not sure that I'm seeing this entirely, um, justly, but I still think I see it correctly, because you know, it's been a long life at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies. I've been—I was here first, for three and a half years, meaning until May of 1971, then I went away and didn't really want to come back. As you know, I got drawn into, you know, the big projects in Hawaii, I got drawn into the Munich Olympics, I got drawn into more performances and more sky events. I got—I ended up doing one of the biggest events of my life—that's the Olympic rainbow—under very beautiful and also very dramatic and you know, somewhat tragic circumstances and still, it still came out, um, beautiful. And I did lots of other projects and exhibitions and architecture and what have you, and then, somewhere in the middle of it, MIT came back and said, we want you back, you should become a professor in Kepes' former position, and you should, you know, take over the center, and I said I'm not—I didn't say it in these words, but I said I'm not doing it for MIT and I'm not doing it because I love Boston, but I'll do it for the center, because that's one, um, humus, one [00:12:00] important place that I am really attached to and that I feel very strongly about. And you know, obviously I gave up a whole lot of things for that, you know, for coming back to the center. I was, in those years when I was not at the center, which essentially was just two, about two years. What was it—maybe two and a half years, between May of 1971 and January, February of 1972—just a year and a half, I guess, I did an enormous amount of work. I did lots of commissions, architectural commissions, and I did all this Olympic work, some of which started already when I—some of these commissions, I won lots of competitions and things, so much of that started already when I was still at the center.

ROBERT BROWN: But you came back here then, with their understanding that you would be given—you were back here because you loved the center, but you didn't so much—

OTTO PIENE: Whether anybody at MIT ever understood that, I don't know. Whether anybody at MIT ever understood that when I came here, I was generally, I was what some artists call a rich artist, meaning very successful. I was doing a lot of work that also paid, and I came back to MIT because I felt what I feel now, that the center is a most important place and the center is the most seminal um, breeding ground for ideas and visions which in many ways it still is.

ROBERT BROWN: MIT would accept you on those conditions. Did you sort of indicate that look, I'm not going to get particularly involved in the institute?

OTTO PIENE: I didn't negotiate anything with these guys.

ROBERT BROWN: You just said I'll come back.

OTTO PIENE: I mean, if I would do it now, I would probably say only for this or that, or yet another thing, and uh, [00:14:00] then I didn't negotiate anything. I didn't need to, I didn't feel I had to, I wouldn't need to do it now, but I certainly had the most idealistic concept of what it would be like to be the director of this place and do some of the things that I wanted to do, such as sky conferences and um—

ROBERT BROWN: And they gave you a free hand. I mean, this has always been the—

OTTO PIENE: Well, depending on what you call a free hand, it certainly didn't give me free money.

ROBERT BROWN: No. But what I was going to ask, how tangible is their support, or was it at that time, in '72 and '74?

OTTO PIENE: It's not tangible in terms of financial terms, and then no council for the arts has ever been behind me and no uh, sponsors of presidents have ever been behind me, except for very short moments every now and then, and no organization has ever been—it may be my fault, but no organization has ever been formed to support the projects at the center. The projects at the center were always mostly idealistic, meaning they were projects in the name of the spirit, the ideas, the realization of art, the expansion of new art forms. It wasn't because of new graduate programs or a better budget or um, the incorporation of the center into the realm of the senior administration, or whatever ambitions are, of the typical academic nature. However, in due course, we did quite a few—I did quite a few academic deeds, such as one, giving the center an educational program, and I was asked to do that. [00:16:00] So I did it right away, because the center hadn't had an academic program under Kepes. Kepes tried to, to detach himself from teaching and I don't blame him, because he was a mature man when he, um, founded the center, and I don't—I wouldn't, certainly wouldn't be surprised if he was kind of tired of teaching when he finally did get his center to enter into full reality.

So I did—yeah, I made an educational program and then a couple of years later, formed a new graduate program. So we had, you know, we had a good number of classes, different classes, somewhat different, new, exploring, adventurous classes, but that is kind of the academic work, compared to what I consider the really important work that the center did: one, to demonstrate the integrated effort of artists, scientists and engineers, in group projects—such as the center, when we went to Documenta, in 1977. And I did many sky events, some of them with friends, some of them with colleagues, with artists, fellows from the center. We did many celebrations on a large scale. We did much video and TV work. Um, and you know, did a couple of landmark projects, interesting to this day, whether they exist on celluloid only these days or um, in somewhat [00:18:00] more solid forms of repeatable event structures, to use the word.

ROBERT BROWN: You did uh, you did document them as much you could then.

OTTO PIENE: Oh sure, yes, on video, still photographs.

ROBERT BROWN: So you put in a graduate, undergraduate and graduate curriculum, but I would think you probably tried to keep it to a—in a sense, at arm's length, because you do not want it to interfere with what you feel has been the real accomplishment.

OTTO PIENE: In those days, we also had a not particularly active, but competent, director of education. That was Robert Preusser.

ROBERT BROWN: What was his name?

OTTO PIENE: Robert Preusser, who was one of these, these colleagues that Kepes hired when, when the staff was experienced, you know, like um, David—[inaudible]. And um, the first Sky Art Conference happened at MIT, which was a really beautiful, integrated conference, with lots of MIT involved, in 1981, here. And then 1982, we had the conference in Linz, Austria, as part of the Ars Electronica. In 1983, we had a conference in Munich, sponsored by the city of Munich, Munich and BMW, and the little digital, also sponsoring um, a little portion of digital was also—no, a little portion of the Sky Art Conference was also sponsored by digital, to say it entirely correctly. Um, then in 1986, we had the fourth Sky Art Conference, where we produced the Sky Art Manifesto and then carried it to the UNESCO in Paris, and stuff like that. So many of these dreams about the sky and the involvement with uh, with the [00:20:00] apparatus such as NASA, um, and the urban celebration as in the increasingly emerging First Night.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. In Boston.

OTTO PIENE: In Boston. It happened first in what was it, '78, I think.

ROBERT BROWN: Mid-'70s, yeah.

OTTO PIENE: '78. And the dissemination of ideas through publications and media, um, and carrying it into nature, kind of the reconciliation of other technology with nature. Those are things that we tried to really carry out and some of that, we—meaning the fellows and I and the graduate students—did carry that out. So it's been a busy and uh, somewhat fulfilled and sometimes very frustrating uh, over 20 years at the center, because as the world—particularly in the United States—increasingly moved away from the arts, because you know, we had adverse currencies and currents, um, after the early '70s, with the war in Vietnam lost and all the war protest, led to the lost war—not that it was lost because of the protests, but I guess what has happened in the first place, because there was a losing war. But the, the subsequent developments obviously were a lost war and the Great Depression and a great dispirited America, and a turning away from the arts, and you witnessed it all, [00:22:00] how the arts became less important increasingly, so the arts became less important at MIT, and MIT bet, in MIT fashion, on technology, and so they created a "media lab," initially thinking they would include the arts, and then realizing they didn't really like the arts enough to include them, and the arts didn't pay enough to include them. So, it was, let's say the lack of an idealistic concept, the arts just shrank at MIT, whereas the center expanded. You know, in 1968 we had five fellows. In 1979, I think we had 25 fellows and a bunch of resident graduate students.

ROBERT BROWN: Plus undergraduates, right?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, undergraduates, resident class. Now we have—we are back to say, eight or 10 fellows, and we have eight or 10 graduate students, and I think the center has about the size of people that the center crowd [ph] building can accommodate. Um, but there have been times when MIT had looked upon the center as a kind of bothersome maverick or some kind of—[inaudible]—of MIT, which is kind of a, a kind of contradiction in itself. And we have had, you know, budgets shrinking and the increased need to raise funds and find sponsors and somehow, um, follow a very precarious course [00:24:00] pecuniarily or budgetarily or economically, and we're still here, and I think, despite all the MIT budget cuts, our annual budget is probably still bigger than it had been five years ago, or maybe not 10 years ago but certainly 15 years ago or 20 years ago. So that let's say, the total activity, the total energy being um, generated, by the center, is still considerable and still very original. Nobody has, has made such a thing as this exhibition lights, so forth, in which latter day art and technology signs are interpreting religious articles of faith. Um, and I don't think there's ever been an exhibition like the one in Karlsruhe last fall, uh, in which many of these, quote unquote, modern media were just blooming, they were just vehicles of expression, rather than a demonstration of themselves. And now, we are kind of, um, in a position of the mature pioneer. In other words, I'm on a lot of um, in a lot of [00:26:00] advisory positions to tell the new centers how to orient themselves and to somehow highlight our sense of values and what we expect of new centers and new schools to do. And they do appear in many different places, in many different countries, even in this country, although in this country the enthusiasm is somewhat subdued, although the means in many ways in this country are more mature and more refined, and somewhat more convincing than in some of the countries in which they are yet to flourish. So, no matter what we think, let's say, critically, of the current culture in the United States, there's no doubt about it, that it has a lot to give and a lot to, um, pass on to others, because of the experiences of the past, because of the accomplishments of the past. And um, I just hope and pray, that for instance, you know, the next discovery is indeed going to be launched successfully, so that we can tell people there has been art on it, too.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. It's ironic in its being confined and small and late in the day isn't it?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, right, it's um, it's kind of in proportion to how the world arranges itself out there.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you saw, you saw it here at MIT. You said the support of the arts is much less proportionately than it once was, yet they did build an art center. But that's sort of a [00:28:00] showroom isn't it?

OTTO PIENE: It's not an art center, it's a computer center.

ROBERT BROWN: No, the List.

OTTO PIENE: Oh, all right, the List Center is not any bigger than what was there before, and that's—I guess it's during that, so I mean that's all very ambiguous. Um, but to some people on the outside world, it is indeed, I guess, by some people from the outside world, it's probably indeed an extraordinary commitment to, or a demonstration of commitment to the arts, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You would argue no, that such things are not.

OTTO PIENE: I think it's entirely superficial. It has nothing to do with what art does, and what art is committed to, and what art works. But it's also probably part of the practice of MIT, that MIT is very much a reflection of the ongoing currents of economy, social scene and government, and you know, when there's one kind of government, MIT has one kind of view of the arts and other things, and when it's another kind of government, then the view of itself and a lot of other things changes. It's probably true of all universities, but probably more so of MIT than of some, because this is all, you know kind of unwashed, um, language, and somewhat unqualified judgement but I may [00:30:00] as well say it. There's a difference here at MIT. On the one hand it's this incredible breeder of, of um, science and engineering enthusiasm and very tangible results, anywhere between Norbert Wiener and Charles Draper, there is MIT. But there's less of a cultural tradition here and hence, this kind of uncertainty about cultural values if you compare it to Harvard. And I think the difference is a lot in the age. This is a relatively young institution and it has developed, in many ways, in contrast to European institutions, as opposed to the way I view Harvard, which has been developed, I think, very much, I shouldn't say in harmony with, with cultural, with European traditions, but certainly in correspondence or in dialogue with European cultural traditions. And in a certain way I think that's, that's a great strength to MIT. MIT has, you know, has received, has developed a lot of, whatever you want to call it, U.S. resources; U.S. resources with a very fresh approach. And I think that has worked to the advantage of MIT. I don't think it necessarily always works to the advantage of, let's say, a broad cultural image that MIT would enjoy, but to, to be just and somehow see the forest and the trees, [00:32:00] you know, the Center for Advanced Visual Studies is an MIT center and you know, what else can I say in praise of MIT? I mean, one thing, no matter what the routine battles are, and the everyday fights are, um, there's also a sense of tolerance and a sense of live and let live, and I think that's—and of course, there is enormous resources and there's the sympathy by so many excellent scientists and inventors and engineers, that makes it possible that the arts—you could find the people that they were looking for or not looking for at MIT. So, cum grano salis, I think um, it's been good. Anyway, so much about the—so much about the year 1969. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: And later. We've been going back and forth haven't we? So where do you feel you—you said you had a certain—a good deal of continuity in your work haven't you, over a long span of time.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I think—I don't think we can go into it now, but at the next session, um, would somehow have to sort out a little bit, the way I sit in this kind of intercontinental life—meaning intercontinental, I was always commuting between uh, the United States mostly and Germany mostly, although I've worked in [00:34:00] so many other countries as well. And you know, when people ask me, you know, where is your home, I say my home is in the United States, but then I am also, I am a German citizen and I'm also registered in the city of Dusseldorf. So, it's all very complex, as they say.

ROBERT BROWN: To sort that out. [Audio break.] Twenty-nine, 1989, continuing the interviews. And I thought today, we could begin to ah, get into your work. You say that since, say 1974 or so, you've really done most of your painting and such work in Europe.

OTTO PIENE: Correct. I still do.

ROBERT BROWN: And you continued that, and so the painting and sort of more private work is done there, but the more public work is done here, as well as there, is that the generalization?

OTTO PIENE: No, I think that's fine. Um, as long as we just talk about say, painting celebrations. There is this entire field of light art which I have cultivated in Europe as well as here, somewhat continuously. I think I've always painted, I mean as a kid, as an adolescent, or even during the—during my participation in the war, I had my sketch book on me and in the end, when the war was over, I had practically nothing but my sketch book and the watercolor box. Um, I had painted [00:36:00] definitely after I came, first came to the United States, then I had a studio in Philadelphia, in the Furness Building, and I painted there. The reason why I'm mentioning that is that one of the paintings I did then just surfaced again, and it turns out has been sold in Europe now. I had a studio in New York City, roughly 1965, '66, '67, painted there. Um, I came to the Center for Advanced Visual Studies in 1968 and painted slides, thousands and thousands of painted slides were the result, and in a certain way they were just miniature paintings to be projected large. Many of them are around, although they're slides and not paintings, and nobody who is interested in them acquire paintings.

I had a studio in Brewster, New York, between, I think roughly 1971 and 1976. I lived there, and I painted until that time, meaning until I gave up commuting between Brewster and here. That's the last time I painted in the United States, meaning after 1976, nil. And in Groton, I'm now getting ready to set up a situation, meaning building some kind of a stone pit, in which I can—

ROBERT BROWN: At your home in Groton.

OTTO PIENE: Right. In which I can do fire paintings again, but first I have to set up a stone pit for reasons of safety and obscurity, and so on and so forth. [00:38:00] Then, maybe end of 1989 or 1990, I will start painting in this country again. And I have great and patient, great hopes that that will happen, because I kind of miss it after all these years in this country. In the meantime, in Dusseldorf, I've had this now famous amount of connoisseurs shared studio at Gladbacher Strasse in Dusseldorf as of 1955, I think.

ROBERT BROWN: That you've had that studio here in Dusseldorf.

OTTO PIENE: In Dusseldorf. In 1955, I switched. In 1966, I had my first place at Huttenstrasse in Dusseldorf then.

That space in Dusseldorf, at Huttenstrasse, 104 on the Hinterhaus, has expanded and now for, um, at least 15 years, probably more, I've had the entire Hinterhaus, which is four stories of studios and storage and stuff like that. So, I painted there since 1966, meaning increasingly so, I'm painting there now, so whenever I am in Dusseldorf, almost every time I am in Dusseldorf, I'll paint there, along with all the other work I do there—painting being actual paintings; fire paintings, stencil paintings, fire gouaches, [00:40:00] stencil gouaches, sketch books, design, architecturally, design of light sculptures, building of light sculptures, and um, occasionally some design for industrial purposes, such as working for Rosenthal Company on china, and stuff like that. So, um, it's always difficult to explain to the tax people—I just went through a tax audit in Germany—that I am working here, I'm working there, and the work, whether it's happening here or there, is somewhat intricately intertwined. Um, however, the painting has been going on mostly in Germany, for the last 10 or 12 years. So, so much about division of labor so to speak.

ROBERT BROWN: The fact that you've made it one place or another is mainly a function of facilities.

OTTO PIENE: It is a function of facilities. Also, people say that the paintings, whether they're done here or there, are slightly differing, um, meaning, to put it simply, the paintings made in America are more American and the paintings made in Europe are more European. It has to do with scale, it has to do with materials, it has to do with size. The ones in America tend to be bigger, the ones in Europe tend to be more of European size, meaning somewhat more moderate in size. But it's not an essential difference, it's not that the one kind is terribly large, and the other kind is not. Now, obviously, I was educated as a painter, at least in part, [00:42:00] and what I did to prepare myself for life, to be an independent artist, was mostly painting. However, I kind of happened upon working with light, because I had made these stencils that I have made the raster paintings with, and I shone light through them. I realized that that uh, generated projections. So I made the Light Ballet and in my first one-man exhibition, which happened in Dusseldorf, Germany, in a small gallery called Galerie Schmela, which was Europe's most—which became kind of Europe's most important um, in the ensuring years.

ROBERT BROWN: Nineteen fifty-nine.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. At that very exhibition, I showed my first stencil paintings. No, I showed my stencil paintings in a one-man show for the first time and opened the exhibition with a performance of the hand-played Light Ballet, with handheld stencils and handheld, uh, lights. So, from the start so to speak, painting and light art, light performance, were very closely related.

ROBERT BROWN: Could you explain? The Light Ballet consisted of projecting through the stencils?

OTTO PIENE: Yes. They were the same stencils which had made the stencil paintings. I made the stencil myself, in my Gladbacher Strasse studio, it took about four months to make something like 30 or 40 or 50, I think all in all there must have been 50 stencils in size, up to, I think, 30 by 40 inches. The most intricate stencils had up to 10,000 holes in them, that I hand-punched myself. So, [00:44:00] the math is kind of interesting.

ROBERT BROWN: Are these entirely abstractions?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, they were what you might call, um, holes that would translate in painting, to relief paintings, meaning dots that would um, rise up from the canvas. And so, on the one hand, you know, there were light patterns with 10,000 light points. On the other hand, there were um, oil paint reliefs on a canvas that had that consistency of up to 10,000 rays to dots on the canvas, and all of these were done in the name of light that is the result of these dots with some visual, meaning, quote unquote, optical vibration, meaning the nuance of light sensation on the surface of the canvas, as perceived by the viewer. The colors were white, shades of yellow, later silver, gold, and eventually black gold, black silver, um, these colors persisted for several years. It was not until something like 1959, that I started with smoke drawings, using the same stencils that I've used for oil paintings and the Light Ballet, and I would, um, let smoke, soot from candles or [00:46:00] lamps, go through the perforations and then settle on a piece of board, paper, above the stencil, and the result is again, "vibrating" arrangements of dots of smoke on a white surface, and they are fairly characteristic now, and generally thought to be essential to my work. Then as, as a consequence of the smoke drawings and smoke gouaches and smoke paintings and eventually the fire paintings, would follow. So, for a while I made stencil paintings and smoke and fire paintings at the same time. Not at the same time, but somehow parallel to each other, and I would say in 1960, 1961, the fire paintings would increasingly take over and for years, I would make predominantly and for years exclusively, fire paintings. Now, five, six, seven, eight years ago or so, I picked up the theme of rasters again, and made raster relief paintings again, and recently have made raster smoke drawings again, some of them in combination with—

[END OF 3 OF 7 SIDE B.]

OTTO PIENE: [00:00:00] You know, an arrangement of formation of dots in, in some pseudo geometric and sometimes uh, superimposed formation or superimposed formations, and there was a relationship between the size of the dots or points, and their distance and arrangement, um, that I called frequency, and how that's related to the size of the board or canvas. So if the frequency was right, you would get this kind of, this impression of pulsating, vibrating color, or vibrating, um, lively activity on the surface, and that made for a, somewhat, display of energy, of optical, of light energy, which was the main theme of all of this. So, light was the, the great medium.

ROBERT BROWN: Even on canvas, you have the shimmering, I mean the shimmering effect, effect of light.

OTTO PIENE: Well, it was somewhat—it was somewhat relatable to a fashion that was widely inspired by my raster, my stencil paintings, um, that—but that also came out of, partly the history of art, partly out of say, the Vasarely camp, the kind of rational, um, serial painting camp, and it was then, there was this somewhat dramatic exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1964, [00:02:00] I think, called Op Art. So, for a year or two, we had this quick fashion called Op art.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you part of that, Op art?

OTTO PIENE: I was not really part of that at all, uh, and it came and it went quickly and it disappeared as fast as it had arrived, because the, the Op art protagonist, particularly Bill Seitz, who uh, who designed, or arranged that show at the Museum of Modern Art, that were somehow mistaken in the assumption that physics patterns, meaning, um, simple scientific interference patterns, were enough, would be enough, to generate interesting paintings, and that was of course, that of course was a mistake.

ROBERT BROWN: Because they're an end in themselves, the ones, and they, don't they also eliminate considerably, the individual?

OTTO PIENE: Sure. It was kind of stupid, it was. That was the fashion for a year or two. We had Op art patterns and Op art dresses and Op art bedsheets.

ROBERT BROWN: But to a degree, you said earlier, you were looked at, at that time, because of what you had done completely independently?

OTTO PIENE: Well, what I'd done, you know, could be misinterpreted to be leading up to Op art, and I was somewhat baffled by the fact that—I mean, there were some people who were serious people, who were indeed pursing this Op art stuff. You know, some people are doing it to this day—just regard Victor Vasarely, but it's also true that this whole titillating art effect is just that, it's really like a, a blown-up printing raster and doesn't really have much poetic [00:04:00] sense to it.

ROBERT BROWN: But you were after that all along, is that right?

OTTO PIENE: Oh, that was as a means.

ROBERT BROWN: As a means only.

OTTO PIENE: As a means, as a vehicle, so to speak, to do something more poetic than that. And the poetry, of course came into whatever you want to call it, in references to the universe or the sun and all that, the stars or light as a light force, and light as the, uh, the force that rules the sky, so to speak. And in that respect, you can read then, Zero Three. My painting was, from the start, related to what you might call Sky Art. Sky Art was a consequence of my paintings, just as it was a consequence of light art, which was a consequence of the painting, and went parallel with it all the time. So, the relationship between the paintings and the Light Ballet, that was displayed in a room, in an interior, and the Light Ballet, that was displayed outside, and the Sky Art that later became inflatables—the relationship is a matter of small steps but it's all pretty closely related.

The other part is that once Zero had established its vocabulary—and I think I was quite frankly, the one who established the vocabulary mostly, Group Zero that is—I also made the connection to nature and to organic phenomena, organic references, and that of course was different from the people who were at home in concrete art, or in the scientific, or into Op art, who were mostly interested in kind of optical, um, phenomena, whereas I was more interested in the connections to the organic world and the, uh, the [00:06:00] astronomical world. And by organic world, I mean the sun is also a sunflower, just as a sunflower is the sun, and so are most other flowers and so are most other fruit and so are most other, um, organic, and sometimes inorganic, phenomena, and just plain things. So, in a certain way, I was more interested in flowers than suns and stars and physics books and print interference patterns, and more interested in that—meaning in references to nature and the kind of poetic world of empathy—than in, um, optics. Although the optics were applied, and they were definitely a vehicle that I did not ignore. You know, my father was a physicist, so why should I not be interested in optics and in physics?

ROBERT BROWN: And this is what, the 1950s, you were doing research and you had all that.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, that was late—this was late '50s and early '60s, and I—that was more evident when I came to this country, yet in the, whatever, mid-'60s and so on. However, when I came to this country, it was not just a painting that was being, uh, thought of as interesting, it was increasingly, the light sculpture. So, the Light Ballet was displayed by light sculptures, and the first, the first one-man exhibition I had in New York, at Howard Wise Gallery, was essentially an exhibition of light sculptures, and the light sculptures had names such as Electric Flower or Electric Rosebush, or whatever. So again, there was a connection there, [00:08:00] and whereas in a Group Zero exhibition, which was the first at the Howard Wise Gallery, in 1964, I had more paintings than my friends. As a result, I had the first one-man show at the Howard Wise Gallery a year later. The entire exhibition consisted of light sculpture, most of it timed, meaning electrically timed or electronically timed. It was mostly electric, electromechanically timed. I didn't give it electronic time. And uh, also programmed so they would act and perform, display together in the tubes that made up the gallery. So, there was an electric component that was increasingly becoming, um, not only evident but also somewhat domineering, and that of course engendered quite a reaction in the United States, where people are very interested in technology and industrial products, and new ways and new means and new vehicles.

ROBERT BROWN: What were some of them? I mean there were other artists who came around?

OTTO PIENE: Other artists did come around, yeah. Actually, I made quite a few friends in—

ROBERT BROWN: —New York.

OTTO PIENE: In New York, pretty soon, some of them of European origin and others just plain American.

ROBERT BROWN: Did your Group Zero, uh, for a few years, you did collaborative projects, is that correct, but these were your own, the ones you were just speaking of?

OTTO PIENE: Right, right. We did some collaborative projects before, after and in between, um, and you know, New York was a big testing ground and [00:10:00] um, after me, Heinz Mack had a one-man exhibition, and then thereafter, Günther Uecker had an exhibition. While Heinz Mack had a studio in New York for a couple of months, Günther Uecker made his exhibition in New York, but they disappeared. They left New York pretty soon again. I still don't know why. I guess they just felt more at home elsewhere.

ROBERT BROWN: But they're—these are people you've seen, you've kept in touch with right, as you go back to Germany?

OTTO PIENE: Well the last Group Zero exhibition, during which Heinz Mack, without checking with his friends, announced that this was the end of Group Zero, had an exhibition called Zero in Bonn, in a Bonn, Germany—meaning the capital of Germany—exhibition. And uh, although I was very much against it, I realized what a power Group Zero had become. On the other hand, it had all sorts of, of um, positive consequences for me, because I didn't have to spend any time and energy on organizing Group Zero, doing a lot of, um, whatever, designing, planning, projecting, there. And the ensuing years, meaning roughly between 1966 and 1973, were what you call—I think I've said that before—quote, very good years, unquote, for me. I did a lot of good work during those years, so no matter how wrong it was to uh, to give up Group Zero, it, personally speaking, had a very positive effect for my work and my well-being.

ROBERT BROWN: You did more on your own, is that right, or—?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, right. [00:12:00] I mean it's a little bit like what I had anticipated when I give up or leave the Center for Advanced Visual Studies. I may have a fantastic life, you know, because these group endeavors, important as they are, I think they're most important, particularly in the 20th century—they're essential to, um, artistic and intellectual developments. They are not necessarily, um, providing for a pleasant and leisurely life. I just said recently, looking around in the springtime, I for some reason think of the time, 1968, when I first came to the Center for Advanced Visual Studies as a fellow. I had just about every weekend off. I would drive around in New England and uh, and other portions of the United States, and would lead a perfectly nice, regular life, very busy, very productive, but at least I had, uh, every now and then I had a Saturday, or I had a Sunday. I could do things that weren't directly related to work and so on and so forth. I haven't done that in 20 years. Well, not in 20 years. I haven't really done that since I came back to uh, to the center, or to the time when things at the center got tighter in terms of budget and money, and so on and so forth. Let's say I roughly haven't done it since 1975, that's almost 15 years, and now I can think that uh, maybe a year or three from now, I have this fantastic life ahead of me. I can go to the circus, and I can uh, and I can take trips to Niagara Falls.

ROBERT BROWN: But on the other hand, you said you think it's essential for artists in the 20th century, to uh, collaborate.

OTTO PIENE: Of course.

ROBERT BROWN: But perhaps only occasionally.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, maybe. Whether that's possible, I don't know. See, [00:14:00] if you look at the Bauhaus, it was a most intense effort, you know for almost everybody involved and while it lasted, it was very absorbing. And you know, the center has certainly been very absorbing, Group Zero has been a very, very—has meant a very absorbing commitment. And you know, Group Zero is now—I mean, in Germany, they called me a classica, meaning a classical artist of modern art. And Group Zero station, I've just read the press, um, book, that was issued after the exhibitions that June, that were down in Berlin, was over, with all the press clippings and stuff like that—um, it's very clear that in Europe, you know the whole Zero movement is considered now, one of the major movements in Europe of the 20th century, um, and will probably, if anything gain that reputation even further, uh, and that's—I'm just saying that to, to uh, demonstrate how these group efforts are very important.

ROBERT BROWN: What would you say is—

OTTO PIENE: I mean it's—you know, Die Brücke, The Bridge, was not a one-man show. The Blaue Reiter was not a one-man show, the Cubists even, were not a one-man show. Of course, there is room for individual artists. I mean Picasso, after he had been a Cubist, he became Picasso, and Matisse, after he had been a Fauve, he became Matisse. But, um, even the Abstract Expressionists are usually, you know lumped together and they call them the New York School, or they call them the Abstract Expressionists, but you rarely hear about [00:16:00] Pollock without also hearing about Barnett Newman and Rothko and, and de Kooning, so on and so forth. So, um, I'm not trying to make a case for this. I'm just looking at life, so to speak. I'm just looking at the evidence as provided by decades past and yes, there are always great individuals, such as Frank Lloyd Wright, but then there's also the time that people refer to when they say he and Le Corbusier and Gropius were all in the office of, um, Peter Behren's together, in Berlin, in whatever year it was, 1906 or 1908, something like that. So anyway, it's partly funny, what I'm saying here, but it's also partly—it's also partly, um, an explanation why I have hung in, in this place for so long, while on the other hand, I'm looking forward to, at some time being an individual wanderer again and, you know, I can just worry about my own stuff, um, and have a good time with it, rather than worrying about, you know, 25 people at the same time.

ROBERT BROWN: What do you think, uh, when you summarize what Group Zero accomplished, what would you say, in a few words? What was there before and what has changed?

OTTO PIENE: Well, Group Zero, one, you know it was really a new beginning, a new art, not without tradition, not without roots, but a new art after World War II.

ROBERT BROWN: And particularly for Germany, a new art.

OTTO PIENE: Particularly for Germany, but it had very strong impulses from other areas. I mean, a very important man and influence, was Yves Klein, who was obviously French, of German, Dutch, Malayan—[00:18:00] and I hope Malayan is correct—origin. And another influence was Jean Tinguely, who was Swiss and French and German, and um, and another one was, another friend was Rafael Jesus Soto, from Venezuela. So, I mean that whole place, the whole thing was also extremely international. And what it meant, for instance, is that the Germans, somewhat confidently, reentered the international, um, scene. And somewhat confidently, people from other countries came to Germany because they found it interesting; they found a lot of resonance there. Um, so it was kind of a, a reestablishment of a spiritual and intellectual and creative, um, reality, that had been interrupted for, I don't know, 15 years or so, by this Nazi madness. And on the other hand, there was a formal new beginning. The art we did was different from the art that had been done before, it was different from the art that was being done around us. It established a new, um, kind of painting of light art, of orientation towards nature. It had stylistic elements that had very strong consequences and it established a new opening towards the elements [00:20:00] that had been ignored in the arts, partly because of the crazy conservatism, the crazy reactionary attitude that had dominated in the '30s, not only in Germany, but also in France and America, so on and so forth. You know, all these people at the time, it was worse in Germany, but in Italy and France and Washington, all built the same idiotic stuff, the same—

ROBERT BROWN: —Neoclassical.

OTTO PIENE: Neoclassical kitsch. As they do now, hopefully not too much of it. So, whereas what happened then, first of all, we established a new relationship to nature that people had thought was impossible after abstract painting, or concrete painting. People thought nature was out because painting was just triangles and squares and dots on a canvas. Well fine, it was a good development, to give painting a certain independence, in a somewhat constructive, um, new world of its own. But on the other hand, that did not preclude, as I saw it, and increasingly my friends saw it, to reestablish a reference system to nature, a larger nature. And of course, it opened up a relationship to technology, to science, to these elements that are now increasingly seen as essential to human interest and to human survival. That was very different. The last time we had heard about that was in the '20s, and most people saw the '20s had taken care of that and never again, and many people didn't know that in a certain way, when they resisted these openings, they were following an also Fascist doctrine. [00:22:00] So, there was a totally different scene and interestingly, sympathizers for that were found in America much sooner and much more strongly than in, in Europe. Now it's kind of the other way around. Now we're dealing with a very conservative scene in the United States again—mostly, not entirely—whereas now, there seems to be some kind of a broader opening in Europe. But first of all, these kind of contrasts don't exist in a simplistic fashion any more. People travel all the time; they bounce back and forth. And secondly, some of these elements are just, you know, year-to-year or decade-to-decade developments, when I think what we have to see are the larger lines. And the larger lines seem to be saying that yes, um, these recurring conservative elements are recurring less recurringly and we have, increasingly, an opening towards integrated effort and life, science, technology and art, and that's just fine. [Audio break.]

ROBERT BROWN: Just how would you say it is different from what was being done at that time? You've said it is, but in what ways?

OTTO PIENE: One important difference was that it was less directed by formal, uh, considerations; the formal considerations were implied and were, um, part of the professional vocabulary, so to speak. But the major concerns were: one, the medium of light; two, how to work with it and its expressive power—which widely lay in uh, [00:24:00] in the nuances of using it; and the relationship to nature—that is, to open up art to a universal approach, rather than formal or a stylistic approach; and um, a very openminded attitude towards technology and new media. The underlying yearning being to reconcile these seemingly opposite forces, such as nature and technology and science. And um, I think in—during the years since then, this attitude has not—division of interest has not gone away, but on the other hand, the attitude that, um, attempts a reconciliation of those worlds has stayed alive and is still very much around, with many practitioners of art and technology now. And um, on the other hand, you can still see separate camps. I mean, you can, in a certain way, you can still see separate camps in places like MIT, where on the one hand there are people who are interested in technology, and then there are people who are interested in formal development and formal, sometimes mathematical, sometimes um, engineering progression, and on the other hand who use, people who use new developments, [00:26:00] who use new media, who use new experiences, who use new tools in the service of expression and the service of making human experience, human poetic concepts and sentiments legible and express them through these new media, with all sorts of advantages, such as how technological development is not only good for making different art or making different images, but also for the sake of wider distribution or the sake of larger scale, or the sake of more intense expression, sometimes at the cost of some concessions.

ROBERT BROWN: Such as what, some concessions such as?

OTTO PIENE: Such as longevity, such as durability, such as material solidity, and so on and so forth. In other words, much of the gain, intensity is gained, at the cost of, of—

ROBERT BROWN: Using a more volatile medium?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, at the cost of, of reliability. The pyramids have been around for a long time, although the, the expression is not necessarily, um, addressing intense and subtle moments of human experience. And on the other hand, you know much electronic or much Sky Art, um, reaches a wide variety of um, of movement [00:28:00] in um, a short period of time, and goes through many stages of intensity, but it doesn't last. So those are the tradeoffs that, that uh, occur increasingly and um, I guess much of that is also true in general human experience but increasingly, in what people do today, meaning you know, the Discovery crew travels wherever the crew travels in orbit, for only a limited period of time, but they'll never forget it. [Audio break.]

ROBERT BROWN: So the uh, the contributions that began with Ground Zero, and what you continued with is quite distinctive. It certainly stood out in its time as a—well, getting it out in the European context, getting away from the academic, let's call it.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, in the early years, it ran into a lot of resistance, I mean it was ridiculed.

ROBERT BROWN: [Crosstalk] and so forth, were still apparent then.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. It ran into a lot of resistance, it was—people tried to ridicule it, to uh, diminish its importance or its impact and um, it took a while until people found out that there was something lasting about it, there was something substantial about it. But I guess that's true with anything that's different from what the common fare is and uh, why should it have been different then? The most resistance came, essentially came from our German compatriots, who just didn't have the [00:30:00] confidence, didn't have the consciousness of the situation, to believe that there could be anything valuable or anything um, independent, coming out of Germany at that time, because people had become so accustomed to seeing the salvation in other places. Now, everybody thinks it's just quite all right that you know, there has been this very strong neo-Expressionist uh, trend coming out of Germany. Now it's very different. Now people think that's just fine, that's the way it is.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you continue with easel painting, with oil painting, painting in oil and so forth, for some time?

OTTO PIENE: Um, in a certain way, I still do oil painting, except you know, they are these fire paintings that are very different from what you would normally do with oil painting and um—

ROBERT BROWN: Can you explain that briefly? I know that it's been written about as well, but could you—you came into that as early as the late 1950s.

OTTO PIENE: Right. What happened is that I did these stencil paintings, which led to the smoke drawings. The smoke drawings had to be, uh, treated with fixative. Fixative would, um, collect on the surface and I, I somewhat impulsively burn off the accumulated fixative and that created the initial inspiration to uh—for the fire paintings. I'm still working [00:32:00] with the same medium, meaning essentially, the fixative that I set on fire and mix with other, other combustibles that collect on the painting, and the painting gets thrown around, and moved around, which creates flow, and the flow becomes the forming, so to speak. And burning it off in a moment preserves the sense of, you know instantaneous action and also preserves the sense of flow, because normally, when you work with liquid mediums, such as oil, it takes a long time to dry, or watercolor takes still, a very long time to dry, and much of the freshness of the, of the organic change gets lost in that uh, process of consolidation.

ROBERT BROWN: Whereas you freeze it literally.

OTTO PIENE: I kind of freeze it, meaning do the opposite. I burn it in an instant, and it gets preserved that way, which creates a neighborhood to organic form. I can't afford an organic form, so to speak, unlike Josef Albers, who couldn't afford it, see, because his, his paint took too long to dry. [They laugh.]

ROBERT BROWN: So this intensifies the experience, fixes it, and tries to keep permanently, that intensification.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, it also makes painting a somewhat dramatic process, which is a little different from, from what it took to make stencil paintings, which was kind of opposite, the opposite. Stencil paintings would still be a fairly quick process, once I had all the tools and all the preparations in place, but then it would take quite a while to dry, although the flowing really started there, because I would [00:34:00] flood the stencil painting with turpentine or, or whatever the solvents are, to make them more light-slick. So that kind of the flooding started then already, but then with the fire paintings, the flooding element would um, just burn off very quickly, and when I'm lucky it all works well, and I end up with an image and if I'm not, then the whole thing burns up or um, just um, gets damaged and I have to start anew. But, you know, that's true with the regular painting process as well. Some paintings come out okay and others don't.

ROBERT BROWN: And this one large book, a number of silkscreens, does that involve as well, release, flowing and dripping?

OTTO PIENE: I developed a techniques for silkscreens that would permit that, meaning instead of working on the screens, I would work on glass plates and would use solvents on glass plates, and they, they run, they move particularly well on the very smooth surface of a glass plate, and then the glass plates would be exposed, um, like the stencils would, that are involved in, in uh, silk-screening, would be exposed um, over the screen, and then the screen would become the carrier of ink, as it does in uh, silkscreen painting. I've made a lot of graphic conditions in my life, it's one part of my work that has not been very visible in this country, and you know there was a regular graphics explosion in this country and elsewhere, until about ten years ago, and then it simmered down. Now, people are [00:36:00] slowly beginning to, to regard prints again.

But in terms of ideation, some of my more cherished work—meaning some of the work that I cherish—was actually done to uh, prints. In 1969, when I was also a fellow here, I was a fellow at the time, in an institute in Los Angeles and I made—

ROBERT BROWN: Tamarind?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. And I made a portfolio of 25 lithographs called Sky Art, and in that portfolio, I uh, formulated many things that I probably would not have visualized and not put into words without the situation which I, for two months, while living at the Chateau Marmont Hotel in Hollywood, I would do nothing but these prints. And I produced 25 lithographs in that time, which was a good number of lithographs in two months, and the result was that portfolio called Sky Art, which is still a basic idea album for Sky Art. So, 20 years later, I still like it, although it has rarely been shown. It's been shown only five or six times ever, um, the more attractive prints are all sold out, but the portfolio is still sitting in a vault in boxes, actually mostly in Groton. People don't care much about them, but to me it's a very um, important and retrospectively enjoyable work. [00:38:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Why do you suppose that it was a—lithography turned out to be such a fertile medium for you, at least at that—during those two months?

OTTO PIENE: I think I liked drawing, I liked graphics, throughout my career.

ROBERT BROWN: The direct drawing perhaps?

OTTO PIENE: Whenever I had a chance. Yeah, I like it. Whenever I had a chance to do it, I kind of enjoyed it. Shortly after I had made the portfolio, somebody who meant well, um, asked the Hayden Gallery to um—

ROBERT BROWN: At MIT?

OTTO PIENE: At MIT. To exhibit the prints, because somebody thought that was really interesting work that—I mean, it was totally unlike what other people did with the medium of photography, but the official reaction was that it was not at all interesting to the Hayden Gallery at MIT, so that's what happens.

ROBERT BROWN: But it's been a wonderful, fertile source of your ideas.

OTTO PIENE: That's right, yes. Some 10 years later, I made another portfolio of giant prints, they are something like, um, 60 by—I think 60 by 80 prints, mounted on plywood or something like that, called Sky Art Two, and they too didn't fare very well and at the time, people thought them—some people thought that was a very good idea to do that, and people would have so much wall space in offices and uh, public buildings to exhibit these prints, but they've never advanced very far.

ROBERT BROWN: The reason those are called Sky Art—were they in a measure, sort of sketches or actual Sky Art?

OTTO PIENE: They were a combination of sketches, meaning projections, [00:40:00] and records of sky events I had done already, and um, related to visual phenomena and related to natural phenomena, and projects to come. And I guess if I wouldn't have called them Sky Art, people would probably have taken to them more easily, but I think some people really had the problem of thinking, oh, that's really nonsense. [Laughs.] People, I mean many people, particularly ones who are supposed to know everything about art, would think it's nonsense, it's off the wall, it's arrogant, it's uh, it's living hubris and so on and so forth.

ROBERT BROWN: In fact, you were, already by the late '60s, involved in Sky Art and Light Ballet, that by then were to a degree had gotten outdoors.

OTTO PIENE: I mean, I first came to the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, which was you know, at the beginning of 1968, I was doing—I was mostly a light artist. I was doing light sculpture, doing the Light Ballet. I was preparing exhibitions in New York and other places. I just came from a comprehensive retrospective in Germany—I think I mentioned that before—in Dortmund, in 22 rooms of a good size museum. And um, I was involved in light performances in the light theater and the Proliferation of the Sun, which was the play, the light theater piece, and I played in the Black Gate in New York City, along with what my friend Aldo Tambellini did. And on the, I think, the 21st or the 22nd of May, at the center—meaning out there on Briggs [00:42:00] Field at MIT—I did the first piece which would now be called Sky Art, sky event, with a total of around 1,000 feet of helium inflated tubes called Light Line Experiment. So here is also a connection between light and sky, in a rather tangible kind of way. And from then on it was much light art indoors and much Sky Art outdoors, and sometimes a combination of both indoors and outdoors.

ROBERT BROWN: Were the colors so vivid as they are on your prints, a number of your prints?

OTTO PIENE: In the Sky Art, you know the materials, some of the materials are rather colorful, meaning red, orange, yellow, um, others just are transparent materials. Every now and then, it's silver and gold. Some of the prints are very strong colors, some of the prints are very uncolored, so to speak, meaning just black and white, or silver, and those colors pretty much reflect the colors I've used in painting a great deal. I started out with—when I became a somewhat confident, mature painter in the middle of 1957, I started out with yellow and white, and later on black and gold and silver paintings, and those colors you'll find in the light, as well as in the Sky Art—also widely in the prints. The uh, the one change as of 1959, 1960, largely, was that I added red. Red became the predominant—red and black became the predominant colors of the smoke paintings and the [00:44:00] fire paintings. Somewhat plausibly. The occurrence of red, I kind of somewhat amusedly attribute to the performance, Khrushchev in the UN, and New York, when he pounded his shoe on the desk. That was an event I minded very much, meaning I objected to it very much and I, quote unquote, saw red. But, as I said, that's—

ROBERT BROWN: That's sort of an—

OTTO PIENE: This anecdote that I tell myself, is to be seen with a grain of salt.

ROBERT BROWN: This was something of an intolerable act, with terrible implications.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, yeah. I thought that was really, the end of, of um, a good faith period after World War II.

[END OF 4 OF 7 SIDE A.]

ROBERT BROWN: [00:00:00] Side two, April 12, 1989. Today we can start by talking about the various conferences that you've been involved in or that you were certainly aware of. Maybe, we probably perhaps could begin with the conference which uh, I guess inaugurated the Center for Advanced Visual Studies here at MIT. That would be about 1968. You were, at that time a fellow here or just had been, but you weren't on staff or anything.

OTTO PIENE: No, I was not.

ROBERT BROWN: You came as a visitor essentially, to this conference.

OTTO PIENE: Right. I should say first, that I kind of learned what a conference is here. I mean, I'd seen conferences before and I knew something about academic life, but the lust for conferences is widely a U.S. phenomenon, and I think it's a fine phenomenon.

ROBERT BROWN: Why do people lust for them do you think?

OTTO PIENE: I think it has to do with essentially, because a conference is some kind of a democratic institution—you know, different people talking and uh, opinions and convictions somehow being choreographed by a moderator who may or may not know what he's talking about or who may or may not support what's being said. I think essentially, it's some kind of an academic democratic institution, and I think it's a good institution. If handled properly, it can produce a lot of information and also produce some new insight if it's the right kind of conference and the right kind of people are participating in the conference.

The first one you mentioned was, I don't know what it's called, was the conference on the occasion or the opening of the center, and I think it was in March—I know it was in March [00:02:00] 1968, because last year we had a 20th anniversary celebrating that fact here at the center. This center was opened, together with another new MIT center, uh, i.e., the Center for Theoretical Physics, and there was some ceremony in the student center and then there was a conference in the Kresge Theater and I think I was on the panel—on one of the panels. I remember the conference in part, because Sibyl Moholy-Nagy was there, and I think it was the first time that I saw her and realized what a fighting lady she was—also somewhat arrogant, um, and I had kind of looked at her and realized that she was the same generation or maybe the same age as my mother. So this lady, being from Germany, it struck a kind of familiar chord.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you feel you were being talked down to by her?

OTTO PIENE: No, not really, but I realized how much tension there was, for whatever reason, between her and Kepes. I wasn't really interested in any kind of standing, vis-à-vis Sibyl. Later on, it turned out there were more contacts with Sibyl Moholy-Nagy. My then wife, Nan Rosenthal, um, subsequently became a Moholy-Nagy scholar and um, was very much involved in the [00:04:00] reconstruction—not the reconstruction. They were building a replica of the Light-Space Modulator, the original, which is a prized possession of the Busch-Reisinger Museum.

ROBERT BROWN: Busch-Reisinger.

OTTO PIENE: Or what used to be the Busch-Reisinger Museum.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, the northern European museum, or whatever it is now.

OTTO PIENE: The Teutonic Museum, the Barberic Museum, the uh, the whatever museum, that came out of some Busch fortune. And um, I always thought that was an excellent museum as far as the collection is concerned, and it's too bad that it won't maintain it, or anything like that. I always thought that the Light-Space Modulator was Moholy's most important work and the most striking and the most tangible work by Moholy, and the replicas were later built by Nan Rosenthal, with the help of Woodie Flowers at MIT, who is now a very important professor in mechanical engineering. He was a graduate student then. Um, also Nan was—I think she was instrumental in selling the replicas, or not selling them but distributing them in Europe, where they ended up being in other museums. Nan would then have uh, good relations with the Moholy offspring and Sibyl. And then some other woman scholar, this time um, Hannah Weitemeier came from Europe because she became a Moholy scholar, and she had her waystation here in Boston while on her way to Moholy. [00:06:00] She also—I may just say that out of context, so to speak—then married um, a German artist/promoter—and his name escapes me right now, which is really dumb—who founded, in Cologne and then in Berlin, the first "television gallery." The marriage wasn't very happy, and they got divorced soon and he—Gerry Schum was his name.

ROBERT BROWN: Gerry Schum.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. Ended up in suicide, after only a few years of this, this uh, television gallery. But he is some kind of an historic figure now, because he was the first one to introduce, in a somewhat dramatic way, television, meaning um, video, into the art scene, at a time when nobody else was thinking about video. This must have been 1969, or something like that. At the very same time when I did the first television program as an artist in Germany, and then subsequently here in the United States.

ROBERT BROWN: But Nam June Paik was just about underway.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, he had—Nam June Paik was part of the very same—the U.S. program that I was involved in, and there are, I mean there are—now, we are not talking about the opening of the conference at, at the Kresge, right? We're talking about Nam June Paik quickly and we'll get back to, to the conference at Kresge. Paik is now, he's now acknowledged as being, you know, the first video artist. There was a time when Paik told me personally—I've known Paik forever and we were good friends a long time ago. He at one time told me at a weak moment that he was um, turned from [00:08:00] a sound artist to a video, or visual artist, by experiencing my Light Ballet in Dusseldorf, in the early years, such as 1959, '60 and '61, and so on.

ROBERT BROWN: It began in '59.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. I mean that, that was a statement from Paik. I'm not sure he remembers that he ever, um, released that private statement, so to speak. Anyway, back to Hannah Weitemeier, Gerry Schum, they were here when the center existed already. Nan had somehow befriended Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, and I think her first acquaintance with her really did happen at this opening conference of the center, when Sibyl was there.

ROBERT BROWN: What was the uh, what was the theme of the opening?

OTTO PIENE: Art, science, technology, something like that.

ROBERT BROWN: Was the presiding figure Kepes?

OTTO PIENE: I'm not sure he was the presiding figure but he—it somehow centered around Kepes because Kepes was the founder and founding director of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies and the open—the occasion was the opening of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies. Some of that stuff—meaning what was said in the conference—has later made it into a book, um, by a scholar, essayist and very interesting man—and I don't remember his name right now, but it wouldn't be too difficult to find out. Um, I think the reason why I'm saying that is that he, just as Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, ended up being murdered in some southern town in the United States. [00:10:00] Um, this is entirely non sequitur, totally unrelated.

ROBERT BROWN: I see, yeah, yeah.

OTTO PIENE: But he, in his book, made rather intelligent comments on this conference and what was being said there and the state of uh, art, science, technology and so on.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, what do you recall of the uh, this opening conference?

OTTO PIENE: Well we talked about uh, what technology does to art and what technology does to architecture. I do remember that I mentioned the television towers in Germany and how, in a certain way, they are communication buildings, somewhat in the place where gothic cathedrals or spires were in the Middle Ages. And I do remember that uh, Sibyl thought—and I was more amused by her answer because she was such an impassioned, somewhat arrogant, self-reflecting, um, speaker—she thought that was more or less ridiculous, and she was in the midst of um, saving the 42nd Street railroad station.

ROBERT BROWN: Grand Center Terminal.

OTTO PIENE: She was all involved in Grand Central Terminal and the Park Avenue Canyon, and so on and so forth. I'm not even sure she—I'm not even sure she was entirely certain about what I was talking about, because that was the time when in Germany, all these incredible television towers went up, you know higher than the Eiffel Tower, some of them, and so on, so forth. So, the same, same idea. There were communication architecture that was essentially built to pass on signals of television, radar, and so on, so forth. That's something I remember of that conference.

ROBERT BROWN: Just as the uh, the gothic spire passed on, or at least symbolized.

OTTO PIENE: Yes, the spiritual.

ROBERT BROWN: She was more hung up on more conventional functions.

OTTO PIENE: Just as the gothic spire spread, spread the spiritual message, [00:12:00] you know, these TV towers spread the electronic message. Still, they're still there, still doing this, they're still building these things. And anyway, she thought that was, that was uh, ridiculous.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, was the uh, overall tone of the conference that it was a good thing, that art and technology were making good use of each other?

OTTO PIENE: No.

ROBERT BROWN: There was a dissonance?

OTTO PIENE: I think the proponents of the idea that people from the center thought it was a good idea. However, it had to be specified how and why and in which fashion it was a good idea. Whereas then, you know the cultural phalanx and architectural phalanx, um, widely thought that technology shouldn't really go too near uh, the arts. Kepes, of course who had been, you know an integrationist, or as they now call them in Germany, universalists, since he arrived from the United States, was very much advocating his idea and I must say, he was advocating it in a rather convincing way. He also published, on the occasion, is what I call the white book, the first catalogue on the center, which consists essentially of one Kepes essay, with illustrations by the—meaning visual material, by the fellows, the new fellows, and um, that reflects very much what Kepes—Kepes' message, Kepes, his um, mission was in this conference. So, the way I saw it, the conference was lively, the conference was okay, it was wildly confrontational. It was also, as I thought, pretty meek.

ROBERT BROWN: So people ah, didn't really get into it.

OTTO PIENE: No, not very much. I felt that I probably said more clearly, what I thought I had to say [00:14:00] than most other people, who were speaking in this kind of mellow, essayistic tones.

ROBERT BROWN: Who were some of the people in the cultural establishment, the art establishment, architecture? Do you recall?

OTTO PIENE: Well first of all, there was the MIT School of Architecture, people like Anderson and Belluschi, and um—

ROBERT BROWN: Was Belluschi, for example, who had employed some high technology or moderately high technology, in some of his structures.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, these people were okay, I mean, they were essential.

ROBERT BROWN: But there were some.

OTTO PIENE: Then there was some MIT brass. I mean, I think the MIT brass, meaning the president at the time, I think was Stratton, the provost was Wiesner.

ROBERT BROWN: Norbert Wiesner.

OTTO PIENE: No, no, no, Jerome Wiesner.

ROBERT BROWN: Jerome Wiesner, excuse me.

OTTO PIENE: No, Wiener, I've never met. I think he was dead already.

ROBERT BROWN: But these, these people, I mean it was all generally with good feeling. Just as you realize—

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, it was a good feeling. There was a good feeling and not much, and nothing much said. Um, I met some people there for the first time, who I've uh, respected and to a degree, um, cherished ever since, such as Doc Edgerton, I think I met him there for the first time.

ROBERT BROWN: The strobe light.

OTTO PIENE: The great MIT pioneer and hero, who was unfortunately also a very old man now, and Cyril Smith, I think I met there for the first time.

ROBERT BROWN: He was sort of technology—[crosstalk].

OTTO PIENE: Cyril Smith's a materials, material science man, who was what he calls a cultural archaeologist. And I don't remember the man who was the deputy director of the—the man's name—was deputy director of the Museum of Natural History in New York City. He actually maintained contact with me about design ideas and stuff like that, but nothing [00:16:00] much ever happened as a result.

ROBERT BROWN: So do you think—did this inspire you, this conference?

OTTO PIENE: No.

ROBERT BROWN: No. You thought it was a nice way to open something but—

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, it was a nice way of opening something. I had met some people whom I enjoyed meeting, but I don't think the conference produced anything but some kind of public acknowledgement that the center was there. I think the press echo and the uh, and the somewhat—and the few national organs that reflected it, wasn't all that, that unanimous. Actually, it was quite ambiguous what, what happened there. But I think it was important for Kepes because he, after all, had promoted the center, and finally got the center, and got the fellows to come here to the center. It was a seminal event and, in that respect, it was an excellent event. Because the center was now there, there were four fellows at the center, and um, the fellows were rather vigorously involved in being at the center, and are quite conscious of how they were at the center. I think those fellows were Takis and Stan VanDerBeek and myself, and that may have been it.

ROBERT BROWN: Well you said that the conferences seemed to be, at that time at least, were particularly and peculiarly American. You conducted a number of performance pieces and collaborative, in Europe, performance work. Can you compare that at all, with uh, a conference? Which is similar, it's collaborative.

OTTO PIENE: No. No, no.

ROBERT BROWN: There's nothing, no resemblance.

OTTO PIENE: No resemblance.

ROBERT BROWN: The conference is largely, or that kind of conference, is largely talking.

OTTO PIENE: It's talking. It's essentially an academic, [00:18:00] um, format, meaning usually, the participants are professors or would be professors or former professors, and uh, so it's like the academic table around which the wise people, the wise men and occasional women sit, and talk about novel subjects in a novel fashion, generally in a perfectly civilized fashion, whereas the performances that I have been involved in, that I have staged and conceived of, were usually widely physical, with things happening, so to speak.

ROBERT BROWN: Well right after, in fact right after you'd done the Olympic rainbow in '72, in Munich, that next year you said that you were involved with yet another conference at MIT, something you described in the '70s, 1973. You described it to me, you called it sort of a testing conference.

OTTO PIENE: There were, yeah, I think there were two of a kind, probably one a year, or even both of them in one year. One, which was actually quite a beautiful conference, that Kepes was responsible for, that had a lot to do with environmental art and the topic was environmental art, although it wasn't called environmental art. It was called more like art on a civic scale, or something like that. And he managed, not only to invite, but also to get here, interesting people who had something to say on the topic.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you—you were here, or you came up for it from wherever you were?

OTTO PIENE: I came up for it.

ROBERT BROWN: And then there was that conference at which you were in a sense being looked over, to possibly be his successor. You said there was a conference there.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, right. I remember the one conference, the conference with all these environmental artists and architects speaking, giving presentations with slides and all sort of things, it was really interesting. [00:20:00] I just don't remember today—I don't remember names all that well. It would be much easier if I had the names in front of me and I could um, comment on what they did. I know that at one—at the conference at Kresge, um, a Lawrence Halprin, for instance, gave a beautiful presentation on the fountains he had built in Portland and other places on the northwest coast. And um, then the, you know—what's the very, very vital, lively, now aging and sick black lady who has done all this art at the school?

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, here in Boston?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Elma Lewis.

OTTO PIENE: Elma Lewis. She was at that conference, she gave a beautiful—I mean, I really, really enjoyed that. At that time, she was at the height of her liveliness and, and somewhat suggestive, very, very missionary power, and that was beautiful. And we had Claes Oldenburg and um—

ROBERT BROWN: Was he effective in what he does?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, he's good, he's very good, kind of witty and cool and beautiful, a very powerful presence. Um, and I think it was that conference when the concluding, um, set of people were Buckminster Fuller and Robert Motherwell, and that was okay too, although they were full of themselves and somewhat talking more to themselves than they were talking about what was on our minds—the, kind of the practicing artist mind, so to speak. I didn't really mean to exclude Robert Motherwell, certainly not in practicing environmental arts, [00:22:00] whereas Buckminster Fuller was doing all his tricks about, you know—[inaudible]. [Audio break.]

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, this was—

OTTO PIENE: I mean, this is kind of incoherent. Um, anyway, that was a beautiful conference. I think that's Kepes' conference all together and was beautiful. I think I ended up, I ended my presentation by reading the translation of a poem that was part of the fire flower theater play that I had written and produced in Germany in 1964. Now, this was eight or nine years later, and I spent half the night before this conference in Brewster, where I lived—Brewster, New York, where I lived at the time—translating it to English, and concluded my presentation with reading that poem, and it had a very strong effect on everybody. And I do remember walking back from that session of the conference, um, and I was told that I should please consider being the next director of the center, in success of Kepes, in his faculty position, so on and so forth.

ROBERT BROWN: You'd been told by—you were told by somebody at MIT.

OTTO PIENE: I was told by the head of the department, who I think was a member of the search committee, but it was a high-powered search committee then, and included people like Phil Morrison and Walter Rosenblith, stuff like that. They had mulled this over for a long time and I really didn't pay any attention. I was just maybe one-quarter aware that it was happening, but I certainly hadn't involved myself in any kind of fashion, and I didn't really give that much of a damn anyway.

ROBERT BROWN: What was the substance of the poem that had such impact?

OTTO PIENE: Ah, it's called, um, "Babylon," and it's a long poem. It's not that long [00:24:00] and every now and then, I still read it. I haven't written that many poems in my life, maybe the total number of poems I've written may number anywhere between 15 and 25, and every now and then I will read one. I think you have a little catalogue that has some of the poems in it. And the "Babylon" poem that not too many people have attempted to interpret and not too many people who attempted have interpreted it correctly, although it's clear as bright day out there that it's about the role of the artist, vis-à-vis whatever society or life or whatever. In a certain way, it's very simple to read the poem, but it doesn't seem to be that simple. Anyway, it had a pretty strong effect and I felt good about that whole conference, because there were lots of good things to see and hear. So, I think of Kepes' conferences, this was clearly the most vital one.

And then I remember one other conference which was happening at the student center. There, this may have been post factum, but again, I didn't pay that much attention to the, to the um, formal aspects of it. I don't remember whether the choice was, the successor to Kepes had been made already, or whether it was still being, being uh, considered, but there were people invited as participants, panelists, presenters, to that conference, who were clearly candidates or thought of as candidates, um, to be the next director of the center. There were such people as, um, Jonathan Benthall, from London, who had—

ROBERT BROWN: What was his last name?

OTTO PIENE: Benthall.

ROBERT BROWN: Benthall. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

OTTO PIENE: He had written a popular book on art [00:26:00] and technology. He was a fairly refined um, educated man and um, one of the Cohen brothers who had already, from London, who was teaching in California and had already done a lot of computer-inspired and computer-directed artwork, particularly graphic artwork. A very, very sophisticated man and uh, and a good artist. And there was, I think there was Jack Burnham, um, and I think the moderator was Robert Gardner.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, from the ah, Carpenter Center at Harvard?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, yeah. And there is one, one person I mentioned before, and I don't even recall right now. Oh, Friedrich St. Florian. Friedrich St. Florian, who had been kept his kind of official assistant, or associate director at the center during the last two or so years, when Kepes was uh, was directing the center and I was not here, um, meaning during the time when I was not a fellow at the center.

ROBERT BROWN: And had you known St. Florian for some time?

OTTO PIENE: I had known him, although I didn't know him all that well, and most people thought he would be the next director here and maybe he himself thought so too, and that's not what happened. However, one of the first things I did when I did become the director, and actually started minding the business of the center—although Kepes was still here—was that I encouraged, very much and very warmly, Friedrich to stay on as a fellow, and he did stay on for another two years or so, and then you know, we worked together, and we did classes together, did it very well, [00:28:00] and so on and so forth and you know, to this day we're very good friends. For Friedrich, I think all of that worked out fine, because he was trained as an architect and he ended up being the dean of architecture at the Rhode Island School of Design, where I think he also was a professor, while he was a fellow here and at some time he was—for years, he was the acting vice president of whatever, at the Rhode Island School of Design. So Friedrich, he was fine, he was happy, I think.

ROBERT BROWN: Had he an academic background as well?

OTTO PIENE: He did have an academic background. He studied architecture in very serious ways, came to uh, the United States originally, because he wanted to study with or be near Frederick Kiesler. Kiesler was one of his heroes, understandably, and he did well with Kiesler, while Kiesler was living in New York City and I think worked with him or worked for him, or studied Kiesler, and on from there. So, Friedrich is a, he's a very intelligent and very knowledgeable, um, man and architect, with an extraordinary sense of imagery and a somewhat extraordinary vision; a maverick among architects who finally, late in life, got to building buildings. Right now, he is building Lowry Burgess' house in Hull, Massachusetts, across from the Boston Harbor. So, I mean this—Friedrich was one of the original, kind of, core group. He was here first at the center, he came at the center around four years or so, but he became very much one of the core persons [00:30:00] at the center, um, just like after him, shortly after him, Lowry Burgess—and these people are still very much attached to the center and they're still very much attached to Kepes, for instance, and also very good friends of mine and all that. So that's um, another consequence of maybe, those conferences that Kepes had. Whether it has anything to do with conferences, quite frankly I don't know—but it was, you know, the conferences were part of the center's life, particularly under Kepes. Quite frankly, however, I think the conferences that I have inspired were more important.

ROBERT BROWN: As conferences.

OTTO PIENE: As conferences.

ROBERT BROWN: These incidentally, happen to be good ways of meeting people, that you described.

OTTO PIENE: I think the Kepes conferences were a little bit in the nature of running an open doors.

ROBERT BROWN: Sort of an open house?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. You know the, let's say the ideas of you know environmental art and art, science, technology working together, and these integrative, um, efforts had all been widely publicized through Kepes's books, and in lots of other books for a long time, and there weren't really new ideas coming into the picture through the conferences. The conferences were giving this idea of maybe some more human presence and human warmth and human energy.

ROBERT BROWN: A bit to the extent of, sort of, showcasing a particular people's ideas.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. And some of that was quite beautiful.

ROBERT BROWN: Well you did the, uh, come on in '74 as director, and you—there was a conference in '76.

OTTO PIENE: Art Transition.

ROBERT BROWN: Art Transition. And that was conceived by you.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: And what, what did it hope to accomplish, what was its theme?

OTTO PIENE: To, to point out, in a somewhat wider context, that art was indeed in [00:32:00] transition, and that a new art was developing beyond the traditional pursuit of the arts, even beyond the traditional pursuit of, quote unquote, environmental art, which widely until then, had been considered something to do with architecture. And, I mean, the people in the School of Architecture and Planning, the Department of Architecture at MIT, still think that, that essentially, they own environmental art because it's just artists, sculptors, working for architects so to speak.

ROBERT BROWN: But you see it as something different, environmental art?

OTTO PIENE: Oh, yeah. I saw it in the wider context, to do widely with ecology, with a balanced environment, with a balanced environment biologically, economically, industrially, politically. And I'm not saying that Kepes didn't see these things. It would be unfair to, to imply that he didn't see that, but in a certain way, I think I pursued these things in a more practical fashion. I mean, I wrote, in some kind of essay, or letter, or something like that, that already in, I think 1967, '66 or '67, that—yeah, it must have been that. Picasso was the last artist who was not also an engineer, and I still think that is a somewhat overly pointed and somewhat abrasive statement, but um, I still think it was quite true.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean artists who have got something new to say are also engineers.

OTTO PIENE: They have to know contemporary media to really say it right, and distribute it right, and get it to the right people, and the right number of people, so on and so forth. So, I approached many of these things in a somewhat more tangible fashion, in less academic [00:34:00] fashion, less in the fashion of roundtable talk, and more towards the true development of new art forms. After all, the center had started with kind of a brought reputation, that is the fellows that came here first brought their reputation with them and brought the art with them, all of which had not been developed here, had not been promoted here, had not come to blossoming here, which was a very smart way of doing things, but you know, there hadn't been much time yet for anything new to happen. So in 1976, instigated by Peter Feinstein, the then director of the University Film Center—I think is what it was called—he thought he had some money and he had some appetite for a conference, and we sat down in Brewster, New York for a weekend, and he was just thrown by, you know what I threw into the concept of the conference, and it became a very good concept and it essentially was to lay open what's in store for the arts—that is, what will happen in film, vis-à-vis video, what will happen in performance vis-à-vis multimedia, what will happen in um, architecture vis-à-vis moving architecture and communication architecture, and uh, migrant architecture, and what will happen in um, kinetic art, vis-à-vis the immateriality of um, transport and transmission, and what will happen in um, sculptural art vis-à-vis impulses from biology and medicine, so on and so forth. We published a [00:36:00] catalogue, Art Transition catalogue, which indicates just a few things, but it's a pretty open book in terms of what it lays open as choices, options, promises, for the arts. And it was a very strong conference, because we raised money, we had a big conference staff. We invited lots of people, we had lots of, um, subscribers to the conference, we had lots of open sessions, and we had superb artists, so that made it very good.

ROBERT BROWN: It was the—was the format varied from performance—?

OTTO PIENE: The format was, um, panels, lectures, exhibitions, events, social events, that essentially—so the center, we turned the center into a mini temporary whatever, museum gallery. Um, we had performances and installations out on the Kresge Mall, we had performances on the Briggs Athletic Field. We had parties and receptions. We had permanent presentations at the center—meaning permanent for two days or one week—and we had Kresge and um, the emphasis was on the artist presentations. So it wasn't theorists, it wasn't the critics, it wasn't historians, it wasn't essayists, it wasn't commentators; it was mostly the artists themselves.

ROBERT BROWN: Was the attempt to lay these things out and then comment on them, or have—?

OTTO PIENE: Well, essentially just expose them.

ROBERT BROWN: Expose them? And people conclude what they might. For example, you mentioned kinetic art, immaterial kinetic art, this sort of thing was shown.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. We also, we also still had quite a bit on architectural art [00:38:00] and so on, so forth, elements such as earth art, which is beginning to flourish, um, and [inaudible]. It's interesting, last year, I reread some of the programs and the panels and the people, and it still struck me as a good group. If you would bring the same group together today it would still be a good conference, because they were very lively, very bright people. They all had something to say and they had a strong, um, who had a strong record of work done, work to be presented, and work, um, conveyable. So, they came here and showed the work and it was terrific.

ROBERT BROWN: Can you perhaps describe some of the names and describe some of the people, what they did, who participated in that conference?

OTTO PIENE: I just remember that, for instance, Renee Levine came from the University of Buffalo, with a group of musicians and performers, and they gave a performance at the Massachusetts College of Art, so that it was also something we did for the first time—we branched out into other institutions in Boston. We had a group that I haven't thought of much since, from Kansas City, people who were dedicated to kinetic and concrete art, and they did an installation art here, on the student center lawn. We had um, some film and video people who were really doing interesting work. I just would have to look up the names. Larry Burgess did an installation at the center, we had permanent video presentations at the center. We had a big exhibition in the exhibition room that included, um, works such as paintings by Kepes, and come to think of it, this very drawing [00:40:00] that is sitting here, was part of what I exhibited at the exhibition. In other words, in this conference that was dedicated to art, science, technology, and opening towards new media, I also made the point that one of the main concerns of the artist, under whatever circumstances, human life and human appearance and human soul, and so on, so forth—so that was, I think, also probably an interesting point to make, that in all this, this great onslaught of new media, we were not adverse to the traditional media and we certainly were not anti-humanistic or um, given to technology at any price, and so on, so forth. So that was also an interesting element there.

[END OF 4 OF 7 SIDE B.]

ROBERT BROWN: [00:00:00] Continuing, April 12, 1989.

OTTO PIENE: It wasn't the first time that I, at the center, promoted a somewhat ambitious catalogue, but it was the first time that um, I proposed a catalogue of this range. Some people will definitely say it lacked depth if you compare it to some of the previous publications, but it certainly displayed breadths and widths, so for once, I guess it could live without that depth, or all that depth, as I recall it. And um, in the participants, people who gave presentations—or among the people who gave presentations, were some interesting artists either from the center or outside the center, such as Juan Downey, who was an architect and video artist, or Douglas Davis, who was becoming increasingly, a video artist and a telecommunications man, and um, we included from MIT, people like, like—such as, as Richard Leacock.

ROBERT BROWN: The filmmaker.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: What about from the outside world, what about any of that group, that E.A.T. group, the Billy Klüver group?

OTTO PIENE: Um, Billy Klüver, I think he was here for that conference, but we've never had too close of a relationship with Billy Klüver, because there was some, some—whether it was rivalry or whether it was competition between E.A.T. and the center, or should I say, Billy Klüver and Kepes, [00:02:00] or something. So, I've never been too close to Billy Klüver and I don't think I had any reason, and I don't think I've missed much, um, because Billy Klüver became a very difficult person in the, in the later portions of his life. We had Maryanne Amacher and Grover Mouton, ah, we had Larry Burgess, I mentioned that already. We had Joan Brigham for the first time, we had Rockne Krebs, who was one of the most important artists who ever were at the center. We had Nancy Holt—I remember almost falling asleep during her presentation, um, and we had um, Alejandro Siña for the first time. We had for the first time, um, Charlotte Moorman, and Pike [ph] and um, we had the theme of celebration represented by, by um, Karen Bacon. We had the Center of the Creative and Performing Arts of the State University of New York at Buffalo, directed by, or administrated by Renee Levine. Um, and we had, we had some other interesting people there I can't find right now. Jürgen Claus was there, Christo was there, I mean they all gave presentations. Jim Ackerman was there. This is entirely—it sounds like a smorgasbord now, but it wasn't. It was all organized according to themes and groups of themes, and presentations and groups of presentations.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, Ackerman is the first conventional art historian you've mentioned. What, what was his [00:04:00] role as you recall?

OTTO PIENE: I think he always had an interest in—at that time, he certainly had an interest in art and technology. He was probably giving an art history presentation on, on uh, art, technology in the first half of the

20th century. We had Hollis Frampton, who gave a beautiful film presentation. We had Ronald Hays, um—[inaudible]—from Yugoslavia, who was giving a really perfect Marxist, um, lecture, on the role of the arts in the modern Yugoslav society that was very interesting. I had known him earlier and he was kind of the resident Marxist of the conference, and that added a pretty interesting flare to the conference. We had Allan Kaprow, um.

ROBERT BROWN: What did he do, because he'd been—he was, by then, a veteran of performance art.

OTTO PIENE: Among other things, among other things, he was doing a happening, kind of indoor happening of um, disparate people in different places. It was an interesting concept. It somehow was a concept that was as intelligent as his contribution to the first video program we did at the Medium, where Allan Kaprow also did something very interesting. There was Carl Nesjar um, talking about elements in sculpture. There was Gerald O'Grady, talking about the role of the media in um, in modern art and education. There was Jack Nolan, who later became the president of the Massachusetts College of Art. At that time, he was still a Lincoln Lab scientist. [00:06:00] There was, um, Yvonne Rainer, showing a film. There was Joshua Reichert [ph] from London, who was then the director of the ICA in London. There was Robert Rohm, a performer, there was—[inaudible]—the film critic of the Boston Globe, and on and on. Manfred Schneckenburger was there, the uh, commissioner of the '77 Documenta. Jim Seway [ph] and it just goes on and on.

ROBERT BROWN: And all of this crammed into about two days, or several days.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, what was it? I think there's the program in here. It must have been three or four days, maybe four days—but you realize that it just goes on and on. It was dynamite, very intense and very vital. Howard Wise was there, old Howard Wise, the old sponsor of the artists video media art [ph]. Stan VanDerBeek was there, Tsai was there, Aldo Tambellini was there—many of these people were fellows then. Takis was there, Alan Sonfist was there, Michael Snow was there, um, Jeffrey Shaw. Some of these people are still very important people in their medias, so that was our transition. Enough of that.

ROBERT BROWN: It's a tremendous variety. I mean it was—it just sort of redefined what a conference could be.

OTTO PIENE: In here, they're all bunched together in certain groups. Some of these groups may be a little forced but um—

ROBERT BROWN: Did the catalogue come out after the fact?

OTTO PIENE: No. It came out before the conference, during the conference. One group is called interaction.

ROBERT BROWN: What was that meant to say, just what it means?

OTTO PIENE: Interaction, participation, collaboration among many. Um, the next group is called—she was there, Sonia [00:08:00] Sheridan.

ROBERT BROWN: What did she—?

OTTO PIENE: The next is called developmental media work. She's one of the gurus of computer art. She was then, and she is now.

ROBERT BROWN: Developmental media work, what did that mean?

OTTO PIENE: Education, see, that's so we all behave at the conference. We also worried a lot about education. Um, see, Jim Ackerman is right there. John Nolan is in there, who then, I think—Mestrovic from Zagreb is in there, head of education. Then the next group is communication, um, Gerald O'Grady of course, Hollis Frampton. Then there's video arts, such as Aldo Tambellini, Juan Downey, Douglas Davis.

ROBERT BROWN: Some of these people could have been in other groups, not just in film.

OTTO PIENE: Sure, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, yeah.

OTTO PIENE: Environmental concepts, which, zero gravity was a new concept then. Celebrations.

ROBERT BROWN: Which could cover practically anything.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, but celebrations became kind of a rubric, a medium, an art form, not that it hadn't been before, but it moved into the arts, where it belongs, after it had been, you know, relegated to show business, or sports, or national nonsense, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Now following that conference, did you uh, see the things emerge that you had not anticipated? Because it's highly organized.

OTTO PIENE: Well, this was 1976. What happened the next year was that we were invited to do [00:10:00] Centerbeam with the Documenta 6, 1977. So that was when the center forces kind of coalesced and came up with this. We had a pretty focused and pretty important group sculpture, performance, sculpture, concept, in context with the world's, you know, most respected contemporary art exhibition. And it was in—it was actually initiated when I invited Schneckenburger to be the—to be a contributor to the conference, and he certainly was fairly impressed by, by what he saw here, and he's now—I mean, Schneckenburger is still a friend of the center, and he is still saying that the only model in existence in the world for future art pursuit, education, and concepts is the center, which is, you know, remarkable that he's still saying that 13 years after our transition conference. That's the first time he came here to the center, so.

ROBERT BROWN: For Kassel, the next year, what did you pull together? So, what was Centerbeam, what was the name supposed to mean?

OTTO PIENE: Well, Centerbeam is again, this kind of theme in itself. It was a group sculpture that um, was the result of the collaboration of, of these 15 artists from the center and five scientists, five engineers, five graduate students, to become a large, a long, performing sculpture at the Documenta. It was 144 feet long. It was carrying such media as um, steam, water, electricity, neon art, radio, video, um, [00:12:00] laser, holograms, solar power, um, some organic elements, and it was a sculpture to be turned on and off. It also ran itself and it was also the focus of performances that were kind of staged around Centerbeam. In '77, it happened in the Documenta in 1978, it happened on the National Mall in Washington. There, it was—there was a new version of it. There it was accompanied by 22 sky events that I brought into it, as a kind of satellite operation to it, and that became a new art form, the sky events in this form, although I had started them in 1968, right here at the center. And in Washington, Centerbeam was hosted directly by the Air and Space Museum and tolerated by the HEW Building, in front of which it was really located, and sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution, and the National Park Service, plus some companies, corporations, so on and so forth. So indirectly, there was also the result of, result of the, of some of the activities at the Art Transition Conference.

ROBERT BROWN: So it turned out to be a very fruitful, seminal thing.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. Another thing about the Art Transition was that it was honestly international, and that was also something pretty good, because from then on, the conferences at the center were thoroughly international. That is not only did we invite people who were already in the United States, of foreign nationality, but we invited people from all over, meaning from—not for the Art Transition to that extent, but then for the Sky Art conferences, we invited people from Japan, from France, from Germany, from, um, [00:14:00] Australia, from lots of diverse countries and countries distant from each other, to participate in this conference, also to communicate, because during the next set of conferences, this was Art Transition 1976. Then, as of 1981—

ROBERT BROWN: You started the Sky Art.

OTTO PIENE: We did the conferences I really wanted to do, and that was a series of Sky Art conferences.

ROBERT BROWN: And what, what were—what underlay them, what did you hope to accomplish by them?

OTTO PIENE: To, to um, generate Sky Art, let's put it that way. Much of it existed already, much of it was inspired, much of it was um, attracted, kind of magnetized by the Sky Art conferences. And the first one happened in 1981, at the center, at MIT. It was probably the most academically well-founded conference that we have done—the 1981 Sky Art Conference at MIT—because we involved lots of people from MIT, who had a lot to say on certain aspects, such as weather, such as um, image transmission.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean there was lecturing as well as performing.

OTTO PIENE: Yes. And the Sky Art Conference '81 was happening in many locations at MIT, and uh, it was accompanied by many—not accompanied by, a part of it were really interesting events, again, out on Briggs Field and on the lawn here. And uh, one part of it was [00:16:00] a fairly substantial telecommunication event that happened between the center, via slow-scan, and a sizeable group of what you might call sky artists, in Australia, much of it in performance. It was a really organized, interesting event of artists talking to us, live, through um, methods and media of telecommunication, in pictures, but also, of course, sound, because the slow-scan uses the telephone as the basic carrier and the telephone carries images as well as it carries sound. So we had this live kind of teaching and events—um, information event going on between the center and Australia for hours, and um, it brought the sky artists together. So the '81 conference here was massive, it was well organized, um, it was reasonably well funded. We had again, a big conference staff. It took I don't know how long to prepare it.

ROBERT BROWN: And you were, you were the prime supervisor for the whole thing.

OTTO PIENE: I was the prime mover, yeah, the prime mover and the prime, um, organizer and the—to a degree, an inspirer and policeman at the same time, as you know, as is the role of somebody who instigates it and then, you know, realizes it. But I had very good friends. Elizabeth, then Elizabeth Goldring, became my codirector. She did much of the fundraising and the organization and the drawing people into it. [00:18:00] And uh, we had you know, the best artists from the start—the best artists sympathizing with the idea of Sky Art or practicing some form of Sky Art. And Lowry Burgess became the, what I call the senior consultant, meaning one of the major forces in the planning and the hosting of it. And Lowry is the very same Lowry who, just last—what was it—three weeks ago, flew his payload on the shuttle, which you know he envisioned already, during the first Sky Art Conference. He probably talked about it then. It takes a while to get these things to piggyback on another um, scooters.

ROBERT BROWN: Why Sky Art forms were there, in general were there, at this first conference in '81?

OTTO PIENE: There was flying sculptures in the case of my work, and people like Howard Woodie and uh, and Tom Van Sant, and Tal Streeter, and then there was satellite work, as in the case of Tom Van Sant. There was telecommunication work.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean worked that was beamed up to satellite and transmitted?

OTTO PIENE: Right, as in the uh, Tom Van Sant's desert eye piece, which he had done already six months or eight months before the '81 Sky Art Conference. He laid out mirrors in a certain configuration in the uh, in the California desert, and they were timed to beam up to the, to the overhead land satellite at a certain second, and um, it all worked like a charm and he talked about it. We had um, what's his name, MacCready, who [00:20:00] had done—around that time, I think he had done a channel crossing, with muscle-powered aircraft. MacCready is not—he did not—[Audio break.]

ROBERT BROWN: And did he redo it here or did he talk about it, or show documentation of it?

OTTO PIENE: Now, he had done it. He brought documentation, and you know. Paul MacCready is not an artist but close, and he is extremely fond of the arts and the artists, so he was a very good man to have around. He was around other Sky Art conferences, I think—the next two. as well. Um, and then there was telecommunication, which at that time was a budding art and as we said, we did this, for instance this, this—

ROBERT BROWN: Australia.

OTTO PIENE: Australia event, which was done by Aldo Tambellini.

ROBERT BROWN: What would you—as you recall, what was the impact of that for you, of back and forth with Australia? Just the sheer great distance and the way it was accomplished?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, that's what it was. Otherwise, it has not had any artistic consequences. To, to this day, I have not been in Australia, but the sheer distance and the sheer fact that it happened and the effect, the encouraging effect it had on both sides was really pretty good.

ROBERT BROWN: Whereas other forms at this conference, were more palpably uh—

OTTO PIENE: Like what I did, what I did. For instance, during this first conference, I flew the Blue Star Linz, which is the largest sky sculpture I had—flew here at night, it's about 300 feet long when it's fully inflated and up. It was a beautiful event, it was one of the most beautiful events I've done, but it dominated the entire outdoors and everybody at the conference was just walking around and talking, and screaming and yelling and shouting and communicating, [00:22:00] so on and so forth. It was pretty nice, just like with the, the Art Transition, also an interesting event, was that one without—[inaudible]. This time, the Blue Star Linz was a very good event and in both cases the weather was excellent. We were lucky.

ROBERT BROWN: So it's not for you, it's not merely what you're—you produced, but what the people are doing and interacting with it, that's part of it for you.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. And it was a big team that would uh, fly these things in both cases, and I would come. With Neon Rainbow, I clearly collaborated with another artist and with Blue Star Linz, uh, I needed a big team to do it. And I think Charlotte was doing Sky Kiss and I had done—I'm not sure I had done it with her before. So there was, there was enormous um, electricity around that conference. People were really charged and charging uh, with lots of energy and lots of outlook and projection, and they were very happy to communicate their ideas and their experiences and to show their work. And there was a sympathy, a sense of sympathy around the sky artists, to like each other and respect the other guy's work and so on and so forth, which was remarkable. Um, so that was '81 here.

Eighty-two, we were invited to do the Ars Electronica Festival in Linz, Austria. Ars Electronica is what it says—it's uh, electronic music, mostly show business music, meaning rock, and some serious aspects of it. And I introduced there, mostly the element, not so much of computer graphics but of video, into the Ars Electronica, [00:24:00] the year before—so around '80, in Austria, and I was commissioned then, to build Blue Star Linz, which I sort of got into in Austria. Now, in '82, they had the Ars Electronica, again invited us to have the Sky Art Conference there, and for that, we refined and reworked the Icarus, the sky opera that Paul Earls and I had played for the first time in Washington around Centerbeam in 1978.

ROBERT BROWN: Paul—who was that?

OTTO PIENE: Paul Earls.

ROBERT BROWN: Paul Earls.

OTTO PIENE: And then we had another sketchy version of it, from which I stayed away, because I didn't really like the, the way it was played—in 1981, for the Sky Art Conference here. And then we did the full-fledged stage version of it for the Brucknerhaus in Linz, in 1982, and I brought into it Johann Strassvogel, who was an experienced opera producer and director, and he—

ROBERT BROWN: Strauss Vogel?

OTTO PIENE: Strass, Strassvogel [ph].

ROBERT BROWN: Strassvogel.

OTTO PIENE: And that was a very good production in Linz on stage, and it's the first time we did it indoors and we had a very good organ, so we played it, I think four times. That was one part of the Sky Art Conference, and the other part were events on the banks of the Danube. And I did Sky Kiss with Charlotte Moorman, which was beautiful.

ROBERT BROWN: Now does she, she then performed with you several times in this. What was her role?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. And they had the most beautiful crew to support Sky Kiss and Charlotte Moorman. There, we had people participating, like Stan VanDerBeek and, and Howard Woody and my son was there, and um—

ROBERT BROWN: What is her role [00:26:00] in that piece, Charlotte Moorman?

OTTO PIENE: She, she is being lifted by um, these helium-filled creatures, loops that rises with amplification equipment, her cello, and she plays the cello up in the air. She's some kind of cellist—Cecilia, cello-playing angel up there. So that was beautiful there, in Austria.

ROBERT BROWN: A conference that, or were there all sort of a great many of the public came to that as well?

OTTO PIENE: The conference part was a beautiful conference, with lots of good artists there and some theorists there and no audience whatsoever. The, the—almost no audience, compared to the '81 audience here, where, you know, people were milling about and all the lecture halls were full, and it was, you know, vibrating academic life around the conference life, and the conference life was really playing into the academic life as well. In Linz, Austria, where the sponsor is the ORF, the Austrian state television and radio network, part of the conference happened at Brucknerhaus, which is um, staging the Bruckner Festival every year, and the other part is happening in the, in the television, the national television station. The orientation was widely towards what you would call show business, meaning you know, the people were broadcasting stuff all the time, doing a big, big adieu, um, and worrying about whatever, Nielsen ratings and viewer statistics and all that stuff. They were very strongly [00:28:00] oriented towards um, public appearances. So, the conference part there was practically unattended. We had beautiful people for the conference but no audience, so it was a real kind of equal [ph] situation, finally, um and—

ROBERT BROWN: So you didn't have the same electricity, so to speak.

OTTO PIENE: Not at all. Not at all here in the conference part, but all the, I mean all the presentations happened, and all the panels happened, and very interesting things were said. We had Pierre Restany from Paris, who came out with this weird question which, you know, still resounds in conversation every now and then. He said, "Where is God in all of this?" And that was essentially a rhetorical question, but it was funny, it's good. Talking about art, science, technology and Sky Art and telecommunication and space, um, endeavor and ambition, so on and so forth. So that part of the conference was pretty nice, and we had fireworks in the streets—just, you know, improvised fireworks at night, and all that was good. However, there was no public response to the conference part of the Sky Art Conference and it ended up with some primetime television, some big deal, euro primetime television program uh, coming out of Vienna, but happening there, and I had, on that television, I had a just incredible fight with a moderator, who was such, I don't know, some weird—

ROBERT BROWN: Were they intrusive?

OTTO PIENE: Intrusive and uninformed cynics, you know, the typical kind of European cultural television person who doesn't really know anything, but always pretends to be on top of everything. I just told them they should [00:30:00] cut out their stupid um, blasé attitude and listen and start learning, because we were talking about something they didn't know, so please. [Laughs.] It was, I mean people still come, almost in the street, ask me wasn't that funny, they saw that and wasn't that good, that somebody finally told these guys to shut up and learn something.

ROBERT BROWN: This was right on the air.

OTTO PIENE: That was European television. It was in Germany, in Austria and Holland. It was very funny. So that was the end of the Sky Art Conference.

ROBERT BROWN: So that conference was a mixed bag, I mean there was no audience and then you had this run-in.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, the events had audiences, Icarus had audiences. I mean, Icarus was sold out, and so on, so forth.

ROBERT BROWN: Does Icarus involve Sky Art as well, indoors?

OTTO PIENE: Well, Icarus is about the theme of Sky Art. Well, not about the theme of Sky Art, it's about Icarus, but still, the Icarus story is some kind of a mascot, or some kind of poetic mascot story of Sky Art. Or if one wants to look at it somewhat more deeply, it's a story about the human urge to fly, to elevate, or to um, to overcome gravity of bodily and mental kinds, so to speak. So, Icarus is just a wonderful story that embodies what's on the mind of, what's in the blood of many sky artists. And the—I should say that the second Sky Art comes in 1982, it's just radically different from the, [00:32:00] from—different than the one at the center, but it was interesting, and it was rewarding for, you know, many participants and it was a certainly a somewhat enlivening experience. Nineteen eighty-three, Munich, the Sky Art Conference happened because I kind of repolled [ph] a series of events that I had been invited to do in Munich for a long time, and I finally said now here is something that I'm offering you as a really new concept for these events that you want to do, and here is the Sky Art Conference and here is something attached to the Sky Art Conference. In turn, the cultural commission of the city of Munich came up with some supporting suggestions, so all of the sudden, they had it together.

ROBERT BROWN: But this was something you had wanted to do for a long time in Munich, or with them.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: This, after all, being the place where you begin your art schooling, right?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, well I didn't begin it there but the—I did, yeah, actually I did, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: So there were those certain homecoming qualities.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, right, and I did the Olympic rainbow in Munich, in 1972.

ROBERT BROWN: You had done that about 10 years before, yeah.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, and that was very important. I did other work in Munich.

ROBERT BROWN: What's it like working in—distinct from here, with an art commission, you just mentioned, in Europe?

OTTO PIENE: Well one thing is that, of course, the general acceptance of culture and the arts in a city like Munich is wonderful and the general acceptance of culture and the arts in Germany is wonderful. The general acceptance of culture and the arts in Europe is wonderful. You don't always have to prove that you're also here and you also have something to say, or at least you have the right to live and work. In that respect it's really different from what it's like in the United States now. It was [00:34:00] certainly different in the United States, say uh, 25 years ago, when New York became the metropolis of all the arts in the world. But right now the arts aren't really quite as naturally accepted as they are in Europe, particularly in Germany, where there's always—as you would look at it from the point of view of an American—money for the arts. Remember Robert Wilson, and how he got all his impossible projects that he couldn't get money for in the United States, financed by essentially government-run or government-supported institutions in Germany, including the city of Munich. So, that's part of the story.

Characteristically, some of the um, errands I had to do in preparation of the Sky Art conferences were to the IRS in Germany, where it had to get exemptions, to make sure we didn't have to pay taxes for what we were doing there, which is also different from how it would be in the United States or in the state of Hawaii, where you pay taxes for the money you receive, no matter whether you are a resident or not, whereas there, we took advantage of a law that says that important cultural, um, message bearers from foreign countries can be exempted because their messages are important. So, we were deemed important and hence, we didn't pay taxes.

ROBERT BROWN: I suppose it's European enough to—its contrast with ours is the uh, inheritance of the traditional patronage by the state, more really about the [inaudible].

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. Munich particularly, prides itself in having hosted the arts forever. Whether it was Ludwig or Maximillian, whoever these people are, and they don't these days talk about how Hitler, you know, appointed them [00:36:00] capital of the movement—that's, that's not what you hear so much about these days.

ROBERT BROWN: No, but that is in fact, their cultural fakeries had continued right, under a new form then, I guess.

OTTO PIENE: Right. And you know, many Americans going to a place like Munich are extremely self-conscious and you know, we had a Jewish population among our artists who were more than self-conscious. Some of the stories that they encountered, I hear today—they didn't tell me then, so on and so forth, because some of these stories aren't funny, um, but then they weren't lovable either. Anyway, the sponsors, um, in Munich were the city of Munich and um, BMW, to my great satisfaction. I learned that MIT had never received any sponsoring from BMW, so I was free to go there and ask for money and I got it.

ROBERT BROWN: Otherwise, MIT doesn't want you approaching them?

OTTO PIENE: Well, MIT has use primae noctis, you know—whoever marries, whoever gets into bed with a new bride, um, has to render the right, or the primae noctis, to MIT first. MIT sleeps with a new bride first, except that in this case, MIT had never heard of BMW, obviously and uh, there was nothing to be apprehensive about. So, a rather small triumph that I had vis-à-vis MIT. Later on, of course, they went there and said you've given to them, now you give to us, and now you give big. [They laugh.] Um, the other sponsors were, I said already, the city of Munich, which was wonderful, and then Digital. Digital here, Digital Route 128, [00:38:00] which was also good. They gave us money before BMW and the city of Munich gave us money, and the Digital Europe. So essentially, we had a good budget and we had good support.

ROBERT BROWN: Now this was a pretty international group as usual, coming from America, at least in the sense that you came with the idea, from the States.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, well sometimes it's handy that I'm international. I mean it's not always that. It's sometimes a great disadvantage in this country, to be German, because anything can always be blamed on a German, particularly one who insists to maintain his German citizenship. So, if anything goes wrong, it's always the damn German who, you know, who is at fault. But on the other hand, it comes with certain um, whatever, poetic license, or as you call it in German, narrenfreiheit, the joker's freedom. And, you know, my fairly lively international connections have certainly worked in favor of the center almost the entire time while I have been the director here. And we have done so many international projects in so many different places, in contrast to what the center did before I came here, when the center was very much focused upon MIT and what you could do out at MIT.

ROBERT BROWN: Does MIT quite know what to make though, sometimes, of your great internationalism?

OTTO PIENE: No. Much of the time they don't know.

ROBERT BROWN: What was it, was there—?

OTTO PIENE: So, some of the time I have to tell them, which is sometimes very funny, that I have to stand there and, and you know, grandstand upon all the great things that we have done, but in a certain way, it's sometimes the only way to do it. Um, I can shove books at them and [00:40:00] you know, and uh—

ROBERT BROWN: I suppose as a good bureaucracy, they expect that practically, to have reports.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. In good time, I found out that that's what most people at MIT do. You know, they tell certain people how good they are and all the good things they have done, and so on and so forth. However, it's particularly necessary when it comes to any kind of cultural mission. You know, the scientists who receive a Nobel Prize don't have to tell anybody at MIT—they know that already. In other words, the sensibility at MIT is really pretty much geared to accomplishments in science and engineering—

ROBERT BROWN: But you have to explain, right?

OTTO PIENE: Rather than to accomplishments in culture and art.

ROBERT BROWN: Was there a particular theme for the Munich Sky Art Conference?

OTTO PIENE: Um, maybe. The, the—one interesting fact was that the locale for the conference was the BMW headquarters, which is a very fancy um, modern art, modern architecture building right by the Olympic stadiums, a very exposed kind of building. It was, at the time, in 1972, it was finished right in time for the Olympics, and because of its shape, it was generally referred to as the four-cylinder building. And um, in the building they have—it's I don't know how many stories, a 30-story building or a 35-story building, or something like that. They have a museum in there, they have a gallery in there, they have lavish conference quarters, so on. And in that respect, it was ideal to be hosted by those people. They, of course, BMW, was increasingly getting involved in the U.S. market. Um, it's hard to think of now, how they, how there may have been times [00:42:00] when BMW was not involved in the U.S. market, but I think that was the very, very blossoming springtime of BMW's um, involvement in American export. So, they loved to have the MIT Sky Art Conference there. I don't think it earned them what they thought it would earn them, because it turned out that we were less MIT than they may have thought we were MIT. However, another feat of that conference was that I succeeded in involving the Max Planck organization. So, in Munich, we worked together with four Max Planck Institutes and um, Max Planck has a total of 50, 60, 100 institutes, I mean it's almost as big as the Smithsonian Institution.

ROBERT BROWN: It's a national consortium of scientific research.

OTTO PIENE: It's a foundation, I think, is essentially what it is. It's like the Smithsonian Institution, except I think somewhat more solidly scientifically oriented. I mean, the Smithsonian Institution is very strongly oriented towards history, towards uh, whatever, national pride and all sorts of things, whereas the Max Planck Institute is a scientific organization.

ROBERT BROWN: They participated—?

OTTO PIENE: We collaborated with, I think, four different Max Planck Institutes in Munich, and I found out that there are lots of relationships between MIT and Max Planck Institutes in Munich. They work in space showings, work together in biology, and God knows what, you know. There's hardly a respectable MIT scientist who hasn't, at one point, been involved with some Max Planck Institute in Germany. And, um, I succeeded in making the—there are really funny [00:44:00] stories on the side. One of the deputy directors of the um, either the Smithsonian Institution? No, I think the Museum of Natural History. I think the second director of the Museum of Natural History in New York turned out to be German, and he then became the director of the Deutsches Museum in Munich, and I asked him to be the honorary chairman of the Sky Art Conference, because he obviously spoke German as well as English, and so on, so forth. And he politely and sweetly but nevertheless declined, upon which I went to the president of the Max Planck Institution in Germany, which is a much more prestigious, um, institution, and he accepted. Not only did Reimar Lüst become the honorary chairman of the third Sky Art Conference in Munich, he also gave a fabulous presentation, because he is a—he used to be a practicing, um, space physicist, and he's done all these fantastic experiments 25 years ago, about um, um, artificial clouds and God knows, things that you know—[inaudible]—wanted to do 15 years later. So he gave a fantastic presentation, but not only that, he also, right after the Sky Art Conference, became the presence of ESA in Paris. So now he's mightier than the president of NASA, and ESA is doing all these unbelievable things.

ROBERT BROWN: The European Space Agency.

OTTO PIENE: The European Space Agency, yeah. So that, that was a very interesting feature of the Munich Sky Art Conference; the collaboration with the Max Planck people, who gave—they recruited about half the conference. [00:46:00] They gave all these presentations on space science and space physics and space chemistry, and stuff like that.

ROBERT BROWN: It sounds as though there were a good deal more formal presentations than there had been at

Linz or here in '81.

OTTO PIENE: There were—no, we had the same following. We had formal presentations at Linz as well. These were just, many of these were really scientifically oriented. They weren't quite as good as I thought they had been, as they would have been. Because it turns out, you know somehow, MIT had more substance than almost anything. That's one thing I learned in that context, which was really quite interesting, although so many scientists from MIT go to the Max Planck Institute. But Planck presentations, they weren't quite as good as some of the MIT presentations were at MIT a couple of years earlier. Anyway, Reimar Lüst was fantastic, we had a fantastic opening. BMW was a fantastic host. We had an outdoor production of Icarus on an outdoor stage, next to a lake, and uh, the outdoor stage seated, in amphitheatrical fashion, something like 2500 every night.

[END OF 5 OF 7 SIDE A.]

OTTO PIENE: [00:00:00] I did this piece, International Alarm, which was you know, this big flying rooster piece, based on what Linz had done with a young composer, Ed Le Poulin, already for the uh, '82 Sky Art Conference in Linz.

ROBERT BROWN: And his name was Ed?

OTTO PIENE: Ed Le Poulin.

ROBERT BROWN: And you called it the national alarm?

OTTO PIENE: The International Alarm.

ROBERT BROWN: International Alarm.

OTTO PIENE: It's—[inaudible]—from many, many places in the world, anywhere between Tobago and Tokyo and Austria and uh, the United States. It's this really beautiful piece. So, there was another focus to the Sky Art Conference, which was that outdoor stage in, in the Munich park, and yet another focus was the uh, the exhibition in the BMW gallery downstairs and the um, there were other elements to the conference, like you know, the spiritual side of it. Mel Alexenberg was there for the first time, in the center conference, and he um—to this date I haven't really understood exactly whether Mel Alexenberg is an ordained rabbi or just somebody who has the right to be ordained because he has studied all the proper, um, books. But he brought into the Sky Art Conference this kind of element of mission and religion, and Sky Art as kind of a religious practice, which was very good and very uh, lively, particularly in context with all the media talk and all the scientific talk, and so on and so forth. So that was another element of the Munich Sky Art Conference.

ROBERT BROWN: He brought in another kind of humanity or something, perhaps.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, that's right, yes indeed. [00:02:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Did he speak to history, or just speak to the occasion of being there, or—?

OTTO PIENE: Yes indeed. I think he was inspired widely by the fact that this was very close to the place where, in 1972, the Israeli team during the Olympics was abducted and later on, ended up being killed or dying in all that. So, there was a lot of tension of that sort, which I think added to the fiber and added to the intensity of that conference. So, all conferences mysteriously happen at the same time of the year, meaning late September, and I mean all the Sky Art conferences.

ROBERT BROWN: You don't know why? It just worked out that way, it's happenstance.

OTTO PIENE: It just worked out that way, it just happened that way. And so, three years later, the fourth Sky Art Conference, which happened again here, again happened about the same time of the year.

ROBERT BROWN: In 1986.

OTTO PIENE: In 1986. And the '86 conference, which was the last in the anticipated series of four Sky Art conferences, was very different, because unlike the first three, we had no money, and I think we probably uh, either inquired, or even ran some applications and didn't get any substantial money in '86, to do the Sky Art Conference with. So, all the artists came on their own, using their lunch money, to be at the conference, and we had more artists than at any one of the previous conferences. We had about 150 artists for the conference, much fewer outside people. It was a much smaller conference, but it was beautiful, with all the presentations happening at the center, and we had something like 50 presentations, mostly by artists, in a nonstop fashion, [00:04:00] with exhibitions, with some events outside, with enormous human climate. The smallest, but maybe poetically, the most beautiful conference, and it ended up producing, somewhat spontaneously, the Sky Art Manifesto that was written at the end of the conference, with the contribution of many people there, and um, endorsed by many people there, actually most people there. And we took this very Sky Art Manifesto to the UNESCO in Paris, where there was a conference happening about a month after our Sky Art Conference, on whatever, the future of space in science and education, something like that—it was a very abstract, somewhat formal conference.

Anyway, we had ourselves invited to that UNESCO Conference, and in the UNESCO Building in Paris, we, you know, published the—and presented in three different languages—the Sky Art Manifesto to that UNESCO Conference, and that was formally, kind of the conclusion of the series of Sky Art conferences.

ROBERT BROWN: That was a very nice conclusion then, wasn't it?

OTTO PIENE: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You presented this manifesto formally uh, or was there a performance?

OTTO PIENE: Formally, yeah, it was presented formally. No, just read and, and translated, and we presented it ourselves in three different languages. Um, it was partly because the—we had very good, I mean wonderful, honorary chairmen [00:06:00] of the conferences each time, and they were very actively participating. They were there, they gave presentations, they were constantly there, milling with the people, talking and giving their own presentations, so on and so forth, so that was quite beautiful.

ROBERT BROWN: They were usually well-known senior figures?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. The first time, at the '81 conference, Doc Edgerton was the honorary chairman. In 1982, Yash Pal, who was the leading figure in Indian, um, physics—and at that time, he even was a candidate to be Minister of Culture and Education in the Indian government. It didn't happen, but he's a wonderful figure. He uh, is also kind of an MIT product, a real kind of wise man, very smart, a beautiful man. He was the chairman in Austria, at the second Sky Art Conference. The third Sky Art Conference, we had Reimar Lüst, then president of the Max Planck Society, and from then on, right thereafter, president of ESA. And the fourth Sky Art Conference, we had—the president was, the honorary president was um, Dr. Daudel, who was the president of the European Academy of Arts, Sciences, and the Humanities, and he was a very fine figure to have. He also gave a very engaged presentation here, and then he was instrumental in getting us to the UNESCO Conference, where would, um, present the manifesto. End of Sky Art conferences, and I said at the time, I'll never do a Sky Art Conference again, it's too much work, too much trouble, too much responsibility. In Munich, I ended up paying money out of my own pocket, because some people had done some bad negotiations for the artwork production, and so on, so forth, but those were all minor details. I mean it's just an exhausting business, to get all this stuff together, and to get all the people there, and to find the money [00:08:00] and to organize, and so on and so forth, that I thought four is enough, I'll never do a conference again.

ROBERT BROWN: It has been a cumulative—there was a cumulative effect that was very good.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, it was excellent. I mean now, everybody thinks Sky Art has been around forever and everybody has known the word forever, and so on, so forth.

ROBERT BROWN: And the residual effects, what would you say they have been?

OTTO PIENE: The proliferation of sky artists and Sky Art, and new things, new developments. Um, an opening we had at the—here, at the fourth, 1986, we had a contingent from NASA actually. That was a first for—that was the particular feature of that conference as well, to have the president of the European Academy of Arts and Science to be the honorary president and have a NASA contingent here to talk about Sky Art—I mean, space stuff from the point of view of NASA. This was before Challenger, um, and so on, so forth, but it's thereafter that—after the Challenger disaster, that now Lowry has had his—[inaudible]—on NASA and so on, so forth, this thing goes on. And um, anyway, so, no more Sky Art conferences. In the meantime, in 1987, a group of artists in Anchorage, Alaska staged the Alaska Sky Art Festival, and that has happened ever since. Now, this year, I'm going for the fourth time, and that's kind of a mini Sky Art Conference.

ROBERT BROWN: And what's your role there—is it simply one artist?

OTTO PIENE: I go there as an artist and as a participant in panels and stuff. Um, it's certainly not as global as, as it has been here, as the ones that we organized, we have organized. But the emphasis is on action, is on big events, and I've done some of my most beautiful Sky Events out there in Alaska. Every time we do it the weather is excellent. The three good days of summer they have in Alaska is when we do the Sky Art [00:10:00] Festival in Alaska. Now, to finish the theme of conferences, um, now we're getting ready for the, what I call—it will probably be my parting shot as director of the center. We do the global, the ultimate, the exhaustive, the conclusive conference in arts, science, technology, um, again, probably with people present from everywhere. And this time we're going to make it a point that we'll have many people from Russia, from Yugoslav, from the areas of God knows where, on the theme of arts, science, technology again. However, the specific clientele we are addressing, we're trying to bring together, are people from all the new art, science, technology centers that are now emerging all over the world. There is for instance, there is a new hochschule, uh, kunsthochschule actually, for media in Cologne happening. I'm the chairman of the uh, um—

ROBERT BROWN: Board of advisors?

OTTO PIENE: Board of advisors, um, which is very much modeled after what has happened here. There are two other centers like that happening in Germany. In other words, in Germany, there are three—or maybe if we count right, even four, major new centers. All of them have much more money than we have ever had, um, sponsored by government, sponsored by cities, sponsored by states and industry, and so on and so forth, and that's happening in quite a few other countries as well. There's a group from Denmark coming two weeks from now, who are establishing a center at the Danish uh, [00:12:00] technological state institute. There are these places in numerous countries, I mean in England there are several centers happening, in France, of course there was this whole post-Pompidou movement in art and technology—there's quite a few places there. Um, I just refused to write an expertise on a new university for art, science, technology in Leon, and stuff like that. It's just popping. It's almost somewhat scary, you know, how everybody is going to art, science and technology, but I guess it has to do with the fact that the wealth of just about every country these days depends on whether they have a developed industry and a developed science, and whether their culture can indeed, um, reconcile life with those developments.

ROBERT BROWN: So it includes life sciences as well, doesn't it, and ecology and all that.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. We, at this center—I mean, I'm trying to tell people at these new centers, to not concentrate on the media, to not concentrate on hardware, to not concentrate on computers, do not concentrate on electronic art alone. They should please remember that there's the medical arts, there is biology, there is ecology, there is the total environment, there's the sanity or the sky, that is as important to us as it is to have developed media, and to have it smoothly run on tasteful national television, so on and so forth. So I guess that's part of the message that we're trying to disseminate here—that people should please not get hooked up with the computer industry alone, or get hooked up with the media alone, meaning the things that, in part, we worried about 25 years ago, but that the life sciences, in a certain way, most—that simply say [00:14:00] most important to us now, and that they do, in a certain way, they do more for human life and the human body and the human, um, sanity, than you know, all this information industry. Because after all, people are now designed to live until 100 and so on, so forth. I've said that before, it's pretty funny, but um, it's the U.S. television, the media again, tell us every morning, meaning NBC, that was the Today Show, on comes Buddy Dillet [ph] whatever his name is, um, and congratulates all those who have made it to be 100, 101, 102, and so on. That's the new design, essentially that's the ideal, that's the model, so to speak, that the media are spreading for people to live accordingly and um, that's mostly the accomplishment of life sciences, of medicine.

ROBERT BROWN: So not ignore it. Otherwise, if the fellows were to ignore that they would just be working small changes, say in the information sciences. You want them to leap.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. I mean, it's perfectly fine that MIT has got a media lab, but I think the Media Lab is on the wrong track, essentially just promoting what the mail has done forever. I think our fellows, like Todd Siler, who um, worried about connections between the brain and nuclear physics, are much more to the point, or Elizabeth, when she goes into the psychology of suffering, or the psychology of loss, or diminishment of the senses, so when she goes into, you know, what the laser can do as a healing instrument and so on—those are important developments. Or you know, what Doug [ph] Davis does when he um, he attempts to send, as a universal message into the universe [00:16:00] the digitized phenomenon of vaginal contractions, and stuff like that. I mean that's, that's what our fellows do now, and I find that much more interesting than more computer graphics or more media-slick performance and so on, so forth. Anyway, enough talk about conferences. [Audio break.]

ROBERT BROWN: April 28, 1979. [Audio break.]

ROBERT BROWN: Further about the Center for Advanced Visual Studies. It's not simply a program or a graduate program.

OTTO PIENE: Well, it's a graduate program, and it's a program.

ROBERT BROWN: But more importantly, isn't it something else?

OTTO PIENE: You know it's basically convictions [ph], but quite importantly, it is a voluntary group, invited group, of individuals who volunteer to work together, and also work together voluntarily with other people who volunteer to work with the people at the center, meaning scientists, engineers, scholars, graduate students from other parts of MIT and other parts of academic and other institutions here—meaning in Boston—but also elsewhere, including elsewhere in other places of the world.

ROBERT BROWN: And you've mentioned that the program itself is of secondary importance. You've said elsewhere, that the students should follow their own instincts, explore new media.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, following their own instincts is not always, um, [00:18:00] guaranteed to be successful, meaning following their own instincts as far as impulse, energy, momentum, drive is concerned, and otherwise, follow the guidance of, um, teachers and older, should I say, senior artists, but also equals, peers, community. Among students, when it comes to the graduate program, the fellow students are as important as the sympathizing, and sometimes hosting, fellows, um, at the center, or faculty or programs, or academic structure, and that is very much in keeping with my experience as a student. When I was a student, what I learned in art school was less important than um—let's say, what I learned in art school, like the Munich Academy or the Dusseldorf Academy, what I learned from my teachers was less important than the inspiration and the mutual generation of energy that I experienced from and with my fellow students. And by the way, the one school where I really learned, where I really was a student and I was really taught important things, was Cologne University, where I started, mostly started university and just not only felt the being in school, but also practiced being a student and learning from teachers, meaning um, informed and competent, and [00:20:00]—some of them—inspired professors. And it felt like being in school, rather than how it felt in art school, where I and some of my students usually felt that we had to teach the teachers, because we felt we knew more and better than they did, and in a certain way that was really true. So, um, so much about the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, because the fellows here are here because they want to be here. The fellows are here as long as they can be here, that—

ROBERT BROWN: What's that dependent on?

OTTO PIENE: It's a result of how they want to be here, that depends on fellowships, grants, foundations, that grant residencies, and it depends on how much time they can stay away from the country of their origin, and it depends on how fascinating the work is that they are developing here. We've had fellows who were here for three months, but we've also had fellows who never wanted to leave—many of them, actually most of them.

ROBERT BROWN: What did you do in those cases? There are some, you've suggested that were better—

OTTO PIENE: Well, some of them, some of them become, uh, faculty and staff at MIT, and others become research staff at the center, and some of them just are fellows for a long, long time, and then most of them have to leave one way or another, because the status of fellow is theoretically limited to a maximum three years, just as it is limited to a minimum three months. But the general experience is that fellows—once they're here, once they've really worked themselves into the inspirational pattern, the inspirational [00:22:00] flow of energies, at the center of MIT, they develop work in a way that hardly permits going back, because the resources and the correspondence with other minds and laboratories and institutes and, and uh, instruments is not easily available in other places. And what happens in other places isn't always quite as good as it is here.

I just read an invitation today that is urging people to participate in a conference in Montreal, and it's sponsored by UNESCO and it's the third in a series and it tells us that the main—the focus of the conference, of so many people for so much time, a well-endowed conference, the focus is the computer. This is after we had fellows here working on computers almost at the start of the center. Um, and the topic, meaning the theme as formulated, obviously, with the endorsement of UNESCO, is training artists to be creative with the help of computers. Now, in a document like that, to find the first word, training, makes me think that people wear dog tags or dog ears as they go in there, because I always thought that training was reserved for the military and maybe police, but beyond that, it will not be applied to people [00:24:00] who want to be artists or um, or develop educational programs. I always thought that if you can do anything with a computer in this context, it might be education, it might be education. I'm sure computers are very good for training, but you can't train people to be creative. So anyway, it's very much in contrast to what we have seen as our purpose at the center, that is to pick up um, impulse from modern scientific and technological developments—to pick up new media and to help develop new media and hold them up against the light and see whether they can indeed support, sometimes inspire, new expression. Um, whether that is creative or not will turn out after a while. And um, one major asset in this context is that people at this center are free to work, they're free to move in whatever direction they want to move. This is the most tolerant place and it encourages individual development as much as anybody can encourage that, and that also goes for the graduate program, in which every graduate student is really very different from the next. They are all becoming individuals and again, if they're a group and they're a group of voluntary individuals, not a group that is cast together or that is um, that is directed together or that is forced to be together. What the center does, it provides chances, [00:26:00] it provides inspiration, it provides neighborhoods, it provides congeniality, it provides generators, so to speak, of mental and um, individual and artistic energy, but it does not provide directives that approach the nature of regulations or um, law.

ROBERT BROWN: How does this sit with the institution, with MIT? Have there ever been times when they've wanted something more programmed, more directed?

OTTO PIENE: I don't think there has uh, been much of a discussion on that. What the institute has had problems understanding is that, you know, the art that is being encouraged here is different from what some people understand to be art, once they start learning, quote unquote, the arts. If you can apply any cliché term to the work being done at the center, it's usually in the nature of avant-garde art, meaning it's art in evolution, it is art in the process of becoming. It is not the practice of habitual art and it's not the practice of traditional—not even traditional art, although we definitely do not doubt the value of tradition, and we do not doubt the value of traditional art, but we do doubt the value of conventional art and we do doubt the value of, [00:28:00] of um, mindless habits or routine in the arts. [Audio break.]

To go back to MIT, the MIT administration is not the center administration. The MIT administration sometimes consists of people who favor the arts, but that doesn't mean they understand the arts. Even if they understand the arts, it doesn't mean they understand us. So there has been conflict as to first of all, the administration knowing or not knowing whether what we do is art. Sometimes, knowing or not knowing what we do is good, because how do you know it's good if it is not what you've been taught or what you've read in books, to be good in art? Um, so sometimes the value of the center's work has been doubted um, at MIT, and I have had to stand up to that or against that, and there have been various ways of doing that. First of all, Kepes, when he founded the center, he had secured the sympathy of the MIT administration, at a time when MIT, like other universities, was under fire. He was some kind of a mediator between um, the youthful forces within and without MIT and—

ROBERT BROWN: At a time of unrest, student unrest.

OTTO PIENE: That's right.

ROBERT BROWN: The later '60s, yeah.

OTTO PIENE: Although, you know, there may have been criticism of Kepes from the camp of the arts, there was never a doubt that he was representing very good, and in this case we can really say, creative forces, um, as a somewhat alternative to [00:30:00] the military industrial establishment that also constituted a different pole in the MIT picture at the time. And I think that was a very wise choice of the MIT administration at the time, to enable Kepes to form the Center for Advanced Visual Studies as a visible gesture on the one hand and as a true, honest and genuine creative effort. At the time, vis-à-vis the time, but also within the context of the 20th century, because it was the first and only and unique founding of this integrated, um, integrating opportunity for artists, scientists and engineers—not only at the time. It was the first effort and the first successful founding of a place like this, period; there has been no other place before it. And in a certain way, you know, almost 25 years after um—certainly 25 years after Kepes' initial efforts of founding the center, the center is still the place in which I understand the efforts at integration are the most genuine, the most clearly understood and intellectually pure, so to speak, free of industrial, um, bias and funding bias, [00:32:00] and bias of opportunity, and bias of national interests, and bias of intellectual interests.

ROBERT BROWN: How has fundraising been? How have you done that and Kepes, how he had done that, to avoid the military industrial pressures you just were alluding to?

OTTO PIENE: Well initially, Kepes had friends, he just got some grants from, from some people he knew, who at the time weren't quite as clearly identified as they would be now, and then he got some very good support from an initially laudable [ph] grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. There were some good grants that sustained the center over the first couple of years. MIT gave them some money too.

ROBERT BROWN: And how have you kept it funded—from what sources, what kind of sources?

OTTO PIENE: Too many different sources and it's never been enough, um, because we always have had to write many applications and to respond to many invitations, um, to keep the center afloat. We have had good grants but never exhaustive grants, from the National Endowment for the Arts. We've had precious little, practically no money from the Massachusetts Council for the Arts and Humanities, which in my view is a massive failure, and—

ROBERT BROWN: You mean it gives to the wrong sort of thing?

OTTO PIENE: The work is most, is most—if any of the artists in Massachusetts that I know did not vote for Dukakis, it was because he permitted an essentially corrupt Council for the Arts in Massachusetts; very much in contrast to the [00:34:00] National Endowment, which is also—which is mostly a very, um, dedicated place of integrity.

ROBERT BROWN: Whereas this became politicized.

OTTO PIENE: Politicized, became um, self-serving to the administrators of the council, and essentially discouraged Massachusetts independent creative, genuine efforts to formulate arts that were at home in Massachusetts, such as the development of art and technology, which is really something that, that occurred here before it occurred elsewhere.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean it, it gave money to things that you could find many other places?

OTTO PIENE: Totally routine.

ROBERT BROWN: Routine, conventional.

OTTO PIENE: Conventional stuff. Um, and you know, favored art at SoHo, which you know was intellectually, has been intellectually, half a century behind what we are doing here, so on and so forth, so Mass Council for the Arts has been an unfortunate development and an unfortunate, um, incidental part of Massachusetts government.

ROBERT BROWN: By now, do you have—?

OTTO PIENE: My private view is that Dukakis lost the election because he didn't have the integrity that would have carried him, um, to the top. Um, probably not entirely his fault but manifest in something like the Mass Council for the Arts. Because the arts, after all, if they are great, they say a lot about, um, a time [00:36:00] and a place and the pride and integrity that is to carry people's lives. So, there was something wrong there. Anyway, so much, so much about the Mass Council for the Arts, which is a lousy institution that, that cannot be criticized enough.

ROBERT BROWN: Have you, uh, however—?

OTTO PIENE: And by the way, I went protesting the withdrawal, the threatened withdrawal of funds by the state, by the legislature, from the Council for the Arts. What I'm saying here is not self-serving or is not against the institution.

ROBERT BROWN: In principle, a council would be a good thing, right?

OTTO PIENE: That's right. I'm just talking about the lousy conduct of those who have been conducting business there, it has been very bad.

ROBERT BROWN: Have you by now, got some sort of friends of the center, or some organizations?

OTTO PIENE: Oh yeah, to cover the funding, um, we have worked with the city of Boston, we have worked with the city of Cambridge. We have worked with some very prominent organizations for a while, and I think it will never entirely go away. We have had the um, sympathy and support of the Rockefeller Foundation, which was most important to the center in terms of money, but more so even in terms of prestige. We have had quite a few fellows who were supported by the Rockefeller Foundation. The center has had grants that we would then turn into individual fellowships, from the Rockefeller Foundation. We have had many Guggenheim fellows, we've had—we have worked with—I mean, we've had real friends in those foundations, thank goodness, and they have really been, they've been intelligent, they have been supportive, they have been congenial, they have um, [00:38:00] displayed and practiced vision. And sometimes, with the help of, the help and support and endorsement of people at MIT. You know, at some time I needed endorsement from MIT to get another grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. So I went to David Sachs, the chairman of the MIT Corporation and he supported us and stood up and said this is good, please continue to support it, so on, so forth. So, you know, MIT sometimes has been very supportive and very sympathetic, and at other times MIT has been very bad. I guess that kind of reflects daily business anywhere in the world.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, true. But when it began, was the president here at MIT Stratton, James Stratton?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, he was very good.

ROBERT BROWN: He was very supportive.

OTTO PIENE: Of Kepes at the time. It was a very critical time and Kepes enjoyed his uh, sympathy. Before Stratton it was Killian, who was also very supportive.

ROBERT BROWN: James Killian, yeah. Thereafter were they more of a mixed record?

OTTO PIENE: Well then Wiesner became president and Wiesner had the great disadvantage that he is the brilliant politician, tactician. We know that he was a science presidential advisor for what, three different U.S. presidents. Unfortunately, he then attempted to apply his skills to the arts and that was really unfortunate.

ROBERT BROWN: Really?

OTTO PIENE: Um, because he still thinks, I think, he understands the arts, and at some point, I did tell him in public that unfortunately, Jerry, you don't understand the arts and artists, and um, I still hold the very same opinion, if anything, more so [00:40:00] now.

ROBERT BROWN: Did this have unfortunate effects on—for the center?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, it had. It led to the splitting up of some of the initially, the affiliated groups that were to uh, form what's now called the Media Lab. Initially, that was to be the MIT Center for the Arts. And um, people like Wiesner got support from the National Endowment, pretending, or thinking that they were supporting the arts. In the end it ended up being supporting industry and—supporting industry and industrial interests, defense and the Pentagon and Japanese television, you know lots of—

ROBERT BROWN: Well that's what the Media Lab is essentially in the pocket of.

OTTO PIENE: Lots of people are essentially technological engineering.

ROBERT BROWN: Sort of contracts.

OTTO PIENE: Promoters and um, some of the work they do is respectable, is interesting, is necessary, is part of our times, but it does very little for the arts.

ROBERT BROWN: But initially, they were to have been together with you, initially had that idea.

OTTO PIENE: Well, it does the arts a disfavor when it either calls itself art, or pretends to be serving the arts. Then the real intellectual, um, schisms not only happen, but also become apparent, and some of that has really done a disfavor to the arts at MIT, and a disfavor to the arts in, in Boston, even in Massachusetts, even in the nation, and it sometimes, at times, has made life at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies difficult and hard, really hard, because we had to spend a lot of time explaining to people where the arts are and what the arts are, and that—this is not a field and a case in which computers [00:42:00] replace people, in which programming replaces mind processes, because you cannot replace imagination, you cannot replace vision.

ROBERT BROWN: And did Wiesner fail to see this, so to speak?

OTTO PIENE: He had no projection. He failed to see this essentially, uh, the way I see it, because he's a power maniac, he's a real player. He is somebody who has got accustomed since the days of radar, and he has got accustomed to the fact, to the habit of viewing himself as an unconquerable power player, a chess king.

ROBERT BROWN: And he wanted more power through—

OTTO PIENE: Chess king. He wanted to direct the arts, and he wanted to tell the arts what to do, as he is telling, in a certain way, people in engineering what to do. You know, some of his convictions are, are certainly neighboring on what we feel at the center, when it comes to politics and when it comes to nuclear defense and peace, um, advocacy and so on, so forth, but those are very general values and very, very, very simple convictions that are easy to subscribe and there's no debate about those ever among the artists, most artists I know—I shouldn't say all artists, but many artists. However, when it comes to art, science, technology and what art does now and in the future, vis-à-vis those, then of course we have the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, have a lifelong experience of, the vision of, on the one hand the artists present here—there are still a number between 20 and 25 at any given time[00:44:00]—and the body of artists who were here during the past over 20 years—beginning about 170, 180 fellows and about 60 or 70 um, graduate students—we have much more to say and we have much more competent understanding, in understanding the arts and understanding the future of the arts and the resulting applications to education and to future policy and to implementation. Then, an occasional inspired administrator or inspired political force of a man who thinks he will do that too, because he just happens to be a smart, um, president or former president.

ROBERT BROWN: So he's essentially a passing person, whereas now there's an accretion, a force or accretion of the present and past fellows and graduate students.

OTTO PIENE: The Media Lab, in the meantime, it's just about history.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean it's petering out?

OTTO PIENE: Well no, I mean they're very successful as, as a place catering to Japanese industry, um, but they're certainly an almost a matter of the past for the arts, because they represent, you know, one development of the arts that has become rather common, but that's never been a question because they—you know that development in the arts, mainly using computers, started here at least 20 years ago, when Stan VanDerBeek was here or Paul Earls did his initial computer programs for performance, for lasers, for all this. It then was an intellectual issue. Then, people were indeed debating whether a computer is [00:46:00] humane enough or is humanistic enough, to be inserted in the art process, and we have always advocated the intelligent use of new tools and new media to be helpful in the arts.

ROBERT BROWN: But now it's not an avant-garde issue at all.

OTTO PIENE: No, not at all.

[END OF 5 OF 7 SIDE B.]

ROBERT BROWN: [00:00:00] Despite these various embroilments, it has maintained its independence, and you said there are 20 to 25 fellows here now.

OTTO PIENE: It's a constant struggle, I mean nobody knows how much of a struggle it is to maintain—how much of a struggle it is all the time, to maintain the independence of the center, and you know, intellectual and artistic and creative independence translates, at a place like this, immediately into administrative structures and patterns and bureaucratic practice, and so far, so good. I just wish that I will very soon find a very strong successor who you know, will practice the spirit of independence as stubbornly as I have. It takes a lot of, of um, force and energy, to, to be the David constantly. It's almost like a role model, to constantly practice being the David, vis-à-vis all these Goliaths with lots of money, with lots of technological power, with lots of academic status, influence, records and statistics, um, to maintain, you know, the artistic vision, which is as important to the world now as it was in 1967. However, there are some rewards, if we want to look at them that way. One is that um, there are many institutes and schools and programs these days, and of course the number is [00:02:00] growing constantly, that essentially—that are essentially modeled after this very Center for Advanced Visual Studies. Most of them are bigger, maybe not better. We have—that's something we have yet to see. Most of them have much more money than we have, and they are trying to you know, practice many of theexperiences that we have passed on.

ROBERT BROWN: Are they more heavily supported, generally speaking, by their own institutions, than you have been?

OTTO PIENE: Well, I mean, for instance there is what's called the, um—

ROBERT BROWN: You were just in Cologne.

OTTO PIENE: It's called [inaudible] für Künstlermedia [ph] in Karlsruhe, which is a creation—if you can call it that, because it hasn't fully existed yet, but it has stated working towards its realization, something like six or seven years ago. It's a creation by the state of um, Baden-Württemberg, which is I think the richest state in Germany. They host such companies as Mercedes and, and uh, IBM Germany, which by the way is the most prosperous of all IBM operations. And they started out in life, so to speak, with an endowment of—and this is kind of a rough figure and is almost more symbolic than, than uh, budgetarily proved. They started out with an endowment of about 100 million marks. That's how they started, and they still don't have it together, but that's, you know, that's kind of the way people operate these days when they hear about art, science, technology, and of course they want to do it bigger, better, so on and so forth. So, whereas this center, [00:04:00] and that is Kepes's merit, Kepes fought for that partly with personal sacrifice. He was very sick before the center finally, um, came to life. This center—the building was remodeled initially, with a grand total of $250,000, that's it. Um, we're still in the same building and we haven't been remodeled since. Our walls haven't even been painted by MIT. If the walls gets painted here, we do it ourselves. However, to build the Media Lab for instance, which is kind of a bastardized art effort initially, cost $28 million. So if you multiply it by four, meaning if you divide by $250,000.

ROBERT BROWN: You've got um, over a hundred times.

OTTO PIENE: That gets you about a hundred times more.

ROBERT BROWN: Just for their shell of the building.

OTTO PIENE: That's right. So, that's how the world has become better and that's how the pure human spirit has uh, excelled since.

ROBERT BROWN: But you have said that all these progenies in a sense, speak well for the center.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, I think so. And um, judgment is of course up to others, but for instance, I mean if that's an authority, a friend of mine, a friend of the center, Dr. Manfred Schneckenburger—who has been the chief commissioner of the Documenta, the world's most important global art exhibition, twice or three times—has said lately and not to me but to others, that this center is the only model, the only valid model for [00:06:00] um, efforts in education in the integration of art, science, technology and the consequences for art and the consequences in its social and societal context, and of course for education. So, those are big words. Um, and um, I know from other people that they feel the same, but that doesn't mean that everybody feels like that, not at all. Many people think we are off the wall still. Many people think that if we move from, let's say, practicing integration of lasers, computers, um, holograohy, video and the consequences, into our processes—in other words, if we go beyond that and we now have artists who have very inspired ideas and do art accordingly, using media and insights from say, genetic engineering or medical process and technology, or um, developing concepts of relationships between brain and physics and art, then many people think, just as they thought 20 years ago, the use of computers was silly and the practice of video was silly. They now think that, you know, the art is looking to genetics and into medical um, process, that that's equally silly as what they thought then. So, in other words, what I call the evolving [00:08:00] interest and the evolving vitality of art practice and art—I used the word once, research—goes on. It's the process of evolution. The process of evolution doesn't stop.

ROBERT BROWN: And you're pleased naturally, with that.

OTTO PIENE: And I see young people who are doing beautiful things, and everybody does different things, and that tells me that you know this—since we are talking about the center—the center is alive, the cell is productive, the center is productive. The center is, is continuing evoking life, receiving life, and um, producing new life. So yes, no matter what the industrialists and the technologists think—because they are now on the plane that we were on a long time ago—there are new things happening. I'm not saying that we are the only ones who think we are—I'm not saying we are the only ones with a vision, we are not. I'm not saying we are the only ones who have an instinct for the future. However, I am saying that we have sustained this instinct and that we still have a lot to say, to convey, and that's why so many people are looking at us and are curious about what we are doing. This entire field that has evolved from the center, they are just beginning to make sense to other people, the whole field of Sky Art, the whole field of artists involvement in space, the whole field of telecommunications. Those are just the beginnings as we can read them here, according to what we have jotted down, so to speak, but they will increasingly [00:10:00] develop their magic to others, so that more and more people are um, seeing those visions and those fields as well. I think at some past time—I've talked about Sky Art, for instance, and how we started the Sky Art Conference with so many people participating and then five years later, we had a much, much smaller conference, with much less money but three times as many artists as we had in the initial conference. All of these developments are pretty interesting to look at and are somewhat reassuring as to how, the one other thing [ph] we have formulated is indeed catching.

ROBERT BROWN: In all this you've talked about we quite a lot, but what about your own role as a leader? What do you think has been so vital in your—what vital role have you played would you think, in various ways?

OTTO PIENE: Well, I mean, first of all, somebody asked me, why are you here? And I said well, um, you know, a colleague of mine, who was an occasional fellow at some, some point, uh, termed me an integrated force, and that was a very quick way of pointing at the fact that I've had a somewhat seminal role in—besides my own work and my personal statements—as an integrator. First there was Group Zero and then um, there were elements of light art and environmental art that I have defined or helped define, [00:12:00] and then I came to the Center for Advanced Visual Studies and obviously, I've been here as a director for a long time. One thing Kepes said to me when I was here for a year or a year and a half, and I told Kepes I wanted to leave because it was too difficult to make a living in Boston, he said, you can't leave because—I mean, this is almost verbatim he said, "You can't leave because you are the center." It's a very nice way of tying somebody to the pole. Kepes was, he was very um—he is a very intelligent human partner. He knew how to fascinate people and how to kind of hold them to their commitments to the center. I guess I am the one who, who has been held to his commitment to the center most enduringly. And as I said, I've now been the director for almost 15 years. And the one field in which obviously, you know, I have taken a very active and almost aggressive role in forming and defining, it is Sky Art, including the term and including the publications and the conferences, and so on and so forth. And I see that, in a certain way, as the most artistic um, accomplishment in my integrating role. I see that almost as a more artistic accomplishment than um, looking at the center, because the center as a whole, is much more diverse and the role of holding the center together and on the hand expanding it and making it grow, and on the other hand, defending it [00:14:00] against so many adverse forces, in a certain way, does not take artistic imagination only. It also takes an enduring human persistence and it's almost more just generally human qualities that are needed to hold this place together, than just artistic vision. You know, we've had people with artistic vision, with considerable artistic vision, at the center, but many of them didn't stay; they just went on to their various um, places where they felt they wanted to work next, so to speak. But I do feel that it takes a fairly enduring character, a fairly enduring, um, tenacity, to sit here and keep the place alive and keep it intact for a long time. Another thing that—we've talked about conferences and how they have had a very strong role in, let's say, sparking and re-sparking our energy, as well as passing the spark.

ROBERT BROWN: But you have an ability to meet people.

OTTO PIENE: Another thing I've done within the center, within MIT, is that I have initially, together with Negroponte and—[inaudible]—formed this graduate program that didn't exist before, leading to a degree called MS, master of science in visual studies. That's the one and only art, graduate art program at MIT, and out of it, many interesting young people have become individual beautiful artists doing beautiful, very personal, very [00:16:00] um, clearly defined work. And I guess I have attracted many friends to the center. I mean the funding of the center is almost the most—I mean that's the work that has cost me the most effort, because I wasn't raised as a banker or a fundraiser or a money man, or any one of those things. I've probably failed to be a very prosperous artist by choosing to be the director of the center instead, and providing the money that it takes to keep this place alive, because at some point MIT was through just about all the funds from the center, and MIT was in a slump. MIT did what all people do when they are in a slump; they cut the funds for the arts and then they cut the funds for education. It's not so easy at MIT, to cut the funds for education.

ROBERT BROWN: For education, yeah.

OTTO PIENE: So what do they do? The cut the funds out. We found ourselves, at one point, with almost no money from MIT, and at a time when everybody says there is no money in this country for the arts, which is a metaphor. Of course, there is some money for the arts in this country, but there is certainly less money for the arts in this country now than there was 10 years ago or 20 years ago. Um, it is, to somebody like me—maybe to some people, it's not difficult at all, although I doubt it. It's not easy to raise between $250,000 and $750,000 every year, which is almost like earning it, because you know, sometimes the center operates like a business, without a profit, [00:18:00] meaning much of this money has to be earned, much of this money has to come out of projects, but nobody takes anything home. Um, so that's something that to me, has been a fairly engaged and sometimes enraging effort, and it still appears to be working somehow.

ROBERT BROWN: What about spreading the gospel? I mean, you've mentioned that you have a number of progeny elsewhere and you've said they speak well for the center. Did you actively encourage others to set up similar integrated places that would permit the individual to seek things?

OTTO PIENE: Well first of all, some of our former fellows have, you know have found incentives in recent years. I mean there's Takis for instance, who supposedly hasn't seen it, but he's initially written me lots of letters.

ROBERT BROWN: Takis.

OTTO PIENE: Has a center in NASA. It's not finished yet but it's supposedly going to be big and good and strong.

ROBERT BROWN: A center for—an intellectual center, as much a—not a production center.

OTTO PIENE: No, a center, also a production center for the—for art, science, technology. Then um, you know, many people who used to be at the center have become very influential academic heads of departments, deans and all that, so that's definitely in the nature of spreading the gospel. If I had to sit down and had the time, I probably, I can probably list a lot of things of this nature that have a very direct connection to the center or the history of the center. Then, of course, I tend to mention the things that to other people are banal. To some people it's not a big deal to raise [00:20:00] between $250 and $750 a year.

ROBERT BROWN: Thousand dollars you mean.

OTTO PIENE: Two-hundred fifty and $750,000 a year, right. To some people that's trivial. To do it in the arts may be a little less trivial. To do it here, if you look at it closely and you realize what it takes, most people will probably decide it's not trivial at all. But, um, I think spreading the gospel has to do with other things like, you know, all the manifestations, exhibitions, festivals, celebrations we have done, in many places, in many parts of the world. We have been in many places. We also have published a lot of stuff; I have written a lot of stuff. When I went to school, people thought I'd become a writer. I've probably written more than a lot of writers. Um, and much of it has been written in the service of new ideas, of new experiences of the center—of myself as well, but much of it of the center. We have published catalogues. I have published books, and you know my books, co-authored books, go back to my first days as a, as a maturing artist. I started publishing things, meaning Zero 1, 2, 3, in the second year of my independent career as an artist, my independent work, life as an artist, in 1958. Now, we are more than 30 years later and I'm still writing a lot, I'm still um, encouraging publishing. And at the center, if you look—if you pile up [00:22:00] the modest format publications that came out of the center, they're not even as impressive as the, as the Zero reprint that DuMont and MIT Press did some 15 years ago, but if you pile up the catalogues of the center, it's a fairly impressive pile, ranging from say the Art Transition catalogue—I looked at the Art Transition catalogue yesterday and it looks pretty good today, meaning 15 years later. No, not 15, um, 14 years later.

ROBERT BROWN: And these are, these catalogues, these catalogues are statements, they're not merely listings.

OTTO PIENE: Most of the Sky Art Conference catalogues are really more in the nature of what people used to call manifestos than of scientific essays or publications. They usually have some sort of missionary, um, effect to them. And with many catalogues, we started out with a pile of—cartons of catalogs that you would think would never go away, and if you go to our basement now and see how many of the cartons are left, you realize most of them have indeed gone away and have had some sort of a proliferating um, effect.

ROBERT BROWN: And what effects, for example, what kind of effects have some of these writings had, that have come back, you've become aware of?

OTTO PIENE: Well, a good—I mean, outside the center, I think if you look at, at Zero, obviously it's an historical, it's an historic movement now.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, but it's—

OTTO PIENE: That you find in all art histories [00:24:00] as—[crosstalk].

ROBERT BROWN: But in its time, it had an immediate and penetrating effect.

OTTO PIENE: At the time obviously, it had a penetrating effect that had less to do with the publications but with the effect of the exhibitions, the manifestations and what have you. Now, something very similar has happened with the center—that is, the center has had, over the years, exhibitions, conferences, celebrations, in many places, and um, we just finished the Lights of the World exhibition that we did commission by the Yeshiva University Museum in New York City. And the catalogue looked at today still looks pretty good, after it had been published originally a year and a half ago. But more interestingly, the show has not been reviewed by any New York critic, because the Yeshiva University Museum is too far away from 57th Street.

ROBERT BROWN: Did that—that's a good bit of the explanation, they're off the, out of the beaten path?

OTTO PIENE: I don't know. I don't know, but the show as such endured in the museum, commissioned and paid for, for one year and five months. It's the only kinetic, new media, electronics and laser inflatables, and video exhibition that I know, that has held up beautifully and technically, competently, for that long a period of time. It makes me think of the kinetic exhibitions, the initial global kinetic exhibitions that I experienced in Europe, made and organized by Pontus Hultén or somebody, the Stedelijik Museum in Amsterdam in 19, what was it '58 or '59? Half the exhibition was downed at all times, et cetera, et cetera. So, in that respect, I think we have—in that respect and in other respects, we have really built a reputation that we have made [00:26:00] sense, besides being inspired and being—if anything, we had this exhibition in Germany last year called Otto Piene and the Center for Advanced Visual Studies. It's the first time that an exhibition like that had page-long reviews in the most respected papers, so it was intellectually, artistically, finally things sank in and people realized that this is something that has obviously generated a lot of response and new spirit and new attention, and so on and so forth.

ROBERT BROWN: In this country, you don't get that kind of press, as witnessed at the Yeshiva University show.

OTTO PIENE: Every now and then. No, not at all, but initially, in other places, we also have good response. When, for instance, the only time the Museum of Fine Arts in New York has—in Boston has had a true "avant-garde" exhibition, that's when Virginia Gunter, in 1971, organized Earth, Air, Fire Water: Elements of Earth. That was a fantastic exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts. Never before, never after, God knows what made them decide they wanted to do this—this was fantastic. Virginia, she even says in her forward, that the exhibition was essentially inspired by my work and the exhibition I had at the Howard Wise Gallery in New York that was called Elements. At that time, when things were generally friendly towards the arts, we had also, long and excellent reviews in the New York Times and stuff like that. I think in this country, it has to do with the change of the times. We've had so many years of Reagan, you know whose main accomplishment before he was president was to play cowboy roles, um, [00:28:00] and I've often said, isn't it ironic that the arts have it so bad when finally, an artist is president of this nation. Things weren't very good for the arts then, but now, there's a very good chance that the situation for the arts will become even more restrictive or certainly restricted, and that the public fondness of what we do and what other artists do just isn't the same as it was in the days when New York City was the grand metropole of the arts in the western world.

ROBERT BROWN: Well you're doing most of your own work now in Europe, aren't you? You're not—probably perhaps because of the immense load of work you have here at the center, that when you're—particularly in Germany, is that where you're doing it? I think you've mentioned earlier.

OTTO PIENE: Well, that's where I paint.

ROBERT BROWN: That's where you paint.

OTTO PIENE: That's not where I do most of my art. This, the end of this month, we're going to Montreal, where there is an important exhibition in which the center participates, called Images du Future. And then the next month we're going to Finland, where there's an exhibition called Light. And the following month I'm going to Alaska again, which is going to be what, the fourth, fifth time I'm going to Alaska, where there is this beautiful festival called Sky Art Alaska. Somebody just called me, and I almost yelled to him on the telephone, saying that he will now organize Sky Art Texas, um, so I don't think—we don't own New York City. We probably have a smaller part of, we own a smaller part of New York City than we owned 10 or 15 years ago. But I did, [00:30:00] you know, this is what, 1984, '85—I did this beautiful project at the Guggenheim Museum called Sky Dance. So, there have been good things in this country.

ROBERT BROWN: Well there are certain minor fluctuations on there.

OTTO PIENE: I usually do more enterprising things in this country than I do in Germany. Except now, the emphasis in the arts has really shifted from the United States to Europe, for entirely insane reasons. I fail to believe that this country is less prosperous than it was 20 years ago. I think on the books, this country is probably as prosperous now than it was in 1965. But it is true that for whatever reasons, the European countries have spent much more money on the arts during the past 10 years, proportionately speaking, than uh, than what has happened in the United States. Um, France is very obvious, how they are, I mean out of almost self-defense or for survival—how they have created the Centre Pompidou and then after Centre Pompidou, they have all these—have made all these other things to restore the French prestige in the arts. The Germans have been much more understated in what they are doing, but they have—I think they're probably the nation that's the most steadily committed to spending money on culture, out of their budgets; the federal budget, the state budgets, the city budgets, and so on and so forth. They built all these new theaters, they're building museums, um, and then now they're building new centers for art, science, technology, in Karlsruhe, in Cologne, in Frankfurt there's something going on.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you think—?

OTTO PIENE: In Berlin, they're saying they're doing something. So, much of this is now going to those places, and [00:32:00] in certain ways it's a damn shame, because when Reagan said he was handing the responsibility for culture and the arts to industry, he meant business.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. And is industry a dead hand, so to speak, or too restrictive when it comes to the creative arts?

OTTO PIENE: Industry in that respect is just foolishly democratic. In other words, they are entirely given to, to audience, to viewer statistics, to the Nielsen ratings, than the arts.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

OTTO PIENE: They are interested in box office. They want as many visitors to their exhibitions as they could possibly get, so that's anti-innovation, that's anti the spirit of invention and, and inspiration, and that's unfortunate, that's the lowest common denominator.

ROBERT BROWN: The state bodies in Europe, will they have—will they allow free expression and innovation?

OTTO PIENE: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Or is it—it's prestigious to be behind that.

OTTO PIENE: It's a completely different culture. I mean they're not totally insensitive to, to the Nielsen ratings. But there is a different governmental structure there that is, yes, they all get elected, but once they get elected, they work out their budgets and the budget is traditionally a good place for arts and culture—sometimes not always for the betterment of arts and culture. But you know, it's not the one or the other, it's not black and white, it's not yes or no between those systems, but the scales have it currently, um, that there is a lot of encouragement. We should not forget that if one wants to look at it cynically, it's also true that they are doing now what we've been doing here, 20, 25, 30 years ago. They could have had it earlier; [00:34:00] they weren't all that smart. And I said, it was partly in self-defense when the French all of a sudden decided we must have technology, we must have culture and technology and all that. You could almost view the steps as they were decreed centrally by decree, by the president.

ROBERT BROWN: In France, you're saying.

OTTO PIENE: In France, yes. We now must have a renewed French nation, a renewed economic power, a renewed intellectual influence, renewed technology, renewed culture, and it's all related. Therefore, we are creating this state-run, state-encouraged, state-supported, state-financed, new science and technology and related culture. Um, that's a completely different system. And I will never, I'm afraid, clearly understand why things are the way they are in the United States. Nobody understands.

ROBERT BROWN: So fragmented.

OTTO PIENE: So fragmented, so, so um, unpredictable, so trendy on the one hand, so inspired on the other hand, so vital on the one hand, so totally nonchalant on the other hand. It's—to me, it's the greatest mystery, it's a real grand social mystery, how things are the way they are and continue in this kind of unpredictable way. In Europe, I can predict that you know, I could predict 10, 15 years ago, that there will be a surge of art, science, technology in Europe, at such and such a time, despite all the obstacles, all the hindrances, all the, [00:36:00] the resistance, despite all the cultural resistance, that's why it took so long. Here, you can't, maybe, predict much. You can only believe in it, you can only say, this is what I feel is valuable. Whether it will take, that's a different story. But you know, certain things do happen—that is, I think I've mentioned it before, that Lowry Burgess, one of our premiere and senior and most important fellows, has had his first artistic—meaning nonscientific—payload, on the Discovery shuttle. And things like that, so things can happen. Whether they find a lot of echo, that's the different question, different story.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, the—

OTTO PIENE: The National Endowment, to mention them again, they're a very lame outfit these days. They do not encourage much, either innovation or enterprise or adventure or even curiosity, um, no more. Whether they will come back, I don't know.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, it is, actually is our space program, even very notable anymore, really.

OTTO PIENE: Well, you've heard that. You've probably seen—watch television and see people debate whether what's being announced now as, as the next steps towards Venus, and so on and so forth, really makes a dent. There are plenty of people in the field who think this is not—this is just lip service, so to speak.

ROBERT BROWN: Well you, as a European-born person, do you—what about international in the arts or in science?

OTTO PIENE: Oh, it's certainly there. People from Europe still like to go to the United States and learn, there's no doubt about it, but they also do—they are less awed by it. They are doing it much more for practical reasons now than they were awed by it, say 10, 20 years ago. Um, [00:38:00] also—

ROBERT BROWN: I meant, you had spoken for example earlier, of telecommunications as an art form. Internationalism is very possible. [Crosstalk.]

OTTO PIENE: It's more possible and it's also practiced much more clearly. Um, I mean all these simple little things like fax, you know, has a very strong effect on how things happen.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you expect to remain sort of an internationalist, commuting back and forth?

OTTO PIENE: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You say you'll step down from this in a few years.

OTTO PIENE: Yes, until I get too old and too craggy and, and too um, frazzled, I will definitely commute between, um, focal places and airports. I do believe in internationalism, as I have since the end of World War II, and um, it still makes a lot of sense, it makes more sense then. But I do also believe in what I said before, that you can't have internationalism unless you have nations. You can't have colorless and faceless and nameless people, because that means that you would have faceless masses. We've seen in Russia that that doesn't get very far in terms of promoting humanity, so to speak. Um, there's something else I wanted to say—that is the uh, the fact that the [00:40:00] people in the United States have taken less of a public role as, you know, artistic role models, or as promoters of new ideas—it doesn't mean that they don't have that role. It's just it's less politically endorsed, but there is still so much vitality and curiosity and there's so much life going on here, as I look at our young people, and I still find it more convincing than what I see as I look around at other places. I went to um, a convention of the members of the Deutsche Kunsthalle in Berlin two weeks ago, whenever that was. It didn't look very lively. I didn't see too much.

ROBERT BROWN: Rather passive?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. It's you know, somewhat maybe even spiteful, vis-à-vis society as a whole. There was much less room, room for movement and change and innovation than you have here, despite all the somewhat less advantageous political and societal situation. You still have the individual knowing his or her intellectual rights and rights to vision and rights to um, a future and rights to evolving, new evolving ideas. There is still something else here, which is not just political, which is not just sociological, which has a lot to do with [00:42:00] the land and the sky and the freedom of movement and the rights to individuality, and all these things that are really possible here, and are beautiful about where we are here, and in a certain way are just not possible in, for instance, in Europe. No matter what the brand-new future of Europe will be, it still will be, um, 350 million people crammed into this wonderful, little old piece of land with so much intense culture. Even if Europe is going to be the strongest force economically—meaning the new Europe, the integrated community—there will still be a big difference between the new Europe and all its smartness and all its economic power and all its innovative industry and so on and so forth. Yes, and the Japanese, 120 or 30 million, with all their cleverness and their energy and their aggression and their coordination and their um, intelligent management, crammed into these little islands on the second hand, and to come to the point of the third hand, this enormous country that you know is beautiful and big, and if you are not here then you go there. If you don't want to be here anymore you go there, and migration and as I said before, the big sky. And, what I see, th eenormous future of the southern continent, meaning South America, attached to it so to speak—it's very, very different, the way I see it, from [00:44:00] all that massive intelligence in these other countries that do not have, as a matter of fate really, the geographic assets, the geographic life and advantage that you have in this country. So, I still think that people who came here were kind of smart, smart enough to come here, um, and it's not what I want—I really see myself as a, as a mediator, not a moderator, but a mediator between cultures and between nations and between politics and between histories, but that's a kind of chosen individual role. If I were just to relax and enjoy life, then I'd just go to—[inaudible]—and stay there for a long time. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Give the whole thing up.

[END OF 6 OF 7 SIDE A.]

ROBERT BROWN: [00:00:00] In 1990. We've been talking about the uh, Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT, and you've talked a bit about your program here and many of your activities at the center. You've also made a point that the center is here to stay, that it has a certain amount of security, perhaps we could call it clout, within the institute. Could you maybe give us some idea of why that is?

OTTO PIENE: Well first of all, I shouldn't have said that, because that's trying the gods and you never know what the gods do next. However, statistically, since the center was formed, as I just read in one of your recent papers, the center was formed in 1967, and this is 1990—that's 23 years and that's a long time for a place like this. Um, I hate to think that I've lent stability to the one or the other activity, my involvement of it, because the same would occur to me talking about looking at Group Zero in Europe, which officially existed for nine years—that's already a long time for an artist group. But now it turns out there are still random activities, or secondary activities, going on around Group Zero, as evidenced by an event, an exhibition that happened last December, as well as the year before. Now, looking at the center, first of all, the founder was György Kepes, and it was his initiative and his advocacy and his um, alertness to see the time, to see the opportunity to found the center when he founded it, after many years of advocacy [00:02:00] in 1957. That was definitely a good historic moment, as well as a moment in history when the center could be realized. I don't think this center could be realized here this year; this is a different age, or this is a different era. This is an era, in artistic, intellectual, creative terms, of non-enterprise, of certain, um, cautious stagnancy or stagnation, as opposed to those years when people's minds were very active, and life and times were very active and György Kepes seized the opportunity to found the center. Um, and I was very much aware of that because he told me years in advance that that was happening. However, then he was director until just barely 1974—I think I had done most of the business of the center already, as of 1973, and have been the director since. That's 17 years and that's what you call, rightly and justifiably, call stability. However, what looks stable on the outside certainly hasn't been safe or secure on the inside, because it's been a constant fight, um, mostly with changing opinions and changing personal configurations and changing tastes at MIT. And uh, some of the most avid advocates have been the most difficult people to deal with at MIT, because my view of what the center is good for and what the center should do is somewhat different from those at MIT who think they know what the center should do and what the center [00:04:00] is good for. So, every now and then it's been fairly rocky, um, waters or situations to navigate through. And then of course, there's always money and you know, money has to do with intellectual orientation and intellectual tastes and artistic interests as well.

Yesterday, there was a meeting at MIT, nothing to do with the center, nothing to do with people we know, in which it was said very clearly and very bluntly, that we have completely different times now, that many things that were good 10 years ago or 20 years ago are no good or no longer good, or no longer considered productive in terms of generating money today. And whereas we see the fruit of our labors internationally—um, particularly in Europe but not only in Europe, also in many other places, such as Australia—we don't see them at MIT and we don't see them so much in this country, because many people think that currently, this country is culturally stagnant, period. Many people think that, you know, what's considered the arts is repetitive and at best, generating collections but not necessarily generating new ideas or new activities or new energy.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you feel that yourself?

OTTO PIENE: Well, again, without being too critical, um, sociologically, I can certainly see how I earn much more money as an artist in Europe and other places than in the United States. And nobody runs after me in the United States and tells me, will you please, please, please do the project, please, please, [00:06:00] do the celebration, please, please sell these paintings to us. Um, in a certain way, that gives me a lot of freedom in the United States, because I don't have to sell paintings, I don't have to run after projects, I don't have to hassle, as I said I think once before. Yvonne Rainer said that, you know, I work in Boston and I hustle in New York. In the larger sense, that's true now, uh, if you compare, say, Europe to the United States. You know, I can work quietly on projects that I care about here because nobody bothers me by pressing me into all sorts of projects that I ought to do and realize here, in contrast to Europe, where lots of things are going on all the time and all I have to do, in a certain way, is go there, show my face, and lots of people want lots of things. So, there's good and there's bad, um, to that, and I think it's a situation somewhat comparable to the, say, the mid and late '30s in this country when, on the one hand, the economic situation—the way I know it, I've learned about it—and the art was pretty bad, but people did a lot of good work. And then, in a certain way, that fed, that work fed into history.

So what we're facing right now is that the center is still physically small, physically still has a very small budget, uh, physically it's just kind of benignly tolerated around MIT. But in the world, if that's the word, there are between 100 and 150 places nowadays, places that have sprung up during the past 10 or 12 years, that are centers for research and art, science, technology, centers for technology and media, centers for new [00:08:00] education and, and uh, the new arts, centers for research in electronic art, and on and on and on. This year, 1990, we are trying, at the center, to hold a conference called Art Transition '90, to demonstrate our ideas and to share our ideas, and to somehow um, point at the leadership we maintain in having new ideas and finding new media and finding new expressions—um, not so much to the rest of the world but to MIT and to the United States. And we're sharing these ideas with many representatives from the new centers that I've mentioned, be they in Karlsruhe, Germany or in Cologne, or in Rheims [ph] or Saint Etienne or in Paris or in parts of Australia, or in England. But the main purpose of this conference is to point at and to somehow make work, and to somehow uh, bring into the open the main thing in all of this, and that's the work of the artists that I mentioned before. Many of these artists work fairly quietly these days. Um, the media are not running after them and saying do this for television or do this for NBC, or any one of those things that, you know, would make this work public. Some of the artists are really working somewhat quietly but very beautifully and productively, and we hope that we'll have 150 artists present at this conference, most of them—many, I shouldn't say most, but many of them American, because [00:10:00] much of this art, science, technology interaction, movement towards environmental art, including the media, has really originated here and should, in a certain way, continue here. And we want some U.S. support so that these things can go on, and it's very difficult, for instance, to get a contribution from the National Endowment for the Arts to support our efforts, because the National Endowment for the Arts also has become a very—to say something very sweet about them—a conservative institution, um, just moving along with a conservatism that is ruling a lot of the rest of the country and politics and attitudes and a general sleepiness that is not just pervading—not really pervading, but somehow proliferating in this country, and that's kind of difficult to witness and somewhat difficult to take. But I know, from experience, from acquaintance, that there are many excellent artists in this country who, despite the sleepy situation, they are doing very beautiful and very alert and very intelligent work.

ROBERT BROWN: And you hope to pull them together.

OTTO PIENE: That's right.

ROBERT BROWN: Because a conference, you said earlier, is in itself, an artistic, a very important artistic phenomenon, or can be.

OTTO PIENE: Yes. It's like an orchestra of fantastic players that we're trying to bring together. Um, so as far as the center is concerned, I think I've said it in the past that one of the good things about the center is that it's small.

ROBERT BROWN: Which means?

OTTO PIENE: It means that I think if you're small enough, it's easier to, to um, survive. [00:12:00] You know, lots of people, meaning enough important people, consider you insignificant, so they won't bother to take you off the list.

ROBERT BROWN: What is it you were alluding to earlier, at the institute? I assume that's what you meant, people on the outside or outside the center and their idea of what it should do as opposed to yours.

OTTO PIENE: Well, one of my major conflicts has been with Jerry Wiesner, who thinks he knows the arts, and that's of course a mistake. There's nobody who is, is um, not a learned connoisseur of the arts—and particularly if he's somebody whose instincts are mediocre, or should I say average, about the arts—should think that the artists, the arts can be directed, or the artist can be managed. That's one of the problems at MIT, that there used to be a time—and maybe the time isn't quite over yet—when people felt that management could do anything. And if you are an electrical engineer, you tend to think that there is a machine for everything. That includes the arts and that's not very smart. So at the time when um, decisions had to be made about who was going with whom, if anybody was going with anybody—decisions had to be made about whether to expand the center or whether to create a center for the electronic arts, and the result became the Media Lab. There were real differences of opinion as to what, one, the role of the arts is at MIT; secondly, what the future of the arts is. And um, at that time, there were very few people like me who said the arts isn't just electronic arts, the arts isn't computers, the arts is not um, [00:14:00] animation or even a lot of video arts; it is also the environment, ecology, et cetera, et cetera.

ROBERT BROWN: But the prevailing opinion at that time here was otherwise. They wanted something else.

OTTO PIENE: The prevailing opinion as far as the—as putting, as placing a bet was that, you know, the future was in electronic arts, that the future was in, in research, the future was in computers supported by Japanese corporations and defense, and um, that, around that, the attitude around the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, which is one of independence, is one of openness, is one of you know, being ready for surprises, is one of, on the other hand, it's holistic concern—that the role of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies was maybe not part of, quote unquote, the central concerns or the central academic interests of MIT. So, we just barely made it through that period.

ROBERT BROWN: When was that period, in the early 1980s?

OTTO PIENE: About 10 years ago, right.

ROBERT BROWN: When the Media Center was created, around that time?

OTTO PIENE: Right. And you know, plans changed up and down, left and right, and so on and so forth. And um, as I said, I had real confrontations with Jerry Wiesner, who is not really the confrontational type. He's, you know, essentially, at least on the surface, very soft-spoken. And um, it was much, much later, meaning maybe three years ago, that he finally, finally said that maybe we still didn't know what art was, or was to do in this age [00:16:00] of art and technology. So in a certain way, that was a fairly generous admission, so to speak—that these very opinionated, um, issues or issuances of what was important or what necessarily, the, the um, final truth. Anyway, so I mean, that's something that the center has survived. And now the center is surviving because the entirely—the entire scene of education and culture is so impassive, that kind of, as a result of that, people, including people at MIT, don't really want to change too much. They don't even want to change the Center for Advanced Visual Studies currently. Um, that, all of that has to do with money of course, you know. If somebody would move in and say okay, I've got $100 million and I want to do something terrific with it, there is still a big question if anybody would think that those $100 million would be spent on the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, or maybe on you know, the next fad, industrially promoted.

But, one thing that is certainly on our side now, that is not so much in the United States, but in other countries—the awareness of ecological needs, the awareness of the issue of umwelt, the awareness of the green issues, so to speak, is increasing and increasing and increasing. I've heard many political statements that say that's [00:18:00] the one unifying issue that, that unifies the world these days. And to me that's, um, reassuring, because I always said, and many, many people at the center have said, and so forth—Kepes had essentially that, certainly traces of that awareness already—um, that art, science, technology alone, does not make sense unless it agrees with the sociopolitical state of things. And those things together do not make sense unless they agree with the state of the earth, and the state of the earth is becoming a very physical, physically, um, urgent, urgently um—physically and urgently seen and experienced and demanding story. Because unless people do something about it, we're all going to starve or suffocate, or something like that. And as I said, that seems to be a unifying element in a whole lot of developments that we've seen this year also. It somehow brings us closer to other attitudes and other values and beliefs in the arts. This is where the artists who practice art and technology, are not that diametrically different or different than, [00:20:00] or diametrically opposed to artists in other camps, such as the late Boyce, who has done a lot of—done and said a lot of nonsense, but his orientation as concerned with a sound and green earth was quite laudable and quite understandable. However—but whatever much of a truism it may have been, and I think the way we see it, it's less of a truism—but there too in the arts, is a somewhat unifying element that has put us in contrast to the blindfolded technologies and to the industrialists and on the other hand, seems to show us to be the somewhat more broadminded and openminded fellows, compared to the narrower interests of whatever industry.

ROBERT BROWN: This broad—breadth and flexibility survives well here at the center you would say.

OTTO PIENE: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Even though in this country itself, it's not.

OTTO PIENE: In this country it's difficult. In this country, another thing that—there's always a danger that erodes the centers, is that the spirit of community is being eroded by the me first spirit that has ruled such big portions of society in this country for the past 10 or 15 years or so. Something that's really uh, somewhat heartbreaking to see, how many artists are giving in to that somewhat solipsistic and egotistic and somewhat, sometimes egomaniacal attitude that's been bred by the, [00:22:00] um, economy in this country for the last, at least, 10 years or so. That's always a danger too, at the center, but we continue to do projects together, we continue to have ideas together, we continue to project things together—uh, partly with the help of, or with the cooperation of, or upon the invitation by activities at centers that artists have organized in other countries. However, this conference in the fall—which is not easy to do because the financing is so shaky in this country—is supposed to bring a lot of people in this country together, or back together, something like that, and that the funding is really, really hard to get. I mean, no matter where we go, whether the big corporations or small corporations, whether the National Endowment or the Massachusetts, it's similar—that they all nod and think it's nice, but they'd rather buy another Henry Moore or something like that, or buy another big painting in New York City. It's very strange. No, it's not strange at all, it's like a déjà vu. Um, the—that society is very, very goods-oriented, you know, goods over experience, possession over knowledge or over intensity, and so on, so forth. It's like a leap back into the whatever, the budding '50s or the flourishing early '60s, or something like that. I'm not really complaining, I'm just saying that it's different here and it's hard to continue that fight to keep a place like the center [00:24:00] vital and productive and creative despite all these lousy conditions around us. Because, you know, lots of people are simply saying, oh well, just let it ride, you know. If people want to buy paintings these days? You know, I've seen a lot of artists who just, you know, go back to painting—not just in this country, also in other countries, because oh, video doesn't pay, more complicated art and technology involvements don't pay, or things break down or things don't function very well, instruments are very expensive, and so on, so forth, so we say why bother, you know, go back to painting, sell it and you know, that's artistic as well.

So anyway, as I said, I'm not really complaining. I'm just pointing at a few things that are happening, that are happening somewhat more often, more frequently now. And you know, it's not always easy to keep up the spirit of the young people who have it difficult to get in there and make a living with what they've learned here. However, the number of students and applicants and applications is increasing. So what some of my friends say —I don't really dare make predictions—but, but some of my friends say, and it may be true, that what my little daughter says—who is 18 and going to Columbia University—that they have great sympathy with what happened during the days of um, the '60s and the awakening of [00:26:00] whatever conscience, and a certain awareness of um, whatever, this, the spirit of flowers and the needs of the earth, and how people have to work together. All these simple things that in a certain way seem to be self-evident, but went away anyway.

ROBERT BROWN: But still the young students—

OTTO PIENE: But the young students develop a new taste for that, or a new appetite or a new yearning for that, so maybe it's true.

ROBERT BROWN: But the problem now is that the larger society is indifferent to that, is that right, in consciousness?

OTTO PIENE: Our society, a lot of the society seems to be fairly indifferent, yes indeed.

ROBERT BROWN: So you've given two reasons then, that the, the center will thrive or has thrived at MIT. One is it's small; it's not that noticed.

OTTO PIENE: Well, one is MIT, I mean for all—in all um, fairness, yeah, the original concept that the center would live and thrive at MIT is right. MIT is, in a certain way, a fantastic place, because of so many bright and productive and creative and intellectually strong people. That's the basic concept. Beyond that, um, the reason why the center has succeeded as well as survived, is yeah, partly it's, it's smallness. It's, I guess, a very elegant size. And I think that happened entirely incidentally, or maybe not so incidentally. If I would have been more of a maniac, I might have tried to [00:28:00] build the center, make it bigger, make it uh, different physically, go into a different building, get more artists, build a bigger program, solicit bigger funds from dirty parties and stuff like that. Maybe it would have even been easier at times to—it would have even been possible at times, to get more clean money as well. But I don't know why, um, I still think this size of the center is just fine. I hear, with a certain amusement, that for the first time during the first two years—the, the recent two years or so, the Media Lab, for instance, that has $7 million annual budget, has funding problems. This great mythical computer industry that has shown to be all-conquering and changing the world and making everybody better and smarter um, seems to have reached its limits or even its, um—and in some ways it's very sad, because any whatever, decrease has social implications and we don't want all the employees and workers of these shining computer companies to starve. But on the other hand, the ideology that there is a machine, a particularly good machine, for everything, seemed to really have reached its limits in that camp. I'm sure there are always bigger and better machines elsewhere and so on, so forth.

So, I think that money spent on [00:30:00] research, particularly technological research, in context with the arts, is not money ill spent, but money spent in a somewhat um, disproportionate fashion. And quite frankly, I'd like to have some of the money to do something better with it. I know that people will just laugh when they hear a statement like that, but it's really true.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean, you think it's a little too inflexible, art, the research into the arts and technology.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: The application to the computer.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, sure. Um, so we have, I mean at the center, we have developed what we now call the—depending on where I am, I call them the classical media of art and technology, or I call them the boring media of art and technology. Computer, video, holography and laser, um—we have widely developed these media here at the center, for the use of the arts. But we see now, I see nowadays that that's fine and good and I mean, they are ready to go into the art schools and they are already, quite a few of them are already in the art school. But the new ideas and interesting ideas that I see coming to the—not coming to the surface but being demonstrated, being um, brought into public light at the Art Transition '90, that go beyond that, that are somewhat equally sharp, although maybe, certainly for the time being that's popular, but potentially also popular. If you look at the role of medical technology in human life today, and you realize that the artists have [00:32:00] paid almost no attention to that, that I find very peculiar these days because that's technology that's at hand everywhere, and the artists just chose not to pay much attention to it. Well, that's, that's stuff for the art schools, but before it becomes stuff for the art schools, it's still for the artists. Why don't they work with the doctors? Why don't they work with the uh, the medical research, um—and that's just one field where I see enormous future for the artists.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean in terms of using his or her imagination?

OTTO PIENE: In terms of being inspired by what's happening there, as well as using their—using this vast instrumentarium. The medical surplus in this country is incredible. I mean, we, during the past 10 or 15 years, we at the center, the only place where we could buy cheap lasers were you know, from medical surplus; perfectly fine, well-functioning lasers that could easily be reconstituted when it comes out of medical research or even clinical practice. And you know, needless to say there is Sky Art, needless to say there's this whole field of what's happening in space and all that. And there is certainly no moral obligation for the artist to go to all these frontiers, because some artists are very comfortable staying home, so to speak. And I'm not saying that all the artists must go to the frontiers, um, but there's certainly a lot of work to do that goes beyond these established media of art and technology. And that's probably where I see the center, the role, the task for this center, which was [00:34:00] called Center for Advanced Visual Studies. Visual has always been delimiting somehow, and visual is somehow, I guess, symbolic for a lot of other media, but it is the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, which means that the people here should be advancing, that's why the center is there. We are not there to consolidate, we are not there to, um, to agree. We are not here to um, not even coordinate and spread things, which essentially we are here to explore. And for that, I think there is a future, um, if we find enough people who are seeing this future, and who are interested in that future, and indeed want to go on doing that work.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you've believed in running the center with a fairly light hand, in terms of—you mentioned earlier that the graduate program here to you is of secondary importance, that primary to you is the flexibility that the students and the fellows have.

OTTO PIENE: Well, a light hand is the way that may describe, say tolerance, or openmindedness. When it comes to the actual work, it certainly hasn't been light work. It's, you know, all-consuming work around the clock, and it's very trying and very tiring sometimes, and I don't think too many people really want to know what it takes, um.

ROBERT BROWN: No, but I meant you have not over-administered, you've not tried to manage.

OTTO PIENE: Not over-administrated or administered. Um, also, I haven't really told people what to do. Um, I have certainly not minded advocating my own ideas and my own view [00:36:00] of things, but um, the center is still, after 23 years, a haven for the free imagination and the unencumbered, creative momentum. I guess that's one reason why we're there, that's why we keep attracting young people who—from all over, who uh, who are curious and anxious to develop their free spirit and their free, kind of enterprising art and search.

ROBERT BROWN: But you feel you should continue with very few fundamental courses. You have very few structured things.

OTTO PIENE: Well, we have. I did establish here, the educational program of the center. And um, the reason why it is contained is that the school with which we are, quote, unquote, associated in our educational enterprise just doesn't give us much money to, to do that, because they feel that they are dedicated to the, quote unquote, central issues of education in say, the School of Architecture and Planning, or whatever it is, and that what we do is maybe very respectable and also visibly successful, but again, not at the fringes but at the borderlines or the frontiers of what's happening. And you know, there is a certain credibility in that attitude that we don't really have to doubt, as long as we have enough freedom of movement to do what we're doing. But I do not have, and at no time have I had the ambition to [00:38:00] create a school that is academically prolific, and produces students by the hundreds, um, because I do not see how that can agree with the creative exploratory work that's happening at the center at the same time, which I think is the primary work of the center. You know, the fellows share studios with the graduate students. They work together, they live together in a certain way, and if we would over-emphasize the academic practice, the teaching practice, it would definitely encumber the fellows, the residents' freedom of movement and freedom of work. So you know, it's a very delicate balance and the balance is almost literal. We have currently, and we've had for a long time, about 12 residents, fellows, and about 12 graduate students, so that's what you call balance.

Um, and you know, I've worked on this education program since I came here in 1974. During that time, we have had a grand total of roughly 175 fellows and in the graduate program, um, which is a two-year program, at the same time we've had about 75 or 80 graduates leaving, leaving the center with a degree called master's of science in visual studies. Except, quite a few of those have, have since become fellows, so in a certain way, the count of fellows is almost a double count, because some of the fellows who have become fellows now, [00:40:00] then, or are fellows now, have formerly been graduate students who had graduated with their master's degrees. But this master's degree, the master of science and visual studies, is also a unique degree. It's called, to be accurate, it's called MS visual studies. The master's programs that leads to the degree of master of science in visual studies, that's MIT. Under the subtitle in environmental art and performance—that's our program, um, and in this grand program that I have protected with my life, um, after having created it originally, together with Negroponte and Leacock—we have that program together, then they veered off in different directions. And I maintained, I kept this program and it's the only graduate program in the arts, in strictly arts, at MIT, except the total population of the program—that's all I can handle—is up to 12, that's it. So, it's a small, really somewhat exclusive, somewhat, I hate to say it, elitist program.

ROBERT BROWN: With any larger number, apart from your ability to handle it, would you feel be detrimental to them? Is it good for the fellows that it be small?

OTTO PIENE: It would take much more money to make it bigger. It would take so many more professors and it would take so many more—

ROBERT BROWN: But you feel its very smallness is a good thing.

OTTO PIENE: I feel it's a good thing because I can, together with the fellows, and then whoever the other teachers are, and the students, because the program is interdisciplinary. They can also take classes at MIT, in

God knows which departments, under my supervision, under my guidance, um, but it would take a whole lot of—a whole different structure. It would take more professors, it would take more lecturers, and so on and so forth. It would take a lot of MIT, core university money, to expand that [00:42:00] program. Of course, it could be expanded but um, you know, who knows what kind of views or what kind of future there will be after me, but for the time being, I think this is a good thing, because I can pay a lot of attention to the individuals and each student's program is individual, is different. They all have individual objectives, individual choices of classes and goals, and individual work; entirely different from some art schools, where the students do what the teacher tells them, or where the students are, you know, petty masters, and so on, so forth. None of that here.

ROBERT BROWN: Is the age group of the fellows always been fairly considerable?

OTTO PIENE: Well, we have fellows of three generations, over the years we have had fellows of three generations.

ROBERT BROWN: At any given time.

OTTO PIENE: Some fellows have been 25, some fellows have been 40, and some fellows have been 55 or 60, um, of course, in-betweens. And the average age of the graduate students is very high. You know, we have had plenty of graduate students who are 40 or more. But we've also had graduate students, including some graduate students we have now, who are 20-some. So, there's no norm there. The center is a very nonconformist place. I mean, it's a lot of solidarity of the center, that's one of the great things at the center—but conformism, no. And I think those are, in a certain way, they are opposites, um, and that's good. That's one of the reasons why the center has survived against so many odds, in certain years. [00:44:00] I mean we've had, at some point, we had a dean here, from MIT, who was then brand new, who wanted to eliminate the center. He had thousands of graduate students and he made the mistake of coming over here upon my invitation. He had a thousand graduate students screaming at him at the obscenity that he was—he could possibly consider being able to live for the rest of his life if he would undo the center. That's what it would have amounted to. It was said the spirit, but this is honest expression of beliefs and of, of commitment, that's what I mean by solidarity. If you really believe in—most people believe in where they are and what they are doing here. Um, and on the other hand, having the right to do their work, their own personal, their individual work. And you know, I criticize them, and every now and then they criticize me and that's fine, that's part of life.

[END OF 7 OF 7 SIDE A.]

ROBERT BROWN: [00:00:00] To what do you attribute this solidarity among the fellows? What is there, a certain chemistry that comes into them once they're here?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, I think so. It is a very similar atmosphere at the center.

ROBERT BROWN: They interrelate quite a lot, they help—?

OTTO PIENE: They do very much, we do projects together, we involve the graduate students in projects, but not everybody has to participate, only those who want to. And the configurations of participants changes, and often there are former fellows involved and former students involved, depending on where we are and what we do. Um, it's—I mean, it also has to do, maybe these things have just evolved that way, but you know this is not a faculty. We don't have the bitching that is going on in most faculties, um, because this is, in a certain way, a much looser structure, and there is very little hierarchy involved here. There's a director, and there's an office, and fellows, and graduate students and that's it. Every now and then, you know, a fellow would use a word like seniority and I'd say, what do you mean, what's that? And people understand exactly, you know, what I mean by that, so every now and then, things like that come up, but every now and then somebody tries to uh—a fellow here tries to exploit students and I said, no, no, no. If you want to work with students that's fine. If you want to work students—if you want students who work for you, pay them, and on and on, I mean, there are certain moral rules and I am not saying that it's all [00:02:00] just like that. I mean, we're certainly not quite as pure as, as what I'm saying makes it sound, but there is quite a bit of it. And um, I think it also has to do with a combination of individual work and group work. People are free to do their individual work and people are not expected to neglect uh, or ignore their individual work while they're involved in, in uh, communal projects. I think much of the time, that does work. Individuals, you know, they have exhibitions here and there, and some of them very, um, decorously so. And, you know, some people go on to other places in life once they've been here for a while. Generally speaking, very few fellows want to leave, even the grad students don't really want to leave.

ROBERT BROWN: The graduate students don't either, is that what you're saying?

OTTO PIENE: No, they don't want to leave either.

ROBERT BROWN: But leaving, leave they must, is that right?

OTTO PIENE: I mean, there are very few, very few fellows—I think I may have mentioned that once before—that ever said, I want to leave. The one I remember distinctly, or one, is myself, at the time when, I think after two years at the, at the center, I wanted to leave. I mean, I had—there were deep conversations with Kepes and Kepes, you know, he really was using all his, [00:04:00] his guns and said, you can't leave, you can't leave, you are the center. So, you are the center, um, so on and so forth and you know, I believed him, and maybe he meant it, and maybe I meant it too, something like that.

ROBERT BROWN: But at the time that was—

OTTO PIENE: But at the time, I really wanted to leave. Another fellow who did come into my office at one point and said, I want to leave is Paul Matisse. He really is one person I remember who said, I want to leave, I'm not getting out of MIT what I was expecting, I have to try a different route, and so on and so forth. So, there have been people really somewhat maturely, have made the decision that they didn't want to be at the center any more. Most of the time nobody wants to leave and it's usually much more difficult to um, usher people out of the center, or ease them out of the center than to bring them here.

ROBERT BROWN: What it is that takes hold? Is it an isolated, very precious environment, compared to the outside world?

OTTO PIENE: Well, it's a haven—it's uh, it's a real sanctuary. People in here were really, on the one hand, under the umbrella of MIT. That's important, it gives them lots of privileges. They get on the telephone and say I'm, you know—never mind whether I am from Lisbon or from, from, Oshkosh, you know, that's not what they're saying. They're saying, I am such and such at MIT. That's an advantage; that's a real good situation to start with. Then of course, with the human situation, it's interesting here, you know. Interesting things are happening—graduate students have an interesting life. You know, when they go, [00:06:00] doing projects in Europe or in Alaska, um, and in the summer or in the fall, well, that's nice. I don't think they get that at the University of Massachusetts, unless they go to summer school and, and on their own, or whatever, these summer schools. [Audio break.]

ROBERT BROWN: The center.

OTTO PIENE: It's this place—you know, I came here first in 1968. I was away for maybe a year and a half. So I've been here for 20 years. It's that, at the center, I can do—I can do things that I couldn't do without it. I could—I can encourage discovery, I can encourage exploration, I can encourage the, the actualization of people's dreams and expectations and instincts that I couldn't do as a private citizen, that I couldn't encourage to this degree, to this degree of reality, as a private citizen, as a personal individual artist. And um, again, the question is, why is that important, and the question is, why, you know, why would I prefer that over being um, a somewhat much more comfortable individual?

ROBERT BROWN: Freelance, freelance artist.

OTTO PIENE: A freelance artist. I think it does have to do with uh, with my history, with my past. It does have to do with being a teenager in the war, when I realized, if people don't go together, if they don't—in the war and past the war, after the war—[00:08:00] if they don't go together, if they don't develop and apply and practice and act out sense together, then the consequences are just plain chaos and destruction. And I, I still hold that belief. And it's not entirely absurd and it's not entirely naïve and it's not, um, entirely self-appeasing. If you see what happens in East Germany. I was in—while we haven't been talking, Elizabeth and I were in East Germany. We were in Leipzig during the days when the ice broke, and people there really liberated themselves by sheer sense. The people in Leipzig were immensely impressive because of their contained spirit, their contained intellectual and moral human maturity and discipline, that's what did it. They were not screaming and yelling, they were not shooting, they were not uh, producing and printing slogans. They were really acting, talking sensibly, and that's what did it. Except in that case, it took a long, long time for that spirit to come to fruition, but obviously it has indeed. It has really broken the mechanics of suppression. These people are really seeing, at least some of these people, seeing the fruit of their, essentially their spiritual and intellectual um, [00:10:00] liveliness, vitality, contained energy. And in a certain way, I mean I shouldn't interpret that too personally. I shouldn't say see, see, see, but there's something to it, to the sense of working together in the spirit. And this should not be so alien to, to Americans who, to quite a degree, have invented that kind of spirit. Except that you know, we have a political system right now in this country which seems to be built more on opinion than insight, and on, you know, practiced principle rather than um, lively observation or conviction, et cetera, et cetera. I'm not—I don't want to waste my time concerned with the system; it's self-evident what's wrong with the system.

ROBERT BROWN: But in East Germany, this reaffirmed your lifelong held belief in uh, communal things, as in remaining a teacher for that reason or remaining someone in education, as opposed to a freelance person.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, except I mean, the center is not really primarily an educational place. The center is more like the academy in the old sense—um, a kind of mentally peripatetic place in which people have freedom and at the same time, the measure of security to let their minds and their work and their creative spirit wander [00:12:00] and produce. So, I guess our graduate program is really educational, in that respect I am a teacher.

ROBERT BROWN: Is this a place that you think, are you going to want to stay with, or are you going to find it difficult to leave?

OTTO PIENE: No. It's technically difficult to leave. I think mentally, it will not be difficult to leave. I mean, I will never shake off the center, why should I? Why should I want to? But in terms of personal freedom of movement, I think the day will come when I will enjoy that freedom of movement, because I think there will be a day when my energies are somewhat limited, and I have to use them for my personal survival or personal continuation at work. I think the day will come when I don't have a limitless energy, that I can stay at the center, you know, 36 hours a day so to speak, and be there all the time and be alert all the time and be there for everybody at the same time, develop everything that's happening here, and make sure that what's happening is right, what is happening is productive, and it's fertile, and it's supportive of the center. Technically, I don't think it's easy, because I have to build a whole structure that sustains the center further, and sustains it through periods of transition, and explains to MIT that the center will be even more important when I'm not here anymore, and so on and so forth. That's not easy. I could also simply say okay, enough is enough, après moi, what is it, le deluge, um, [00:14:00] but I don't think that way.

ROBERT BROWN: Have you begun to think of ways that you can ensure its future at MIT?

OTTO PIENE: Well, it has a lot to do with money.

ROBERT BROWN: If you could be endowed, is that one thing you may be saying?

OTTO PIENE: Well, that's one thing. The other thing is to find somebody who is just very good at that too, maybe better than I am. I've never been a particularly good fundraiser. My strength has been in developing projects and developing work and projecting work and projecting fields and creating fields and involving many people at the center in evolving work. I can imagine people who uh, who might be, who might be able to, you know, raise millions of dollars and say, here is a portion for the people we like and invite, and this is the money with which they can work, and develop the individual evolution of ideas, as well as subjective work. I mean, I'm sure there are many different methods by which, you know, the center could be sustained. I also do believe that, you know, this is a free country, and this is a free time. This is not the Nazi period that killed the Bauhaus, that this center is needed very much in—vis-à-vis the future of the arts and the integrated effort in art, science, and [00:16:00] social role, sociological role of the arts—that the role of the center is far from having been played out in full, particularly at MIT. And I'm trying to convince MIT that MIT, just like this country, this United States, should realize that they have a radiant, leading position—what MIT had been babbling about forever, you know, calling leadership. And they should sustain it, they should support it, they should go on doing it. All these monies in Japan and Japanese, and when it comes to the arts, the Japanese really don't produce much.

In France, the government has spent so much money on art and technology, ever since you know, Pompidou or definitely Mitterrand decided that technology and hence, art and technology, was a matter of central planning by the government, or what they have used, what they have created in terms of the arts—you know, art that counts, human expression—is really pretty poor. Whereas in this country, you've got all that vitality, you've got these beautiful artists who can say so many things, but they have real problems, you know, saying it, because there is such poor support, and quite frankly, I don't know. I mean, I guess I don't read the, the mail. I don't know how MIT spends its money, but I don't think MIT is spending enough money on the arts. I think MIT is spending precious little money on the arts in a really productive fashion. And that should change, [00:18:00] it should really change. It should change um, not dramatically but substantially, so there can be more, there can be more people. And, you know, more people, if they are living right, if they're playing it right, they can produce more ideas and they can, you know, build more in terms of communicating arts, and so on and so forth. So, I do think that you know, the center has a role.

ROBERT BROWN: Is this Media Center likely to be, would you see it merging with the Center for Advanced Visual Studies?

OTTO PIENE: No. That was an idea a long time and that idea didn't fly.

ROBERT BROWN: You've said that that Media Center is sort of, financially at least, in a weakened position, and I think suggested also, its program is rather too functional.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, I mean, that idea didn't fly. That was then, that was 10 years ago, when some people thought, including myself, that that could happen. Um, it didn't happen, in part because people were really shortsighted, they couldn't see it.

ROBERT BROWN: And now in your opinion, the Media Center itself is perhaps going to have a short life.

OTTO PIENE: Then the Media Center tried to do somewhat, and I guess they failed, you know. They found out that art is difficult, that machine won't really do it, not even many machines. And hence, they found out that there is not enough money in the arts, hence they found out that they don't really want the arts because art doesn't pay, in their experience.

ROBERT BROWN: So what do you think they will become, just an adjunct to computer experiments?

OTTO PIENE: Well, they are doing the same work. I mean, we have good friends. I'm not—I don't have hostile feelings vis-à-vis the media, certainly not today. We have good friends there and [00:20:00] they're doing some good things with holography. They have Steve Benton's beautiful place and are very responsive to the needs of our fellows. Some of our fellows have done their best work there, so for us that is good. Um, in general, I think the Media Lab is getting very much involved in education, uh, and educational, the kind of curriculum building—and they're very much involved in research, what I call nasty, the industrial research, you know, the advancement of computers for ever better purposes in media, Japanese television? Just like some other parts at MIT, military research—and then also some, you know, good old computer graphics and animation and you know, synthetic video and 3-D video, and stuff like that; things that we believe in too, but you know, we believe that they're only good if somebody pours life into them, whereas otherwise, they're just tools.

ROBERT BROWN: Tools and just refinements. Yeah.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. I mean again, in a somewhat nasty, narrow way, one could say it's tooling that's being done there, and that's, of course, expressed too narrowly because there are some really good people there.

ROBERT BROWN: But you said that the institute by and large, has been more neglectful of the arts than it should be. Now there's also the museum, there's an art museum, an art center and so forth. What role do you see that playing? Is that just simply public display?

OTTO PIENE: Go away, build a new one.

ROBERT BROWN: Don't really need that you mean, the building itself is—?

OTTO PIENE: No, no, the concept is just too—I mean, this is kind of a smalltime effort to, to keep up with the Joneses, [00:22:00] That's bad. Um, MIT should not do in a small way what other people do in a big way. And uh, when this whole thing about the List money—that's all big talk. Where the List money uh, was very virulent. I've said many times, MIT should build a museum and the museum should be a museum for art and technology, because nobody else has one and everybody needs one, and wouldn't that be the most logical thing to do at MIT? Well, nobody has, or almost nobody, has seen it that way. And uh, on the other hand, it compares unfavorably to say, Harvard, where they have the Fogg Museum and the Busch-Reisinger Museum. MIT doesn't have a museum, so please, would they get themselves together and create a museum? That's one of the things I told the new associate provost for the arts, Mrs. Harris, does she realize MIT has no museum? Every time I've brought it up, somebody says, oh well, they have something else more important to do first. Well, they should indeed have a museum. If MIT had taken its—made use of the opportunity from the beginning of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, every fellow here would have gladly donated a work of art to a unique museum of art and technology.

ROBERT BROWN: So what should happen?

OTTO PIENE: No response, just plain no response, people just don't understand it.

ROBERT BROWN: Why is that?

OTTO PIENE: It could be a mecca of every kinetic artist, every kinetic art student, environmental art student, et cetera, in the world. Well, they've just bombed on that one so far. [00:24:00] Maybe they'll do it in the future, maybe they will.

ROBERT BROWN: So the List Art Center is simply a gallery for changing shows.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, like, you know, doing repeat shows of what's happening in SoHo galleries in, you know, say ICA in Boston and stuff like that.

ROBERT BROWN: Right, similar. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. It's already just kind of educational and informational and if the MIT students go to the ICA instead, they learn just as much. Um, the old Hayden Gallery is a better place actually, but um—

ROBERT BROWN: Why? Do you think its program is better?

OTTO PIENE: It had a broader program. The program had much more to do with the MIT scene, with the scene in general. They had architectural exhibitions, they had exhibitions by artists from the center, they had one person, important one-person shows. Takis, for instance, I think had his first, if you want to call it museum, one-man exhibition there, and those were important events. Now they have, you know, little survey shows of Japanese young artists and stuff like that. It's all very understandable, although some people think it's fancy. That's what's wrong with that kind of art scene these days.

ROBERT BROWN: And it's not up to the snuff of MIT's level as a leader in research and exploration.

OTTO PIENE: No, definitely not, no guts.

ROBERT BROWN: So you do feel the center is going to outlive you, in one way or another, that there's no spirit, mean spirit here.

OTTO PIENE: Well really, I hope so. I don't have this spirit, this kind of attitude that says, you know, when I go, the center goes. As in, when Kokoschka dies, art dies—that's what Kokoschka said. [00:26:00] [They laugh.]

ROBERT BROWN: What will become of your art when you leave here, do you think, or what's going on now? Do you see new trends and new motion or energy on your part, new directions?

OTTO PIENE: Yeah, well um, you know, I have certain projects for myself that, that—I mean there are always, there are always plenty of projects that I am involved in, and I do as much of them and as many of them as I can. But, you know, I have certain ideas about the next thing I want to do, combinations of light and uh, flying sculpture and Sky Art and light art. I have no, no brain drain that keeps me from doing new things that I want to do. New things, every now and then I have to pause like, you know during the past so many months, it's really been wearing on me to deal with the tail ends of big projects that the center did in 1988, um, like dealing with bills that Yeshiva University Museum didn't pay, and stuff like that. So we ended up with a deficit, and that's really bothersome work that has to be done, and you know, first of all, MIT says you know, clean it up; secondly, I'm not the one who blames MIT and says, you cover it, I will not take the responsibility. No, I am taking the responsibility.

We had this big show in Germany. For some inexplicable reason, [00:28:00] we ended up having to pay the bills that our partners didn't pay, and it's not over yet, and I have to take care of it because on the one hand, I feel responsible. On the other hand, um, I don't really want anybody else to be involved because it's something that, I started it, you know, I feel I have to finish it. But those are things that happen every now and then. It takes a lot of time and work to clean that up, particularly if money is involved. So, every now and then, there is something there that slows me down or that slows the center down—these, what you call pauses, what other people call creative pauses, or something like that.

But come summer, we'll be out there doing all sorts of interesting things, like the one thing we're working on right now is, first of all, there's Portuguese involvement, which may or may not happen. Next, we're going to do a project in Venice—you know, we've been offered to do a big celebration in Venice. Well, that's interesting I think, to work right there in front of a cathedral and stuff like that, kind of thing, et cetera, I think Lee rightfully does and gets involved in. And you know, there's this big conference, which is again, in a certain way—

ROBERT BROWN: Art Transition Conference this fall.

OTTO PIENE: Yeah. A lot of work and a lot of really hard logistics work, and so on, so forth. And it's not exactly the, you know the freefall as in ice skating. It's a little bit like more what we really have to do, and all that. But um, I'm quite confident it will quite out good. Again, the center has a certain magic. Every now and then I'm getting aware that we are doing a preconference—to prepare [00:30:00] we're doing pre-conferences, two pre-conferences, to prepare the conference. The first one is happening this weekend in Belgium, and the people invited to that conference, certain people who will be involved in articulating the program and uh, organizing portions of it and all that. People come on their own steam, from Tokyo, from Kansas City, from New York City, from—well, that's dedication, that's our friends.

ROBERT BROWN: A tremendous amount of energy already, and commitment.

OTTO PIENE: So yes, as I said, I shouldn't sound too, too uh, exuberant about that. But those are very reassuring um, events. Now the next preconference is going to be happening here in mid-April, when mostly artists will, you know, convene here to uh, develop the substance of the program for the conference, all that. So that's work and that's work that's obviously directed at the future. We're calling it Art Transition '90 because I abstain from this problem of saying, towards the year 2000, or you know, towards the new millennium, any one of those things—we'll simply call it Art Transition '90, but it's definitely work that's directed towards the future.

ROBERT BROWN: And would you keep the program pretty open? It will be structured.

OTTO PIENE: It's very much structured, yeah. There's three and a half days of panels, exhibitions, presentations, symposia, seminars, events, performances and all that.

ROBERT BROWN: What chiefly do you get out of these? You've done so many. Is it the stimulus of ideas being knocked around, or is it a publication, or is it particular works?

OTTO PIENE: It's also a publication—there will be two publications, each 200 pages [00:32:00] strong; one catalogue for the conference and then the post-conference document. We have publishers for those already. The conference catalogue itself is 300 pages. We publish at the Paris Art Center, and the post-conference document will be published by Leonardo, you know Leonardo Magazine. So that's all part of the work that's, that's being prepared. Anyway, so much about this kind of—and I don't think the center is future-addicted, I mean we don't advertise that, unlike the uh, the Media Lab. The Media Lab, with its proud history of five years, they make—they, they publish things like—there have to be all these slogans, like um, creating the future, and stuff like that. Um, that's, as I said, that's like selling toothpaste you know?

ROBERT BROWN: A new automobile model.

OTTO PIENE: Right. Um, so there is something, something deeper to that, which I think is also, to be fair, has been part of the center from the outset, from the roots, so to speak. Kepes had some of that um, very, very serious, sometimes solemn commitment to concordia, to working together with other creative spirits [00:34:00] to create whatever models or markers or beacons, to guide the coming generation or something like that. And I think in the case of these people, they were quite a bit oriented towards the university and so on, so forth. Um, but I must confess, some of that spirit is alive. I mean we work more and more with UNESCO, for instance, one of our partners in this conference. There's a certain—I think there's a certain idealistic concept at work, sometimes idealistic to the point at which it becomes idealistic by constitution, so to speak. But generally, we're trying to stay away from that. Generally, we're trying to just convince by the work, to convince by the whatever, the suggestive um, emanations that come out of the work. That, I think is a better way of working that—

ROBERT BROWN: Than through proclamations.

OTTO PIENE: Through declarations, proclamations, manifestos, and so on, so forth. Every now and then that just is okay.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you see, after your connection with the center, do you see it severing finally and your being entirely on your own, or is there going to be a new position of extremely senior person here?

OTTO PIENE: You mean myself?

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

OTTO PIENE: Um, so far I have um, really not responded or abstained from [00:36:00] taking on, you know, other positions. And I think my attitude is increasingly, no matter how tempting new invitations are, my position is increasingly that one center like this is enough center for me. I don't want, as I've been invited many times, to go to a different place and go build a different center, or another school or university, or any one of those things. I can advise these people, which is what I do. And I can, you know, I can be a good um, how do you call these people, Boy Scout brothers, whatever, to new institutions. But um, I don't think that after this center, I want to build another center. Even thinking about it objectively, I don't think it would be fair. You know, by the time I get out of here, I'll be definitely over 60, which I am now. You know, once I have what I see to be building a next stage of the center as far as I can see that and can accomplish that, um, you know, I may be too much geared in my way to create a new place, which you know, I think the new place should be created by people who are 30 years old or 40, or something like that, but not by somebody who has got as much experience as I will have.

ROBERT BROWN: There's no point in having a replica of this place, you're saying.

OTTO PIENE: No. It won't be the same spirit anyway.

ROBERT BROWN: There's already scores of [00:38:00] things that have been developed in imitation, or at least inspired.

OTTO PIENE: Very much so, very, very much so, scores. Between 100 and 150. I also think, and this is something that Elizabeth can tell you, that I really believe in—that this country is important. You can't do in Holland what we've done here. There's a creative humus in this country. You know, the United States aren't that popular these days in many places because people think oh, America, the U.S., it's really worn and tired, and so on and so forth. It was true to a degree. However, I feel that the creative humus, if I look at the artists here, encourages so much more freedom and so much more breadth than what I see, say, in France. It's really been important that this place happened here. It wouldn't have happened elsewhere. Even, you know, the fact that so many consequences, or the Bauhaus came to fruition, the new Bauhaus isn't entirely without bearing on what has happened in this country. Obviously, there's a line there that goes from here to there, to there, to there, to there. But if you kind of look at the records of the center, we've always been a very international center and there have been many, many important foreigners here that have contributed to the center, um, but there is a general vitality that I see with the students here and with many of the fellows here. That's American, and I am not ignoring that. I'm not always [00:40:00] saying it. I'm not always saying to my European, my German friends, that with all your money, why don't you do better stuff?

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, no.

OTTO PIENE: Look at us, you know, our poor fellows and our poor graduate students who, on top of being poor, have to pay $14,600 a year just to be permitted to be students. They would never understand it anyway, even if I tell them that you know, they should try, they wouldn't understand that. But it's really true. If I look at all the money in Cologne, where they are using—they are building this new, um, whatever you want to call it, academy for arts and media. They have so much money. All the man, the president-elect, has to do, is call the secretary of education, and he's getting another half million, and so on and so forth. And what—so far, they are not producing anything impressive, not even a program that's impressive. The program is you know way below, um, what we think, and the same is true with um, with our friends in France. I am not saying that there are not good things happening here and there, but um, that's something pretty—very um, encouraging about the spirit of the young people, the spirit here. And you hope that some of that will come out when we will indeed have our 150 artists here, many of whom will be Americans, and they show what they do, so on and so forth. Um, so I do think, to say it again, the center has a role. I also do think that other people may see that completely differently and you know, other people [00:42:00] may see how the center can work in the future completely differently. That would be really fortunate, if people would, because you know, every next chapter should be a new chapter, and so on and so forth. Anyway, that's yeah, any intelligent person understands that.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]