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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Ron Kent on April 20, 2010. The interview took place in Honolulu, Hawaii, and was conducted by Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Ron Kent has reviewed the transcript. His corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art with Ron Kent at the artist's home in Kailua, Hawaii, on April 20, 2010. This is disc number one. Good afternoon.

RON KENT: Hello, Mija.

MS. RIEDEL: It's great to be here with you in this incredible location. And we thought we would start our conversation with a story you tell about how—

MR. KENT: What I call becoming an artist?

MS. RIEDEL:—becoming an artist, right. Let's start with that.

MR. KENT: I became involved in thinking of it at all as something other than making things for our own home, use, and entertainment. One day, I went to work in my position as a stockbroker; I saw they were taking entries across the street for the Easter Art Festival. So I went home and got a little thing I had made about the size of a tennis ball. I'll tell you more about that later. What it was is less important than what happened. I had to pay \$5 to join the association and another five [dollars] to enter that show, and did, and forgot about it.

That night at dinner, we got a phone call from a man who introduced himself as the president of the association. He was a blacksmith sculptor; it's a good organization, the largest and oldest in the islands. He was so pleased that I had joined—"welcome"—and would I mind if he nominated me to be president? [They laugh.] Yes. That was how we—the explanation—[laughs]—followed.

They had 75 members, 70 of whom were women. And in those days women weren't apologetic to say they wanted a male as president. You could never do that today, but this is before militant feminism. They liked having a man running as president and the other five had already taken their turn. [Laughs.] They were so glad when I joined.

MS. RIEDEL: What year was that?

MR. KENT: Around 1967.

MS. RIEDEL: That's funny. And what inspired you—

MR. KENT: Maybe 1966.

MS. RIEDEL:—to do this?

MR. KENT: Well, you know, I accepted but I took it as a responsibility. I would come to meetings, I started visiting the artists, I joined the shows that came along, just became involved because that was my responsibility as president.

MS. RIEDEL: So, two questions: What inspired you to bring an object over and enter this fair? And two, what inspired you to accept the presidency of the group?

MR. KENT: The object was just—"competitive" is too strong a word but I tend to measure myself against other people and they were—it was a juried show. They were judging these works and I had never submitted myself for judgment before.

MS. RIEDEL: As an artist?

MR. KENT: As an artist, right. So that was a little bit of a challenge. As for accepting the presidency, I was tickled

by the idea. [Laughs.] I didn't know what it entailed but it was an interesting involvement.

MS. RIEDEL: Was the object made out of—was it a wood object?

MR. KENT: No, it was—let's get back to that later, because, perversely, I had never considered myself a wood artist. And later we will talk more about "why wood."

In this case, it was about the size of a tennis ball. It was a clear glass sphere that had been sold in the craft shops for making Christmas tree ornaments. I'd filled it with pearlescent polyester resin. And embedded within the resin were nine little tiny neon bulbs set up to a timing mechanism, a resistance capacitance—going back to my engineering days—mechanism that caused random blinking.

So these nine bulbs were blinking in random fashion where you couldn't see them. They were embedded in the plastic but it looked like a flame playing around the outside of the bulb. I found it really interesting and fun to look at. And it was an aesthetically pleasing design. So that was what that was.

MS. RIEDEL: That's really interesting, though, because when I think about that, so many of the elements of your work are embedded in that object.

MR. KENT: I keep coming back—I haven't changed all that much over the years. Yes, by looking at my old stories, you see that it is woven through to today.

MS. RIEDEL: I think of the sphere, I think of the luminescence, I think of the asymmetry and the randomness. A lot of the seeds of the work are in that object.

MR. KENT: I've just found different ways of using it.

MS. RIEDEL: That's fascinating. [Laughs.] That's a great way to start. Well, let's move back and take care of a little biographical background and move forward.

MR. KENT: Can you switch us off for a moment?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. KENT: I'm going to go try and take a ...

[Audio Break.]

MR. KENT: That was how I first became involved and it was really a sense of responsibility to be—remain involved. And it's fun. I got to meet interesting people. I liked the ongoing measure and judgments. And my goal then was to show a broad, broad range of expression to be in different media.

There was, a year later, the art academy [Now Honolulu Museum of Art -RK] had an Easter show. And in that case—still with the blinking lights, but in this case, with an egg about the size of a football. But within that clear plastic egg there were blinking lights and an electronic metronome. So it was ticking at about the speed of a heart. A lot of wiring and circuitry showing, some of it artificial—it wasn't doing anything—just to get the wiring in there and make it look technical and yet an egg.

I liked—and I found that as one of my elements. I liked the tension and the contrast between the natural form of the egg and the high-tech elements that I had within it. I had and entered polished pieces of driftwood similar to some that I still have on my shelves. Came back with another blinking light thing.

This was in the late '60s, early '70s when blinking lights and light shows were really the thing. And I liked it with the colors. But in each case, it was also the idea of taking something that might have been even ordinary or technological and finding a way to make it look artistic. So that was my challenge there.

MS. RIEDEL: Now, you were working as a stockbroker. Had you been leading sort of a double life and exploring arts on the side for a number of years? Was this a recent development?

MR. KENT: Double life was too strong; it was more like a casual hobby. I didn't think of it as—not even to the terms that somebody would think of himself as a golfer. No, it was just something I enjoyed doing; spent just a couple hours a week doing my own thing plus going to those meetings that I had to attend.

MS. RIEDEL: And had you been doing this on and off for a period, or ever since—

MR. KENT: Always.

MS. RIEDEL: Always?

MR. KENT: Earlier, there were times when I had to make furniture because that was the only way we could afford it.

MS. RIEDEL: But this wasn't furniture. These were art objects; there was a function to that.

MR. KENT: When I reached a point where I didn't have to make something, I could indulge the fun—yes, art is a better word for it. They were just for the challenge of making them.

At one point at about that time, there had been a novelty toy going around. It consisted of a little box about the size of an index-card box, maybe four by six by eight [inches], with a switch on the top.

A feature of this box—people may remember that it consisted of throwing the switch. And then there would be a whirring and a buzzing. The box would just sit there and make noise. And suddenly, a trap-door would open. A little hand would pop out and turn the switch off. [They laugh.] And then go back in and that was the end of it. Its only function in life was to turn itself off. It was a lot of fun, but it also got me thinking: How would I make one of those with the tools I have available, the materials, the skill, and without spending a lot of money?

Those are the important elements that have permeated my work ever since. Virtually all of—no, no. A great many of the most exciting things I went on started with the question, how would I do that? Never mind how they did it or how it is done. If I wanted to accomplish that, how would I go about it—recognizing my limitations? Later, if we talk about creativity—please make a note, or I'll think of it—but I consider limitations a very, very important element in my own creativity.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about it a little bit now. How so? How in particular? It's certainly something you've mentioned again and again. What comes to mind at the moment?

MR. KENT: Okay, I mentioned the criteria. I'll give you a specific example that came many years later but it exemplifies it well. After I was well into being a woodturner—we're jumping ahead 20 years or more now. Typically—

MS. RIEDEL: Well, we're mentioning topics, I think, that will repeat during the conversation, so it's interesting to talk about them up-front.

MR. KENT: It's a good time for that. I started my turning gathering logs and driftwood. Eventually when I discovered Norfolk pine and the beauties I could bring out in it, I got in touch with tree trimmers and told them when they cut down a tree I'd buy—I'd pay them to deliver it. The wood was always free but I paid them to deliver it to my house.

And typically, these were small-time business men who would cut the trees into logs small enough that they could throw on their truck. So when I went to make a bowl out of it, I had the limitations—the envelope—of the size log they had brought me. We'll go into more detail on that later, too.

But on one occasion, a big-time tree trimmer brought me what amounted to 12-foot-long sections of a three-foot-diameter tree and dropped these large logs on my front lawn. But it was the first time I could decide where it should be cut.

Now, Norfolk pine has the knots at intervals. And where those knots occurred within the pre-cut log was a determinant in how I would make the bowl. In this case, for the first time, I could decide where that knot was going to be. And for over a week I was creatively paralyzed. I went out there in the morning with my chainsaw and I couldn't bring myself to make the first cut. How could I get it "just" where I wanted it?

Eventually, I started up the saw and made what amounted to random cuts. And then I was in my milieu. Now I knew what my limitations were, and I could take them into my studio and start making a bowl. But when there were no limitations, I was paralyzed. I've heard similar stories about artists with a blank canvas. Making that first beginning is intimidating.

Okay, let's get back on track.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, let me—I think limitation is a really important concept to bring up early on to address now because it's going to run throughout our conversation, I'm sure.

MR. KENT: Without my being so aware of it.

MS. RIEDEL: And also problem-solving. You were talking about challenging and the importance of that. And I think that's another critical element, yes.

MR. KENT: Problem-solving, it may be a trite word, but it's an excellent description of what kept me involved. I remember another one; this also was from those early art days. I saw an hourglass that I liked very much. I remember this particularly because I was, and in memory, am so aware of the steps I went through. It started out with, gee, I'd like one of those; I don't want to spend the money to buy it; how would I go about making one?

I remember going to the grocery store and looking at all of the salad bottles with the globe and the neck. Now, could I cut off the neck and put two of those spheres together? I looked at chemical flasks and beakers. I certainly couldn't be a glassblower, but what existing forms could I do? And finally decided, hey, I can't work in the round at all, and decided I would use a flat format. Then I went for simplification. Instead of a square cross section, I decided to go to a triangular cross section.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was for which pieces?

MR. KENT: An hourglass.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh right, okay.

MR. KENT: It was, in essence, two elongated triangular pyramids. One with a broad base on the bottom coming to a thin, thin vertex and then broadening out to what was now an inverted triangular pyramid.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. It sounds almost like the decanter shape we were looking at earlier, yes.

MR. KENT: It's reflected in that shape, also, and in the trilons—the tall, slender, again, triangular pyramids. Diverging a little, I never can understand why the triangular pyramid is so overlooked as a beautiful, perfect form. We've gotten so used to these square-based pyramids of the Egyptians. Later, one of the formats, the non-wood formats I liked—and you'll see one here in the living room—is an equilateral, triangular pyramid where I left off one face and used mirrors on the inside faces. Boy, there's a great interplay of image there.

Okay, so here I am, designing an hourglass using materials I can manipulate that aren't too expensive, in forms that I can handle. And the triangular pyramids, then; a wooden base and triangular, wooden uprights. Then I had the problem of what will be my sand. I ended up with a combination of black carbide grit that they use in sandblasting. It's hard, sharp, bright crystals of black and tiny micro-bubbles of glass that they use to make street signs, and the stripes reflect your headlights. They're the reflectors.

Then it was a problem of finding where to get them. There were so many little, individual problems on the way to solving the one of making the hourglass that it was a delightful project that took months to complete.

MS. RIEDEL: I think it's very interesting to note a lot of your work centers around a process of inquiry, it seems.

MR. KENT: Yes, the problem-solving. And sometimes, having solved the problem intellectually, I had to make it to see if I was right. [Laughs.] That has happened. I also learned—again, money has always been a consideration.

MS. RIEDEL: Spoken like a stockbroker.

MR. KENT: Well, I mean, not having a lot; for various reasons and a number of start-overs. That's another whole set of stories that I'll be glad to tell you. But though we consistently lived in an upper-middle-class way of living, it pretty well used the money I had. And this was further exacerbated by the fact that I started over again a number of times. That will tell you more about me, and I'll get to that.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, maybe we should go back and walk through that now.

MR. KENT: Good. I left engineering to become a stockbroker.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's back up even further. Let's cover a few basics. You were born in Chicago, 1931?

MR. KENT: Good. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: What was the date?

MR. KENT: May 18, 1931.

MS. RIEDEL: May eighteenth, okay. And your parents, what did they do?

MR. KENT: My father was a Yugoslav immigrant who, before my conscious awareness, had become a butcher and then owned his own butcher shop. Maybe even two, but this is before I knew about it—I was young.

MS. RIEDEL: What was his name?

MR. KENT: Milan Kestenbaum, my birth name. K-E-S-T-E-N-B-A-U-M. While I was still a baby, he lost most of his eyesight. And with an insurance plan he had, moved to California with my mother, who was an invalid. The two of them shared tasks and he would do laundry and cooking, which often she couldn't. I had a sister.

MS. RIEDEL: What was your mother's name, and your sister's name?

MR. KENT: Elizabeth, as my daughter is. Biss, B-I-S-S. She was born in Chicago but her parents were Austrian-Hungarian. So we grew up in Los Angeles. Hollywood.

MS. RIEDEL: And your sister, what was her name?

MR. KENT: Dianne with two Ns.

MS. RIEDEL: Just the two of you?

MR. KENT: Just the two of us.

MS. RIEDEL: And you moved there when you were very young?

MR. KENT: Three to four years old. So it was the only growing up I knew. I have memories of Los Angeles in the '30s, which served me well in my financial career because I have some memories, some reconstructions of Los Angeles in the Depression. Suffice it to say that those later overcame the greed, if you will—the fun and excitement of playing the market—and influenced my thinking.

I've been financially conservative throughout my career. And found a great deal of challenge, excitement and satisfaction in trying to debunk the baloney that has to come to be—to surround what is now called investing. I won't spend too much time on this because—

MS. RIEDEL: I was going to say, we can have a whole conversation about this. [They laugh.]

MR. KENT: I could spend the rest of the day because I love talking about it. But I will briefly say that I think that virtually everything we hear today is merely legitimizing speculative gambling. That the old ideas of investment have—maybe indeed come back in a few years but have now been put aside in terms of speculating on what other people will pay for it. And I think that's a good time to get off of it because I could stay right on that subject. Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: This idea was formed when you were very young; this idea of frugality and conservative—

MR. KENT: Well, of recognizing my limitations. I wasn't a good—though they didn't have credit cards, I wouldn't have been a good candidate for overcharging on my card. I've lived within my means. But lived to the full extent of them, hence that period when I was renting instead of owning because I could rent a much better house than I could have afforded to own.

So I've used my money liberally but wisely during that period. But it has been an element and I would have felt selfish using it on tools and materials. I started bringing that up when we were talking about solving problems. I had mentioned earlier I would visualize the problem and a solution, and then I had to test the solution to see if it was right.

Well, in order to not waste money, I would then buy the cheapest materials possible to make it. And if it worked, I was stuck with a shoddy—[they laugh]—poor material thing. After all of that work that went into making it, I wished I had spent a little more money on better materials when it was a question.

So one of the lessons I've learned since then, and as money became less crucial, was to make it out of good materials and make it carefully the first time even though there is a part of me that wants to race to the conclusion. I'll make it with care so that if it is right I'll be pleased with it.

MS. RIEDEL: As a child—I'm just going to move us back to the early years for a moment. As a child, did you spend a lot of time working with your hands?

MR. KENT: My father did because he was at home taking care of the house and the family. He gardened. He made things—pretty crude things—out of concrete. He could fix whatever needed fixing—maybe not the way an electrician or a plumber or a carpenter might have fixed them, but so that they would work. And there's a lot of that in me to this day.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. Well, it comes back to the question of limitations: working with what he had to make

something that accomplished what he wanted.

MR. KENT: One of his limitations was training and skill in those handcrafts. But he got what he wanted and made it work. And I'm still largely that way.

MS. RIEDEL: Now, were you in Los Angeles proper?

MR. KENT: No. Picture the Los Angeles of the '30s. The rest of the country—the sophisticated—the New Yorkers, the Chicagoans, even San Franciscans, considered it a big farm town. We had the population already but it was sprawled all over the place. And the sophistication was that of the Rudolph Valentino Hollywood of the Roaring '20s. So technically, my part of Los Angeles was west of downtown and already on the outskirts of what we would call Hollywood.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And did you take art classes?

MR. KENT: No.

MS. RIEDEL: No art classes, no elementary school classes?

MR. KENT: No, just the usual. In junior high school—and I was already in an academic course. Frankly, I was an exceptional student. Very exceptional—[inaudible].

MS. RIEDEL: Of your class?

MR. KENT: In the school, in high school. And later in boot camp.

MS. RIEDEL: And what were your interests? Were you interested in math and science at the time, because your degree originally was in engineering?

MR. KENT: Let's finish your first question. In the academic track, we had to take one-half semester of woodshop, print shop, electric and metal. So my only art or craft training ever was one-half semester of woodshop.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. In high school?

MR. KENT: In junior high, yes. By high school, it was all academic. As for my interests, when I later took placement tests, they told me I could do anything except accounting. [They laugh.] That I should keep away from bookkeeping and accounting but, other than that, had very high scores in all forms. At the time, they needed engineers so they encouraged me to take engineering.

MS. RIEDEL: And were you interested in engineering on your own or were you following a suggestion?

MR. KENT: I was interested in engineering and had a lucky accident there: UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles]. Growing up in Los Angeles there were two obvious choices: USC [University of Southern California, Los Angeles] if you could afford it and UCLA if your grades were good enough. So I went to UCLA, which was free to Californians at the time.

MS. RIEDEL: It was free?

MR. KENT: It was \$35 to join the student body for Californians. Nice, but high—very high academic standards.

MS. RIEDEL: So this would have been 1950, 1949?

MR. KENT: In '49. UCLA at that time was starting what would be the newest major engineering school in the country. They polled the industry and found that almost without exception the big companies said, we'll teach them the specialty. You give us a good, broad background. It turned out that an electrical engineer either would go to work in doing mechanics or might join Westinghouse, but they would re-educate him anyhow to their way of being electrical.

So the UCLA course was what they formally titled "general engineering." And I loved it. I loved the math, the physics, the thermodynamics. It was more science than engineering. And it served me in good stead because my first job was with Aerojet General firing rockets, which didn't come under any category.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. One quick question preceding college: How did you like to spend your free time as a child? Did you build things? Did you go to museums? Read?

MR. KENT: Easy question—no, I was the consummate bookworm/nerd. I had very poor social skills. I had a reputation in school: I'd walk in the room and the teacher would say, Ronald, leave your book at the front desk.

[They laugh.] Because she knew I would be reading something other than what she was teaching.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. What did you like to read?

MR. KENT: Everything.

MS. RIEDEL: Fiction, nonfiction? Everything?

MR. KENT: Everything, really broad, broad range. They could never disapprove. I was ahead of—way, way ahead of grade level in what I was reading. But it took a toll on my social skills, which I've never recovered, really.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] I don't think that's true.

MR. KENT: It is true. At age 16, there was another important thing. I was also skinny and picked on. The next-door neighbor and I bought a set of barbells. And I was fortunate enough to have—I've had awfully good genetic accidents in my life. Very quickly and without nearly the effort my friends—who were [inaudible]—I developed very well. And actually, at 16, 17, won a local physique contest.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you really? They stopped picking [on you -RK], I'm assuming.

MR. KENT: Without working nearly—yes, you know what there was no anti-Semitism in my neighborhood. At least, it stopped while I was around. [Laughs.] I was still the cowardly bookworm I had always been. Later at college—

MS. RIEDEL: But you didn't look it.

MR. KENT:—I went on to take wrestling, which doesn't make you tough or mean, but at least it gave me a little confidence. And having built the muscles, learned some coordination and learned to use them. But these were elements that made me who I am.

MS. RIEDEL: So no great interest in sports?

MR. KENT: I couldn't be interested in sports. I was part of the package deal. Do you know what I mean? They chose teams and then, okay, you get those three and we get these three. [They laugh.] And they invented a new field in baseball for me to stand in. So, no, they always preached teamwork but teamwork didn't include getting the ball to me. It meant that if it ever happened to get to me, I should quickly give it to somebody else. [They laugh.]

That was what appealed to me about weightlifting and wrestling and, later, snorkeling and scuba diving. They were things I could do by myself without depending on other people.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. You mentioned books. Were there any in particular that stood out from your young years as especially formative?

MR. KENT: Yes, of course. Though, the first that pops into mind because it's such a usual answer to that question: *The Fountainhead* [Ayn Rand; Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1943] And later, though they seemed repetitive, her other books: *Atlas Shrugged* [Ayn Rand; New York: Random House, 1957] and some of her pamphlets. But it got to be the same story again and again.

But *The Fountainhead* and, like it, a book called *The City of Trembling Leaves* [Walter Van Trilburg Clark; New York: Random House, 1945] about Reno, which had a hero an awful lot like Howard Roark in *The Fountainhead*. In this case, he was a violinist, but with a strong sense of who and what he was and the integrity to go with it. At least that's how I remember it.

But I also read, gosh, [*The*] *Metamorphosis* [Franz Kafka, 1915] and some of his others. With age, I can't bring up his name now. Remind me.

MS. RIEDEL: Kafka?

MR. KENT: Thank you, Franz Kafka. I'll need [reminding -RK] once in a while. In Kafka, I later learned another important lesson. It took five or six of his books—or shorter stories—before I learned that you don't have to finish it if you don't like it. [They laugh.] And you can already see where it's going. And with Kafka, I learned you can see where it's going and it's not going to get any better. [They laugh.]

So what was that? *In the Penal Colony* [Kafka, 1919]—it's a deeply detailed description of a torture device. And you keep reading farther and farther, waiting for some bit of lightness to quit, and it just gets worse. So that was an important principle in life; whether it's movies or anything else, to see where it's going and to be willing to



get out of it.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, that's interesting, especially given the number of times you mentioned that you've started in a new direction or stopped one thing and moved into something else.

MR. KENT: That became a life philosophy with me. I don't know how far we want to get from things into that but there even—there's a book called *Yesterday Ended Last Night* Self-help booklet published in the early 1960s - [RK].

Ah, but this also goes back to engineering. In the one economics class we had, they introduced a concept that was called the "sunk cost." In essence, that every valid decision begins with the present and looks at the future. Never mind what you've done to—what you bought last week, what machinery you've put in. Where are you right now? Don't let the past handicap the future.

So my starting over was often saying what would I do—in fact, I brought that into my financial life by making up a slogan. It's probably easier to apply in money than most other places. But it's a good slogan: If you wouldn't buy it, don't keep it. [They laugh.] That every day you keep it, it's as if you had bought it all over again.

I've applied that to where I lived, what I did for a living, to my wife [laughs]. You know, I can honestly say if I were getting married tomorrow, that's the woman I'd want to marry; to the car I drive. She's held up well for 59 years of marriage. [They laugh.] Yes, we've changed together. But skipping who I was and what I was; this is where I am and it's what I would do in each of these things.

MS. RIEDEL: And she's been a real critical eye and creative partner for you in many ways; Myra.

MR. KENT: She's been wonderful, getting back to creativity. She doesn't let me fool myself much. She doesn't let me go off on tangents that I might otherwise have gone off on.

MS. RIEDEL: And at the same, she insists on bringing you back to tangents that she would like to see you take up again. For example, I'm thinking of the *Vortex* piece that she kept after you on for years.

MR. KENT: I like her taste. [They laugh.] The *Vortex*, right.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, to do another piece where one could see the interior.

MR. KENT: She doesn't let me be lazy or rest on laurels, true.

MS. RIEDEL: So there was really no early use of art materials? No exploration of museums or anything like that?

MR. KENT: Nothing more artistic than putting boards on concrete blocks to make bookshelves in college.

MS. RIEDEL: When you think about it, what would you identify as your most rewarding educational experience?

MR. KENT: That's very hard because I did like—let's go to the least rewarding: history, maybe geography. Maybe even, in general—and I hate to say this because it won't describe me well, but what is commonly called the humanities. Maybe because I dislike—though I read extensively, as I'd mentioned, but I let it carry me where it was going to carry me rather than having channeled reading.

Oh, I want to go back to books. I found *Flatland* [*Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, Edwin Abbott Abbott, 1884]. I think that was written even in the late 1800s but it gave me a way of thinking I could visualize dimensions; a way of looking at the world.

MS. RIEDEL: Who wrote that?

MR. KENT: Under the name of A. Square, it was written by Edwin Abbott. And that reminds me that a book called *Mathematics and the Imagination* [Edward Kasner and James Newman; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1940] was very important to me.

MS. RIEDEL: That sounds right.

MR. KENT: Ah, and that, in turn, reminds me: Very, very important in my life and development, what was then something of a broad fad was general semantics. In essence, you could call that a—there was a book called *The Meaning of Meaning* [C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards; 1923]. It's not semantics, not merely as linguistics but more deeply looking into—well, in fact, the big book, I think, titled *General Semantics* by Alexander Korzybski reads like and looks like a one-volume encyclopedia of the universe [*Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*].

You can't begin to understand and convey meaning until you have some understanding of this broad range of things, ranging from atoms and molecules to interstellar. And Korzybski in *General Semantics* and later, *The Field*, felt that all of that was important, so it fit in with my loving the generality.

May I come—at this point, come back to a discussion of the concept of general?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. KENT: In science and in my engineering degree, I learned what the word really means. In our ordinary conversation if I were to say “generally speaking,” you sort of tune out a little bit. You're expecting a broad statement.

In science I've learned that that's the finest compliment you can make. “Generally speaking” means it covers the general case. It covers all instances. When you start getting specific or particular, you're limiting it to one application.

Einstein's theory of relativity is properly called the general theory of relativity, again, because it applies to everything. So generalizing is really a broad—you encompass so much more than when you are particularizing. And many of the things you and I will be talking about, particularly in rules that I've made up for myself, I will be showing you that I'm generalizing and that this is something that covers a broad—the entire range of the subject.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, just thinking about your work that makes sense. There is a sense of general there. There's a very—well, think of the bowls. There's a general sense there that there's a few basic forms. The variation, the themes—the variations on that particular theme is endless.

MR. KENT: And using the word “vessel”—vessel is an all-encompassing, or, at least, a very broadly encompassing term today.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. KENT: Pardon me for a—did we get away from any of those topics without answering them? You told me we should be careful of that.

MS. RIEDEL: No, I think we're fine. There's nothing coming to mind right now. If it does, we circle back around.

MR. KENT: Undoubtedly.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I'm sure. So you finished up at UCLA in '57 with a degree in engineering?

MR. KENT: Yes, there was a three-year hiatus for the Coast Guard and the introduction to Hawaii. Then went back into engineering and finished it.

MS. RIEDEL: And that was one of the things that was most significant about the Coast Guard, was that it did introduce you to Hawaii and brought you back here, eventually, for one reason or—

MR. KENT: Yes, to raise a family.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes. So talking about stopping and starting, you finished at UCLA, you began to work at Aerojet and you were there for three years?

MR. KENT: Remember, I went into engineering because they needed engineers. I graduated as one of the highest-paid members of the graduating class, bought a house in eastern Los Angeles, in West Covina near Azusa, to go with the job.

And six months later, Aerojet laid off 1,500 engineers—not 1,500 people; 1,500 engineers—on the basis of seniority, of course. It wasn't as an attractive field anymore. Over the next three years, I had four jobs. Fortunately, each was a little better than the one before. But I was ready to leave the field by then, also.

MS. RIEDEL: So there was nothing about it that was especially compelling?

MR. KENT: Worse, the appeal and challenge of being an engineer from the outside loses its glamour when you're doing what somebody above you tells you what to do as part of a major industry. And there's very little room for creativity on the levels that I was at.

In fact, a problem I've had in life is when there are people watching how I do things. I don't come off well. When they look at my results, I'm outstanding. But I don't do it the way they would have thought it should be done.

So in a milieu where I had a supervisor and he had a supervisor—and getting along with people—I was still this bookworm. I didn't fit in well. Later, as a stockbroker—

MS. RIEDEL: One quick question: During this time you were working as an engineer. Is this when you began to work as an artist or being—as a craftsman, making furniture for your home?

MR. KENT: No, I can't remember having had the time to do it.

MS. RIEDEL: So that would happen later?

MR. KENT: I did put on flagstones for the patio. But I can't remember doing anything you might now call artistic or decorative as an engineer.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember when you did start to do that?

MR. KENT: After I had changed professions and was getting established in San Diego.

MS. RIEDEL: And you moved to San Diego in the early '60s?

MR. KENT: Yes about 1960, '61.

MS. RIEDEL: As a stockbroker.

MR. KENT: As a stockbroker. A new profession, new man with a new company; new city.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you have any training or were they going to train you? How did you make that decision?

MR. KENT: There was a six-month apprentice period—oh, I didn't know what I was doing. I certainly didn't know I was becoming a commissioned salesman, because the idea of selling or salesmanship was repugnant to me. I would not have become a salesman. [They laugh.] The title scared me away. And that, indeed, is what any stockbroker is.

But by the time I learned that—[they laugh]—I'd already seen that there were areas of professionalism and that it didn't have to mean selling something to somebody that he didn't want and didn't need; that indeed, I saw important things in it beyond the speculative excitement that had brought me into it.

I used to use a phrase, it was an Austrian saying that I'd learned from my grandmother. She says, "Men look for sex and find love. Women look for love and find sex." [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: That sounds like a perfect saying.

MR. KENT: That's just from my old European—Viennese grandmother. But it applied. I'd come to that profession for excitement and found substance. Other people come to it thinking they are looking for substance and get seduced by the excitement. And it offers both. The substance part is deeply overshadowed by the excitement, but it's there.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting, though because there was still something that you were interested in doing, that that [job] didn't fulfill. There was still some need you had to begin to work. Creatively, it was not actually happening through stockbroking?

MR. KENT: Yes there were challenges. That was the time I made that little hand in the box we were talking about. I'm trying to remember what else I might have—

MS. RIEDEL: So that was in San Diego?

MR. KENT: In San Diego. I made other things that were more practical. I made a little kayak that we could take out on the lake.

MS. RIEDEL: You made a kayak?

MR. KENT: It worked. It served its purpose as a kayak. It lasted the year or so after I had made it until we moved. It wasn't the best-looking kayak in the world but it worked.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting that you were constantly from the start, though, working with your hands.

MR. KENT: Yes. And my mind. I'm still not sure which defines me more. Neither.

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds like there's a back-and-forth.

MR. KENT: They are totally balanced, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And I would assume that with a project like the kayak there was an intellectual curiosity in how you could make it.

MR. KENT: Again, with the materials and skills and without spending a lot of money, I ended up making it a lot like you would make a flying model airplane with ribs and stringers. And then stretched, unbleached muslin—you know, the most inexpensive cloth I could find—and painted it with resin the way you would fiberglass. So it was lightweight, waterproof, and easy to do.

MS. RIEDEL: We'll pause here and swap the disc.

[END DISC 1.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art with Ron Kent at his home in Kailua, Hawaii, on April 20, 2010. This is disc two. You were saying before we moved on—we discussed briefly an interest you had early on in poetry as well, as one of the subjects you were interested in reading.

MR. KENT: Poetry comprised a significant part of my reading. Primarily, in thinking of it now, two specific sources, though poetry in general—there's that word. The *Rubaiyat* [*The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*] in particular, many of the quatrains express poetically things that have become an important part of my philosophy of life, including that the future is starting now; some for wonders of this world and some for the prophet's paradise to come. Take the cash and let the credit go; don't heed the rumble of a distant drum.

There's a lot of living—what the big seminars, like EST [Erhard Seminars Training] called “be here now.” Of living today for today; looking to the future. Omar Khayyam talks about “unborn tomorrow” and “dead yesterday.” So the *Rubaiyat* gives me a lot of poetic ways of saying things I like and believe.

And a wonderful little book that is probably in its hundredth printing now called *One Hundred and One Famous Poems* [Roy J. Cook; Chicago: The Cable Company, 1929]. It runs a range from Patrick Henry's “The War Inevitable” through Polonius' “Advice to Laertes.” A broad, broad range of poetry. It's a complete education in poetry and one that I've bought and rebought and given to friends ever since I was a teenager.

MS. RIEDEL: Who publishes that? Do you know?

MR. KENT: No, but I've got a copy in the other room. The title lives on. I'm sure that enough other people have been influenced by it.

MS. RIEDEL: *One Hundred and One Famous Poems*. Interesting. And these were books that you were reading in high school?

MR. KENT: In junior high.

MS. RIEDEL: In junior high.

MR. KENT: Yes, I—[whispers] I had a very high IQ.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, yes, you don't have to—it's okay. [Laughs.] It's fine.

MR. KENT: I needed that. It wasn't even stimulation. It was food. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And how did you come across that? Was there a teacher that introduced you to poetry? How did that enter your world?

MR. KENT: No, I just kept—I haunted the library; first the school library, then the public library. Eventually, they let me even go into the locked cabinets. [Laughs.] I have to laugh at things I learned and didn't know what they meant. That's something I've later come back to in people.

And in all facets of my life, I've learned that there are people who know more than they understand. I consider that a very important thing. Just as I delineate between data and information, raw data isn't the same as information. And information isn't the same as knowledge. And finally, knowledge isn't as important as understanding. And we can often be fooled by one into thinking we've seen the other.

Again, back to the other profession, I've learned that some of the most dangerous people I met were honest, intelligent fools; that honesty and even intelligence are like a three-legged stool. Unless you've got that third leg of judgment, that the other two will let you down every time. So those were all lessons that I picked up along the way.

MS. RIEDEL: For some reason, that makes me think of your bowls and your willingness to take them as far as you possibly could, that there was an experimentation in discernment there and a willingness to take this as far as you could, but because it was a safe place to experiment. And then the results could be exquisite. But that called for pushing it a little further than you might normally.

MR. KENT: Perfect. It's even stronger than you've said. When I made too many in a row that didn't break, I would have a sense of anxiety and nervousness. There was something in my mind telling me I wasn't pushing far enough, that I was playing it too safe, that I'd better take more chances. Not consciously, not an awareness, but just looking back at things that I did. And similarly, if I broke too many in a row, I would retreat to a safer form and then venture out again.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. KENT: But I got anxious when things were too comfortable.

MS. RIEDEL: So there was a continual—there was an ongoing reformulating of where the edge was.

MR. KENT: Yes, well said. I wish I'd said that.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] You've said so many wonderful things. We'll get to many of them.

I think the poetry was a wonderful final step in the early days because I think—actually, it makes a lot of sense when I think about your work, and we will talk about religion and spirituality and where it does or does not fit in your work. But I think the poetry addresses that in many ways.

MR. KENT: It certainly fits in who I am. And then the work reflects it, so I can see that.

MS. RIEDEL: So let's move on to the actual start of the woodworking. Before the lathe, you had been working in wood?

MR. KENT: Before the lathe, I'd made some furniture that we needed. Some of it got nice-looking—I paid attention to the design as well as the utility.

MS. RIEDEL: Quick question—were you looking at contemporary furniture at this point in order to design your own work?

MR. KENT: I was seeing it, of course, and we bought some. But looking at it to—yes, in fact, the bed I made was strongly influenced by a bed we had seen, a platform bed.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you looking at much contemporary design?

MR. KENT: It was contemporary, it was simple and clean. And mine was how I would make that bed, so it had the touches that were needed because of the heavy limitations I had in tools, but the bed, in particular, was strongly influenced. But later, we can walk in the room and I'll show you a set of tables I made to go with it that had no outside influence at all that I'm still—40 years later—very pleased with, that indeed in those, as in many later cases, the limitations forced me to come up with a nicer design than the simpler one I might have seen on the showroom floor.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, interesting.

MR. KENT: Yes, those tables are still among the top pride in my design career.

MS. RIEDEL: Really? Oh, I'd like to see those.

MR. KENT: Good. Want to stop while it's on our mind or—later, we'll go on.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Yes, okay.

MR. KENT: So I was primarily polishing driftwood.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, quick question while I'm thinking about those tables: Forty years later, what about them in particular, now, still resonates with you?

MR. KENT: They still look nice. The fact that I solved the design problem with the criteria I had already told you.

MS. RIEDEL: And what was the problem?

MR. KENT: The problem was tools, skill, material, and money.

MS. RIEDEL: In order to create a form—

MR. KENT: In order to create a nice, usable form. And they're both fully usable and have a form that I think belongs in the Museum of Modern Art [New York, NY].

MS. RIEDEL: So very minimal, very classical, yeah.

MR. KENT: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. The silhouette.

MR. KENT: And not the featureless cube I would have made if I could have made it. I would have preferred just the plain, wooden cube. And instead, it looks more like, if I have to make a comparison, a tesseract. Are you familiar with that?

MS. RIEDEL: Sorry? No.

MR. KENT: There's no such thing a tesseract. Do you know what a Möbius strip is?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. KENT: A Möbius strip takes two dimensions and bends them through a third.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. KENT: If you were to take a cube and bend it through a fourth dimension, it would be a tesseract.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Now I definitely have to see those chairs. [Laughs.]

MR. KENT: I hope that I'm keeping my nomenclature correct.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Yes, I'm sure you are.

MR. KENT: There is such a thing as this form I just described, but I'm not sure a tesseract is the right name for it. But I think so.

MS. RIEDEL: We can figure that out.

MR. KENT: I'd say I've got 60 percent probability.

MS. RIEDEL: So at the same time that you were working on furniture, you were beginning to branch out and experiment primarily with driftwood?

MR. KENT: I wasn't doing a lot of furniture. I did furniture as required, but if I'd see a nice piece of wood on the beach or more particularly, our keawe wood, the Hawaiian mesquite, particularly when that had—that is so heavy; it doesn't even float in the ocean saltwater. And when one has been washing along the bottom for I don't know how long, and finally, in a storm washes up on the shore, it's a rich, dark, heavy reddish-black wood. And just sandpapering it a little and it will have beautiful forms. So I enjoyed putting those on the simplest of bases and sticking them on our shelves.

MS. RIEDEL: So purely sculptural forms when you were polishing them as you found them. You weren't necessarily adjusting—

MR. KENT: Maybe cutting off a knob here and there, but basically it was leaving the nature that I found.

MS. RIEDEL: So coming to the famous story of Myra buying you the lathe in the early '70s. She must have seen something in your love of wood and something in your lack of tools to make you think that this was a good idea.

MR. KENT: Well, partly, it was the problem that all of us middle-class people have with our spouse. [They laugh.] We had kept our tastes within the range of our pocketbooks. And so, too, within that milieu, I had everything I wanted. You know, if I really want—I saw a nice shirt, I could go out and buy it. So what do you get your husband?

We've seen, in good times, a surfeit of executive toys, expensive little doodads to give your office-working husband, the balls, the Newton's balls, the waving kite—all kinds of nonsense that lets you spend time at Christmastime to show somebody you're thinking of them.

In this case, Myra bought me a tool. It was not much more than a toy and appropriately priced. But it made a nice package. And when I opened it, my part in that play was to show my delight in receiving it. I didn't know anything about a lathe. I had seen them at the other corner of that half-semester of woodshop, but we weren't nearly advanced enough to use it. But I knew that you held a sharp tool against a spinning piece of wood.

Now, this was small enough that the spinning piece of wood was not very big. But I went down on the beach. I got a nice piece of driftwood. I used a screwdriver that I'd ground sharp on my millstone and made a little wooden whiskey bottle and then made another and another. Then, I got an idea, and we can look at one on the shelf later, and I shudder to remember it, but I very carefully fed it through the blade of my table saw and cut off the sides to make it flat.

It was rounded on the edges but flattened, reminiscent of the opium bottles that you'll see along with netsuke in a Chinese shop. So I was influenced, there, by those netsuke bottles. But still, out of junky driftwood. And just because I was having so much fun making things, I had to find variations and different shapes. I resisted what I later learned are called weed pots—[they laugh]—the little vases that you stick a flower in because I, by then already, wanted my things to have their own beauty. They weren't there to hold something else or to accomplish anything.

MS. RIEDEL: And the bottle form was what drew you from the start? Or did you start with the eggs?

MR. KENT: Bottles. The eggs came from bottles that had oval and ovaloid [sic] bottoms. Many of my bottles, you see, if you eliminated the drawn-out neck, look like little more than an egg standing on end with a long, long, long neck.

And I stress the "long" because I learned one of my own tastes in art is something that goes beyond what I had expected or wanted it to be; something that leaves me a little bit uncomfortable. That it takes what I'd expected and then pulls me farther.

And the challenge of making those long necks. I've later learned that there are tools that help it and make it a lot easier to do, but out of the, oh, 70 to 100 bottles I've made in my life, none of them was made using what I now know is—I think it's called a steady rest. But it's a way of supporting a long, thin thing. I never did get around to buying one of those. So making this bottle form with a neck up to two feet long and not much thicker than my little finger—ended up with a lot of broken bottles.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. KENT: And though I don't remember for sure, the first of my eggs may well have been a rescue job on a broken bottle form.

MS. RIEDEL: So the concern at this point was purely on form and equally on surface?

MR. KENT: We've jumped past the point where the concern was just if I could get the wood inside of the ugly exterior.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about that.

MR. KENT: The earliest concern was finding an excuse to see what was hiding behind—inside of ugly exterior. I still have one bottle that I was lucky enough to find at a garage sale. I can't imagine who kept it that long, but I'm pleased to see it kept its value because—[they laugh]—still \$5, I'm sure. In the beginning, I gave it away and was glad somebody kept it that long.

But in those days, it was really just to turn the wood to have the fun of seeing it take a form and in finding the occasional beautiful wood inside of the ugly exterior.

MS. RIEDEL: Can you say more about that?

MR. KENT: Yes. You cannot judge a log by its outside, particularly driftwood that has been battered around, that may have barnacles growing on it, that has been weathered. You don't. And because—as we'll get to later, I never really cared much to know the story behind what kind of tree it was, the Latin name for that wood. There's a lot of story that a lot of woodworkers and collectors love talking about.

I remember—or I haven't yet mentioned, but for me, the senses were everything. In this case, what did it look like? But along with that, there was the smell of the wood, the tactile—what it felt like—including a kinesthetic

sense that later saw through into my bowls. What does it heft like? One of my beautiful woods here in Hawaii is called hau. It's magnificent earth tones, slate colors. I love the look of hau. It was easy to work with, but it never had enough heft. It was too light, no substance to it.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. KENT: Later, that also shows up in my bowls, where I learned if I made them uniformly thin, they were too bubble-like that. Even though I can't express how or why I feel it, there's a sense of wanting the bottom to be heavier. You want to know that this is the bottom.

I make the upper rim a little bit heavier also because it's less apt to break. But even more important than that practical consideration, I want this sense of heft on the bottom of my bowl. So kinesthetic is a sense.

And I'm not sure that—yes, some were—and during the making, even hearing your tool against the wood, different woods and different cuts sound different to you. I don't think any of us want to admit it, but there's a point in woodturning where we're not paying full attention to what we're doing, we may be looking in another direction, we may be meditating a little bit, but even while we're not staring right at the tool, we're hearing what's going on. We're sensing the pressures against us, the vibrations; just all kinds of sensory input are going on, even while you're not consciously aware of it.

And all of those were important even before it dawned on me that I could also go for shapes that I liked after I was finished with the working. So that was how the shapes evolved; first into bottle forms. Those morphed more into decanters—squat, oblate bottoms, sometimes with small tops like the bottles, sometimes with broadleaf layered lips that I self-deprecatingly called spittoons.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, the decanter forms, right?

MR. KENT: Right. And that is what eventually became a bowl. I found a challenge in making those lips bigger and thinner. That was hard. So eventually, they were disproportionate to the bottom. It was the technical challenge of making those lips, in this case, that overcame the aesthetics of the form. So my early bowls amounted to a broad lip that just didn't include the base.

Also, right through this point, I had never learned what is now referred to—has always been referred to as faceplate turning. I think we have to go back later, under "influences" and so forth—and I also want to criticize the concept of self-taught. But it was very important to me to learn these things by myself without regard to what was going on in other places.

MS. RIEDEL: And why was that?

MR. KENT: I don't know. I just never had an interest in how other people—because personally, the challenge—I guess I have to say I have a little bubble of obliviousness. I'm not—I hate to admit it—I'm not that interested in other people. [They laugh.] I'm not.

MS. RIEDEL: Fair enough, I appreciate your candor.

MR. KENT: I don't care what they're doing. It was always, how would I do it? How could I do it in my world? So *that* was challenging. *There* were those problems. I could visualize a piece of wood suspended between two points with one of those points imparting a spin to it. That, I could visualize. But the idea of holding it just in one place and the other sticking out over bare space and pushing against it with a tool was beyond my visualization.

MS. RIEDEL: The whole idea, too, of challenging yourself to these extreme forms, do you think that in any way relates to your engineering background? And I ask because I think of James Prestini's work, and he also, I believe, was an engineer.

MR. KENT: He was an engineer, architect, too, I think, yes. But engineering—

MS. RIEDEL: But there is a sense of precision to either of your work that makes me think of engineering, and also a real sense of—I think Glenn Adamson talked about this, but there's an elegance almost of mathematical, formulaic elegance; that higher mathematic form that I think of when I think of your work.

MR. KENT: There may be an element of post-hoc logic. Do you know—

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MR. KENT:—the Latin phrase, *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. It means "after this, therefore because of this." It's a logical fallacy. The classic example is Rome fell after the introduction of Christianity, therefore, fallaciously—or I



heard a great example the other day: Some people think that breakfast causes lunch. [They laugh.] I love it. I wish I had thought of it.

But I began to use it the rest of my life. I wonder if what you're saying, yes, I see that as a common element in each of us, but I wonder if it was a question of cause and effect or maybe it went along with what brought us into engineering in the first place. So recognizing fully the common thread, I'll just wait until I see more evidence before I see it as causal.

Okay, now, I'll pick up my thread.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, please do.

MR. KENT: I talked about suspension between two points. It was natural in making the long bottle forms. That's the way you'd make a bedpost or a rolling pin or a long bottle. The bowls, the way everybody makes them today, mounts them in only one form and it's cantilevered.

My bowls, because of the way I got to them, had a stem coming out of the inside and the outside that later had to be cut off by hand and ground smooth to erase the evidences of it. And even to the point where I later entered them in juried art shows and Bud Jacobson [Edward "Bud" Jacobson], who we'll certainly get to—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, absolutely.

MR. KENT:—bought the vessel—the bottle form, the spittoon in Bud's collection and the three bowls that were in his first collection were all made between centers, in this then—and still—unique, totally unconventional, unorthodox fashion—the hard way to do it.

MS. RIEDEL: How quickly did you identify Norfolk pine as a material of extraordinary potential?

MR. KENT: I was on my third or fourth lathe by then, already. The first one lasted only a couple of weeks. The second one, a Sears Roebuck—no, the second one was a used Delta, then a Sears Roebuck model and finally, it was my own personal design. So it must have been at least two years before I chanced on Norfolk pine. And at this point, let's quickly say that most of what I call Norfolk pine was truly what I now know was Cook pine, a close first cousin.

MS. RIEDEL: Just even driving over here from the airport today, I think I spotted quite a bit of that.

MR. KENT: We can step out the front door. Almost all of them are Cook; about 90 percent of this island.

MS. RIEDEL: Getting back to just the very early forms, the bottles, did you also begin exhibiting them right away?

MR. KENT: Yes. This was during my days as president of the art association. My earliest exhibits were before the lathe, but later, when I got into the lathe and started making nice-looking ones, I gave them to my friends and ultimately entered them in art shows, which was—nobody else was doing it.

There were only two or three people in Hawaii doing any lathe work. Most of those were salad bowls. But the idea of entering it in an art show was foreign. So I first entered the bottle forms. Then we took them to the craft fairs.

Now, a craft fair—and it's only in the last two years that my wife Myra and I learned that when we say craft fair, it wasn't what our mainland colleagues think of. Our idea of craft fair is sitting on the grass in the park with a couple dozen other—in those days—hippies, who were doing macramé, sand-cast candles, and the like.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. KENT: So we went to those craft fairs, sold out—showed, gave away—one thing I could never resist was a younger girl in a braless T-shirt. Gave away more bottles than I sold. Getting back on the subject—[they laugh]. At the craft fairs, I don't even remember if I was doing bowls at all, but certainly the bulk of what we were doing at the craft fairs were bottle forms. And eventually, what del Mano [del Mano Gallery], the important Los Angeles gallery, bought here at a craft fair and took back were bottle forms.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting to me, too, because from the very start of your career, there is a sense of working in series or a sense of theme and variation. A sense of—I think Glenn Adamson, again, talked about just exhaustive analysis to the point of refining your form to a degree of perfection or establishing a range of variety of that form within given parameters, but then set up some sort of dialog among the forms themselves.

MR. KENT: I got a lesson in that from Dave Ellsworth [David Ellsworth]. I was one of the demonstrators. This was after the Jacobson show [*Woodturning: Vision and Concept*, 1985] and the growth of woodturning and mine being carried along with that. And I was a demonstrator at a mainland symposium. And I was—

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember where and when?

MR. KENT: I'm pretty sure this was Dale Nish's. He had an annual symposium in Salt Lake City. Dale was the woodshop teacher at BYU [Brigham Young University] and an important person in the growth of woodturning. And he invited me and I was making bottle forms.

MS. RIEDEL: So this would have been the late '70s? Mid-'70s?

MR. KENT: No, it was after Jacobson. So it had to be the early, mid '80s. Maybe '85. But Dave is the consummate diplomat and never criticized anybody. But one day, a year later, when he was here in Hawaii visiting, he came to my home and saw a bunch of the bottles like this. I don't remember whether he actually made a sound or it was just his face, but it was "aha."

He'd never understood, why is this guy—you know, here we are to learn woodturning technique and he's making those simple bottles. I'm projecting what I think he must have been thinking. I know Dale didn't invite me back either. [They laugh.] But when Dave then saw a body of the work, he understood it.

And though that wasn't the birth of it in me, I've always seen sequence as important. I remember locally, in a show, a young couple who were making chess sets. Very artistic, in some cases. Quite large tabletop chess sets. But I could see a sequence in their work. [Telephone rings.] It excites me—

MS. RIEDEL: Just wait a bit.

MR. KENT: It excites me to see sequence in anybody's work.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, proceed, please.

MR. KENT: You had commented on sequence in my work, that you can see it. I'm glad to hear that because I find it—this contradicts what I'd said earlier about—it's not that I'm not at all interested [in other people], just not very interested or patient. But when I see things that other people have done, whether it's writing, painting, I find I like seeing where it has come from, to see how—

MS. RIEDEL: A body of work.

MR. KENT: Maybe, again, because it relates to me. Because in my own work, even while I'm making something, I keep coming to crossroads and I have to force myself to stay on the original track because even while I'm finishing the first piece, I've reached a crossroad at which I thought, wouldn't it be interesting if instead of making this flat, I made it rounded? Now I've got to come back and make another one rounded. Then I ask myself, what if I made it large? So each piece is like a tree that suggests a lot of other things. And it's fun and interesting to trace them back and to see that this development occurs.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. And that leads to another question that I wanted to ask you, which is, where do the ideas for the work come from? You've just answered that. It seems that many of them come from the work itself and from the work process.

MR. KENT: Very, very often, which will bring us to that dialog thing, also. There are some—I mentioned the hourglass—I guess now, that I think back, I must have seen one in a window. I remember a specific instance of driving along Kapiolani Boulevard, past an interior decorating shop and seeing what seemed to me a magnificent large ceramic urn.

And I was thinking, I'd like to have one of those. I don't want to spend that kind of money. And besides, you know, without consciously—all right, so I don't know ceramics, I don't want to spend a lot of money. How would I—and I recognize it would be fun to have one—how would I go about making it? And that clearly was the case of having, mentally, followed all the steps and then saying, yes, it sounds good up here in my mind; I wonder if it's really good. And in fact, the one we have in the living room is the second one that I made.

MS. RIEDEL: This is the urn form?

MR. KENT: This urn form.

MS. RIEDEL: It's about five feet tall.

MR. KENT: The first one was a little bit taller, maybe even a little nicer in shape, but made of the cheapest

plywood I could get. And when it was finished, suffered from the wood I had made it by. So—and the shoddiness—but it showed that the idea was good enough that I came back and made one that I liked.

MS. RIEDEL: And these dated from the late '70s? These first two urns? Because it's interesting, they almost seem predecessors to the Guardian pieces.

MR. KENT: They certainly are precursors.

MS. RIEDEL: Precursors, sorry, yes.

MR. KENT: They show me that I never left the idea. I think that that's much more polished.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, absolutely.

MR. KENT: That the Guardian is a much more polished interpretation.

MS. RIEDEL: But you can see a rough idea there.

MR. KENT: Yes. To the extent that the first Guardian I made was made out of octagonal sections, the same as that urn.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, interesting.

MR. KENT: And then, it was the case that I liked the scale. It was seven feet tall. I liked the silhouette—silhouette and profile are two words I'll keep coming back to. I think other people may say "form," but if it had been painted flat black against—I would have liked it.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, because I have heard you mention that term "silhouette" multiple times, and, yes, I'd like to explore what you mean by that and why it's compelling.

MR. KENT: I'll keep coming back to it. I'll even that bring that into the next sofa [Sculpture Objects & Functional Art] exhibit because it's going to be—form is the criterion for selection in the Collectors of Wood Art exhibit at the next Chicago SOFA. But any rate, the Guardians do echo, but with refinement.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, that describes it perfectly, I think. We touched an idea and I think it would be an appropriate time to discuss it. You've talked about wood forcing into a dialog. Can you elaborate?

MR. KENT: Yes. Is that a common word in the arts?

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I think I've certainly heard it in relation to woodwork and with the lathe in particular, but I'd like to know what your thought is about it.

MR. KENT: You have. It sounds almost cliché to me; that's why I'm asking. And it's reminiscent of what I regard as a lot of the baloney I hear artists and craftspeople and yet, it's so—

MS. RIEDEL: But you said it, so I want to know what you meant by it. [Laughs.]

MR. KENT: It's so accurate. There are some clichés that you can't get away from. It describes—I start out with the log and that has the faintest suggestion of envelope. Whatever I make can't be any bigger than this. It has to fit into this log.

MS. RIEDEL: The limitation, yes.

MR. KENT: Right. Now, it doesn't have to fit in the full thing, though I try not to waste a lot of wood. I try to use as much of each log as I can while still going for a nice form. But the form has already become—the final form has to be good. So then it's a question of finding the—among all of the infinite number of fine forms, the one that will reflect the characteristics of the wood with which I'm working.

So I start with the log, orient it on my lathe in the same direction that my bowl is going to be. I have to take a side to repair because most of the bowls in the world have been made from a block of wood where the tree was growing—if you line that block up the way the tree was growing, the bowl would have been horizontal. It's hard for me to express that.

MS. RIEDEL: No, sure.

MR. KENT: When I started making bottles and bowls, it just seemed natural to make it the direction that the tree was growing.

MS. RIEDEL: Of course, sure.

MR. KENT: So first, my bottles and then, by natural evolution, my bowls were made in that orientation. Later, much later, I learned that that's called end-grain turning. It has its own special problems. It's not widely—in the last few years, things that used to be exotic have become more popular. But at that time, it was talked of seldom and as an exotic.

Okay, so here's my log spinning and I'm making it round and I'm going to make a bottle form for it. First of all, I'll get rid of all the perturbances [sic] and end up with a smooth-sided cylinder with clean ends. At that point, I'll see some of the characteristics of the wood emerging. I'll see grain, I'll see dark places.

MS. RIEDEL: The spalting?

MR. KENT: I'll see the spalting. I'll see the knots, where they occur. I may see a dent or a hole. Now, the wood has already said, "Hey, you can't stop at a cylinder. This place has to be thinner. You've got to cut in until you get rid of this hole." I found on the knots, I can cut a long them and have a slash—the knot—carry the knot all the way through to the center of the wood.

So now, I'm going—and I might start on that and the knot may end. Each case, there will be a suggestion of what my next—and I may accidentally gouge a little too deeply. I may carelessly cut away a corner that I hadn't wanted to cut.

Each step of the way, I'll make a statement and the wood will answer. And then the wood will make a statement that I might answer. And that's where the dialog or the conversation metaphor comes in—right through the end; to the wood, in essence, saying, "Hey, I don't want to get any thinner than this. You might have thought you could make it thinner on the last log, but where I was growing, we didn't have that tight a grain."

I'm personifying it a little too much. But that's going on.

MS. RIEDEL: And is it an intuitive process? Is it a highly conscious and alert process? It is a meditative process?

MR. KENT: No, a combination of all three. It becomes intuitive. Yes, intuition is an awfully interesting thing. Intuitive isn't the same as instinctive. Intuitive does reflect experience. I laugh at that—getting way off, when people tell me how intuitive their Mac computer is—[they laugh]—because Apple has taught them that's one of the good things about it. As a guy who uses both—at one point, switched to Apple—they don't want to learn that I don't know what's intuitive. It's intuitive if that's what you learned to use.

[Aside.] Excuse me, sorry about that.

MS. RIEDEL: No worries.

MR. KENT: But that's where—a good example, but intuition comes with experience. So yes, I mentioned earlier: There's a point where I don't have to look what I'm doing, where this sense of pressure, of vibration and of sound let me know what's going on. And my mind does wander. One of the reasons that I later was not unwilling to leave woodturning when physical handicaps made it important—it wasn't with total remorse. Because I missed the alertness, the challenges we were talking about when I had to pay all of that attention. I liked the aliveness that was caused by the strangeness of it.

MS. RIEDEL: And with the increased technical facility, that begins to disappear, or disperse or lessen.

MR. KENT: Yes. Things became mechanical. That, of course, is when I needed breakage to spur me on.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, exactly.

MR. KENT: Anxiety, I said. [They laugh.] Yes, I needed it.

MS. RIEDEL: And as your technical facility developed, how would you address that? Would you try new forms? Would you try extreme forms? More extreme forms?

MR. KENT: No, that's a good question. It brings up another thing. Certainly, we'll have to talk about where I stand in the hierarchy of scaling. And I will come out sounding a little self-deprecatory. I'm as good as I've had to be. I guess I could have gotten better if there had been a reason. So we can talk about how I felt about New York. Did we mention that?

MS. RIEDEL: Right, but we haven't talked about that on disc—

MR. KENT: It's the same thing, but—so developing those skills was important. And I don't know how good I am

because I've been as good as I've had to be. Same thing, though, I've—and there will be a little contradiction here, though I have solved problems that weren't really my problems. I've created it.

In a broader sense, I can say also that I haven't gone out of my way to solve problems that happened to come my way, that there are things I might—I would have learned how to do if there had been a reason to learn how to do them. To bring that, in particular, to woodworking, though I admire and stand in awe of the so-called hollow turning that Dave Ellsworth popularized, I've never learned to do it because though I admire it, it's never

[Doorbell rings.]

MS. RIEDEL: No, it's fine.

MR. KENT: It's never been one of my ambitions to do. So there are a number of skills within woodturning itself that I had never developed. Also, in saying that, it occurs to me from a broader viewpoint because my tastes are very simple.

I forget—one of the reviewers of one of my shows referred to me as a minimalist, which surprised me.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. You don't see that?

MR. KENT: When he said—the term—

MS. RIEDEL: I think John Perreault, maybe.

MR. KENT: It sounded very highfalutin. It was more artistic than I thought of myself. But I like it because, yes, when I see my work and see the early forms of woodturning, clean, simple lines were an important part of it. And I've never lost my—in what I do, in the Guardians, in virtually anything I do, the complexity doesn't attract me. I like simplicity.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting because I think of there being a fusion of the two in your work, because the forms can be extremely complex in their simplicity. They've been refined to such an extent and that's where I think of the complexity coming in, that the simplicity is a result of that intense—

MR. KENT: I'm not sure. I don't know.

MS. RIEDEL: You're not sure, okay.

MR. KENT: Maybe the word "intricacy" pops into my mind as you're saying that, too. What's going on today in the wood world—and I've stopped reading the magazines—is carving and—

MS. RIEDEL: Oh right, very elaborate.

MR. KENT: So intricate, so gee-whiz—it leaves me totally—totally cold. How that relates to me or this conversation, I don't know.

[Audio Break.]

MS. RIEDEL: Well, you mentioned the New York story and we don't have that. We haven't talked about that yet on disc. Would you like to tell that story?

MR. KENT: It tells something about me.

MS. RIEDEL: I think so.

MR. KENT: And it was an "aha" moment in my life that I remember my first trip to New York.

MS. RIEDEL: When was that?

MR. KENT: I was an engineer—was I an engineer? I don't know because it's going to include—[side conversation] you can cancel that one.

I'm remembering this as from my engineering days, but I don't think it could be, from the rest of the story. But at any rate, so let's say it was in my—I don't know.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. You were working, though. You were working as an artist. You were definitely turning wood at this point because you were looking at artwork, no?

MR. KENT: No, it was just getting off the plane.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MR. KENT: It was just walking out of the airport and being hit by the immensity and the excellence, the magnificence of everything around me, that I was totally in shock for over a day.

MS. RIEDEL: What were you looking at?

MR. KENT: The buildings, the crowds, the street sculpture, I remember in particular, and I've always gone back to it. An isosceles, is it? A triangle—drop the isosceles because—[they laugh]—let's see, I don't remember if it was, but there's a large, polished stainless triangle out on this street and Broadway—the framework. [By artist Athelstan Spillhaus -RK]

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember where? Roughly?

MR. KENT: In the heart of Manhattan somewhere. Maybe around Fifth [Avenue] and Fortieth [Street].

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. KENT: Somewhere like that; not too far from Times Square and not too far from where they go ice skating. Rockefeller Center and in the Rockefeller Center area. You know, I grew up in this farm town of Hollywood, Los Angeles, where had I been? I hadn't been places. I'd been to some big cities, but—

[END DISC 2.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art with Ron Kent at the artist's home in Kailua, Hawaii on April 20th, 2010, disc number three. You were talking about New York.

MR. KENT: I felt so small—not just in size but in magnificence of everything I saw, including some of the simplest, like the triangle I mentioned. I liked it better than the large plugged-nickel thing that you could walk up through and turn around on the sidewalk.

MS. RIEDEL: I don't know what that is.

MR. KENT: It looks like a large—it's maybe eight feet tall; a disc with inset plugs. We have one like it here in Honolulu at the Bank of Hawaii but they had to put it on a mound because it was being vandalized [By artist Tony Rosenthal, ca. 1960 or 1970 -RK]. But in New York, surprisingly, it's right out on the sidewalk where you can push it around. And it seems to survive in Manhattan, where our Hawaiian vandals have ruined it.

But at any rate, whether it was relating to myself as an artist or a person, it was just—I was awed. And that lasted a day or so. Then something soaked in that, hey, I've always been enough for whatever challenge I happened to meet that, indeed, I could see a kind of foolishness in being better than you have to be; save your effort for other things.

That brings up another thing. My family jokes—it's a saying I've tried to teach my children that "Good enough is good enough." That works if you're a perfectionist and don't know when good enough is good enough.

MS. RIEDEL: That's right.

MR. KENT: It doesn't work if good enough is too easily come by.

MS. RIEDEL: That's true.

MR. KENT: But for people who are inclined to be perfectionists, there's a talent to learning when something has been as good as it needs to be, if you will, and needs to be better than anything else around. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Right; and it seems like you were constantly experimenting with what good enough was in terms of the bowls and when it went too far, then they literally broke.

MR. KENT: In terms of most else in my life and in understanding success, which has been a thing I've tried to understand and another thing I can give a lot of talk on. But an important impediment to anybody's success is what they can visualize. That's the biggest handicap for the kid living in the poor part of town with his father who is a day laborer. He can't visualize what it's like to be a doctor. It's the greatest advantage that the doctor's children have. And they become doctors. Yes, having money helps—it helps a hell of a lot—but not nearly as much as being able to visualize the goal and transcending what you grew up with is an immense success in itself.

I'll have to get off that—at any rate: in New York.

MS. RIEDEL: New York.

MR. KENT: [Laughs.] It dawned on me that whatever—that I had always been—even if I failed the first time, I came back and came back. And I used the word “transcend” a moment ago and I like it. Ultimately, did achieve and transcend that goal —and then didn't try to go way beyond it. I had done what I had visualized as success.

For me, this usually wasn't being the best thing in the world. I don't think I've ever seen that as a goal. I wanted to be among the top on something that mattered to me, was very important. That's where I belonged. That was right. But being the very tip-top just—it wasn't worth the extra effort and I don't know if I could have been. But I suspect if I had wanted to be, I could have been.

MS. RIEDEL: I think of the thinness when I think of your bowls. I think of form; I think of light. At what point did you become conscious of the concept of light and did that become important—the transitions?

MR. KENT: Great, great question, because it's an important part, I think, of the recognition I had, because not only was I working with a beautiful wood that nobody had been working with but I was—and I did have distinctive—though in the beginning there weren't—well, it was easier to be distinctive in the earlier days. It's harder and harder for people to gain attention today. But I'm still not aware of anybody having achieved translucence or introduced it at that time. And it was an accident. It was pure serendipity.

It goes back to Norfolk pine. It goes back to the half-semester of woodshop where I made a little pencil-holder—two pieces of wood fastened together with three holes in them, sandpapered smooth and wiped down with a layer of boiled linseed oil. I'd learned that after you made your piece and sandpapered it smooth, you rubbed on a layer of this oil and it brought out the beauty of the wood. That applies to almost—most of the woods I've ever seen. Not the keawe that I showed you earlier, which you run it through the saw and it's as beautiful as it will ever be.

But through our koa, through our monkeypod, through most of the other woods that were famous for it, until you've oiled them, they have a dullness. And the oil is an “aha” experience. So in turning these driftwood pieces to get at the inside wood, after I would finish it and sandpaper it on the lathe, I'd oil it and bring out the final step of beauty.

When the log that I later learned turned out to have been Norfolk or Cook pine—I did the same thing: finished a bottle form, oiled it. And it was beautiful, and almost as instantly, got dull again. So I repeated the oiling and again—

MS. RIEDEL: Is this partially, do you think, Ron, because it was green at the point, too? Did that make a difference? Or would it have happened regardless?

MR. KENT: It would have happened regardless, because the wood is so absorbent. The green is an awfully good point, because that was another unusual way to work with wood. But this is more likely to—especially since it was a one-of-a-kind log. Green would imply a tree had been cut. And I brought home a few. This was just a log I chanced on somewhere.

I don't know how much later that I learned it was Norfolk or Cook pine. All I knew was that I had this log. I did see that it had knots in an even pattern, but that when I oiled it, it soaked up the oil so quickly and got dull-looking again. I went through a number of oilings. But I was anxious to get on to the next bit of discovery and put that on the side.

The next day or the next week, whenever, while doing other—while oiling another piece, I brought that one back down and oiled it again. Same thing happened. But by this time, it also became a little bit of a challenge. Somewhere, there had to be a point where this oil will stop soaking in and the wood will stay this nice.

It turned out to be somewhere like three or four weeks later that there was really any noticeable change. And then it stayed—it started staying nicer, longer. And I just kept going. It just got a little nicer each time until ultimately, it was awfully nice. These were still bottle forms and they—translucence wasn't obvious.

I'm trying to remember—no, I don't remember thinking “translucent” at all. It was only later when I came back and started making bowls of that wood that I continued using that multiple oiling process and the translucence was, “Oh my God, Myra, come out and look at this.” I would bring it in and hold it under a light and enter it in an art show. And I remember I titled it—like most of my bowls—in those art shows, it was important to title a piece in those days. But that—

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember what you called it?

MR. KENT: *Ho-hum, Another Bowl*. [Laughs.] No, no, no. *Ho-hum, Another Translucent Bowl*. I remember, by then, I had started subscribing to one of the wood magazines and they were running ads from a shop called the Cutting Edge in Santa Monica, California. I don't think it has survived, but it was a part of the early days of woodworking and woodturning.

In those days, I don't think there were any woodturning magazines. We were reading *Fine Woodworking* magazine and delighted to see the occasional project for "how to make a rolling pin" type of thing. There wasn't much artistic woodturning going on. Dave Ellsworth was the doing it—and a few people. You know, that was in the early Jacobson days. There were seven people doing it.

But I took a picture of my translucent bowl and on my next trip to visit family in Los Angeles, went down to the Cutting Edge. It was closed; it was a Sunday. But I thumb-tacked that up to their—they had a corkboard outside of the door and it was a sort of, hey, a challenge if you will, hey, I'm here and this is what I do. I remember that and it was kind of snotty, wasn't it? [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Did you leave a number and your name or you just tacked it up on the—

MR. KENT: Nothing else. I felt that a picture of a translucent bowl spoke for itself. What else is there to say? Actually, that bowl later went to Neiman Marcus, who showed and sold it in San Francisco.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. Neiman Marcus, how interesting. I didn't know they showed that kind of work.

MR. KENT: Just within the last few weeks, Neiman Marcus sold one of my Guardians here in Honolulu.

MS. RIEDEL: Really? I had no idea.

MR. KENT: Yes, it was what I jokingly called a canoe-paddle design; the one that has the oblique bottom to a long, long, long, long, *long* neck. Yes. It translated well into seven feet, also; enough that someone would want one there. So anyhow, that was the beginning of translucence. That was before Bud Jacobson.

MS. RIEDEL: And I want to talk about that ,because we've mentioned it numerous times now. That show was, I think, 1986.

MR. KENT: In '83. In '83 or '84. I've got the book that came with it.

MS. RIEDEL: How much of an impact did that have on your career?

MR. KENT: Immense, gigantic. It was the whole difference. I was no longer just a hobbyist. The field burgeoned. If somebody were to graph it—he had it shown at the Renwick [the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC]. They sent it on a program called SITES [Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service]—Smithsonian, you know it. I think it went to five museums. If we're going to record that, you better make sure I'm right.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, I'm sure that's well-documented.

MR. KENT: But that's my understanding. But it went with this book, which looks very simple compared to the later catalogs. But at the time, a catalog devoted exclusively to artistic woodturning with beautiful illustrations was alone. And every place they showed, people got interested in doing it, in collecting it, in knowing what it meant.

MS. RIEDEL: How did your work become part of the collection? Who contacted you or it was part of Edward Jacobson's—

MR. KENT: He called me, and I don't know. I have a half-memory that he consulted with other turners at the time.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm sure.

MR. KENT: And somebody—one of them must have—it may have been—

MS. RIEDEL: [Ed] Moulthrop, maybe?

MR. KENT: No. No, I never met Moulthrop. By the time I met Ed, he was already a little [old -RK]. And his son [Philip] was already prominent. No, it may have been Dale Nish, who had—Dale discovered me on a trip he was making around the world. He was visiting other woodturners. In Hawaii, he visited a man named—begins with an S.



MS. RIEDEL: I remember reading about him.

MR. KENT: He's in the collection.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. We'll come back to that.

MR. KENT: Yes. He was—he didn't quite grow with the field, but he was in the collection—

MS. RIEDEL: [Woodturner Jack Straka -RK].

MR. KENT: All of us who were in that collection gained a measure of fame and recognition and acceptance just because of that. Most of us stayed in it. I was surprised when one, Hap Sakwa, left to become a photographer, an art photographer. But to the best of my knowledge, all of the others found increasing prominence and grew, both with the field and beyond it.

MS. RIEDEL: Did your gallery opportunities expand? Your collector base expand?

MR. KENT: Everything. The number of galleries—I should have included that, who got interested in it. It all grew, and all of it was triggered by—but then, it became a chain reaction. You know, when one gallery carried it, the buyers of other galleries saw it. Sometimes, saw it for local artists. But that very often missed the point. If anything, the localism impeded the growth—at least in those stages—impeded the growth of the art form. The buyers weren't fully discerning and wanted to buy was available.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, that exhibition and I think the attention that it brought to the field, there was a lot education involved. People weren't even necessarily aware of what was out there and who was doing what and the quality that was available.

MR. KENT: They hadn't dreamt of the burls. Somebody once, later, made a joke that this isn't a bowl collection, it's a burl collection. But the use of wood as Rude Osolnik—to go to the sawmill and take their discards and make beautiful things from it was an outrageous concept. To use old driftwood and castaway logs or Dale Nish's worm-eaten wood. These were just eye-openers to everybody, or David Ellsworth's art, the thin, hollowed-out, through the small central hole, the various things that he kept bringing to the field.

Those just were a whole new concept, and exciting. And then the fun that people had doing it, those who did it because it is just so much fun! I have a friend who's achieved some prominence in San Diego, La Jolla, and he sounds like a little kid. He still gets so excited talking about it—it just still is so much fun. They can't get used to it.

I think I'm done. What is the question?

MS. RIEDEL: I don't know. I just got all caught up in the fun.

MR. KENT: It's led to that—to why do I think that Jacobson—I think we honor him, but I think it's some of the people, particularly on the East Coast, where there was a school, like to see more importance in their own work and are talking about some of their get-togethers and conferences and things. And I don't think—even while honoring Bud Jacobson, in my point of view as more of an outsider, they don't honor him quite enough.

They still want part of the credit for the growth of the field. They talk particularly of — Lake Emma, is it? — up in Canada and there's a group out of that. Of the Arrowmont School [of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN]. These are places where they congregated and had an immense, if you will, a salon effect. Think of Andy Warhol's—you know, you have to think of him as a center of growth of what there was then. And though I don't know enough the right names to tell you, there was that going on in Paris, I know, in the various schools of art of painting at different times.

So there certainly was this effect on the East Coast and there was—Albert LeCoff has got to be mentioned. Albert built a career for himself and made himself an important part of what came along. As an early woodturner—I don't remember if I subscribed or he sent me—but I used to get his four-page mimeographed newsletters.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. KENT: Albert was [often difficult, but -RK] was always there, insistent—off the record—we'd always talk about "Albert," and we'd know who we'd mean [... -RK]. But he's done a lot to build the field in new directions that he made important because he had to build an area of importance. He was early in bringing in foreign woodturners to the United States.

MS. RIEDEL: Where was he located?

MR. KENT: Philadelphia.

MS. RIEDEL: Philadelphia. And was he affiliated with the school there?

MR. KENT: The so-called Wood Turning Center [Philadelphia, PA; now the Center for Art in Wood].

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. KENT: Working out of his bedroom for years. He made himself an important part of the growth of the field. So please [... -RK] leave in recognition of the fact that for whatever reason, he has become an important part of the growth of the field and still is today. Which somewhere along the line, before we say goodbye, we better talk about the future of the field, too. And that will take us back to money and finances and the economy and a lot—a broader look at all of those things because they will be tied together.

MS. RIEDEL: I want to talk about—before we leave the bowls for today—I want to talk about the evolution of the pedestal foot and—we’ve talked about the evolution of the decanter lip becoming the bowl, but the evolution of the pedestal foot, creating a bowl that almost seemed to hover and defy gravity.

MR. KENT: Thank you for bringing that in. My first bowls, including those in the Jacobson collection [Edward Jacobson Collection of Turned Wood Bowls, Arizona State University Art Museum, Tempe, AZ], had relatively broad bases. For me, bowls largely started with something in the kitchen and we wanted stability. It also goes back to the fun of making something out of ugly wood and the gradual growth of my aesthetic, both recognition of the fact that I had things I liked and what they were.

And in making bowls, I saw that I wanted it lighter and lighter, to what one reviewer referred to it as “the incredibly small feet.” I don’t think they’re incredibly small. I think that’s what it should be, but incredibly small wasn’t as small as I wanted it. I wanted it smaller and gradually, went to a thin neck, again, about the size of my little finger, still flaring out to a true pedestal, a true foot, which would firmly support the vessel and yet to my own aesthetic, it came as close as it needed to be to disappearing in that.

My eye carried out the curvature. I found it equally attractive on broad, flat forms as on the more—on taller, thinner forms. I don’t know a good word for the thinner, but flat ones you might call platter-like.

And indeed, one of my favorite ever of my bowls, which is in the Yale [University, New Haven, CT] collection, is a floating format bowl that goes through the thin neck and broaden, maybe 24, 26 inches and only a few inches high, just a little bit of a curve up. I didn’t—and don’t—like it completely flat. I need a little bit of a lip to hold it in. That puts me in mind—see, these are the long answers I warned you about.

MS. RIEDEL: That’s fine.

MR. KENT: Here, in Hawaii, one of our most famous and most respected architects has been Vladimir Ossipoff. Val [sic] visited my studio, my shop, my workshop—in those days, it was a carport—[he visited it] one day and was telling me—giving—teaching me a little bit about form.

Val didn’t ask questions. He spoke in—my wife accuses me of that—Val pontificated. But he taught me about what I was doing. And it stuck with me. Whether it has any validity or not, I don’t know, but it was a good pontification: that those of my bowls that curved in, he said there’s something selfish about them. They’re holding; they’re selfish, that he likes the open forms. That’s generous and giving.

I’d never thought—you had asked me earlier about meaning and that goes way beyond any interpretation I had ever had or still can believe. But it was delivered with such authority that it is stuck in my mind. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. Do you agree?

MR. KENT: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I don’t either, but—

MR. KENT: I don’t—it’s one of the stories—if I were making only art as closed or only open forms, I would want to use it to put down the competition.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Right.

MR. KENT: Or even if I were making both and writing a statement. I hate statements, but if I were writing a statement about an entry, I would have—if it were open, I would use it. If it were closed, I would think of some other rationalization. But in either case, the explanation would come after the fact.

MS. RIEDEL: How significant has scale been over the years to you?

MR. KENT: Good question. Scale is an important concept. Proportion—but scale carries authority; certainly, obvious in my Guardian series and in my more recent extension that goes even beyond the Guardians to nine feet tall. Scale becomes important in and of itself, but I can't accept it only as the only criteria. Many things—in my case, for example, I found, in the bowls, that they lost gracefulness and somewhere below 30 inches in diameter, I wasn't able to—

MS. RIEDEL: They lost gracefulness.

MR. KENT:—to translate 30-inch diameter into a graceful bowl. There are people who do it.

MS. RIEDEL: What if it was larger than 30 inches?

MR. KENT: I'm sorry?

MS. RIEDEL: If it was larger than 30 inches.

MR. KENT: Even up at 30, somewhere in the 20—I've made bowls that were 26, 27 inches in diameter that I considered graceful and that I could look at the picture of them without knowing scale and say that's a nice-looking—I like it. But most of the—certainly, in what I was able to translate, when I got above that, they started looking clunker-ish to me.

Now, I do—there's one man, whose name I can't remember, working out of Oregon who makes very large, closed forms. They're hollowed out through a small hole in the top and he does bronze castings of tree branches, weaving into them and holding them up. It may be Ron Gerton. G-E-R-T-O-N.

MS. RIEDEL: We can check.

MR. KENT: Whether it's him or not, he has met—and a couple other people are doing large work that has maintained its gracefulness. And I admire them and their work and them for being able to do it. But often, scale has its—nothing to say for it, not enough to say for it to justify the scale. And I don't like it just because it's large.

MS. RIEDEL: Whereas with the Guardians, the scale is really essential that they be roughly human size, no?

MR. KENT: Bigger than human.

MS. RIEDEL: There are a couple of—

MR. KENT: Oh, the little four-footers? I don't call them Guardians. I don't have names for those. And I've made two six-footers. One of them is at Neiman Marcus now, and I made them to enter some kind of a thing that was going on, whether it had to be six feet or under, maybe a local art show. But it's never satisfied me.

In the case of the Guardians—and we'll go back to the name in a little while. That didn't come out of nowhere. But in the case of the Guardians, the bigger than life size, without losing grace, is an important part of it.

The first *Guardian* had more authority than grace. It looked almost like a sarcophagus, is it called? A mummy case. It went almost straight up to broad shoulders, came in, but then to a thin neck and a little bell and there was a—it wasn't graceless. But I liked it an awful lot and scale was important there.

MS. RIEDEL: Were the first Guardians in the mid-2000s? Is that when you started working on those?

MR. KENT: Yes, yes. Just five or six years ago. And the first one was round.

MS. RIEDEL: And they're plywood, yes?

MR. KENT: Plywood. And the characteristics of grinding through the layers of plywood were, and are, an exciting part of it. I've made others—some of them in a finer grade of plywood that has thinner layers. It's more expensive. It's just finer plywood and it loses something. Even in my seaweed forms, the one we have here in the living room is the finer plywood and I liked it better in the less-fine plywood that has thicker layers.

I liked the laminary look, but particularly if I'm grinding along it like the Guardians, I like the coarser layers. So that first one had a nice shape, but its finest points were its large scale, its dominant authoritativeness, and the look of the plywood. I guess made a second one and then I got an oval cross section instead of round.

Then I started refining it. That first one was, will this idea work? It was good enough that I'm proud of it, but it needed refinement. And going from the round cross section to the oval by using a thinner plywood gave me

that. So having once made that, now it was, what companion pieces can I make? What complementary pieces? And even to try to get negative space into showing them together, how would they fit together with the spaces?

I think what we're now calling the "Canoe Paddle" was—no, I think the parentheses were the second ["Canoe Paddle" is not the formal title, only a whimsical nickname. No formal title except *Guardian II* in *Guardian Series* – RK]. The parenthesis started narrow, went up, as indeed a parenthesis would, to the narrow neck, then a little bit of a narrow neck and flare to the bell. Whether that was the second or the third and whether the other second or third was the "Canoe Paddle" that looked like the bottles with the oval bottom.

Then came the form that we—it's fun to be disparaging. I use the word "spittoon." When something is beautiful, you can disparage it. And by then, I had never seen any gender in any of these. But visitors did. So once we had gender, this automatically became the pregnant form.

The final—and it's become one of my favorites. The final form is my one favorite and it's one that I have in the studio now. Took the first form and refined it. What had been straight up to the shoulder now went up straight and was a little bit concave. It had a concave before it became convex. And the shoulders even have a hint of concavity to them. So it took the first form and made it much finer, much more refined. If I had to name one of my five, that has become my favorite of the formats.

MS. RIEDEL: Are there only five total of the Guardians?

MR. KENT: In the Guardian series.

MS. RIEDEL: I thought there were more than that.

MR. KENT: There have been a total of about 25 of them made, but the variations then were in the wood. One of them even made from the chipboard that I showed you, and whether or not I scorched and burned them afterwards. So those were the variations.

MS. RIEDEL: So there were 25 total of five different forms?

MR. KENT: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. KENT: This goes back to my records, to a whole lot of things, to classes I teach to other artists and to a quote I read from a book by David Ogilvy, *Confessions of an Advertising Man* [New York: Atheneum, 1963]. I never read the book, but someone once quoted this to me and it became a part of my life. He said, "I know that half of everything I do is wasted, but I don't know which half."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] That's good.

MR. KENT: And I interpret that—earlier, when I was trying to learn by reading books—my bookworm days—to play tennis, a book by Bill Tilden in which he said, "Don't change a winning game." He'd seen too many people come along, and after they got inside, they're winning but they want to get better. So that's kind of a moral in life.

"Don't change a winning game," and applying that to the Ogilvy quote, this is winning for me. I love doing it. I even get paid for doing it. If I started keeping good records and keeping track and knowing how much they sell for—that isn't fun for me. That would make it work. It would go back to bookkeeping and accounting that they told me to avoid.

And when I tried to teach young artists some of the aspects of dealing with galleries, dealing with your clients—and I've got a lot to share here—a lot of attitudes that I think are good. But all the questions they want to ask are about insurance and percentages. And I want to scream, "I can hear from your questions that you're detracting from the fun of doing it."

If making money is your goal, don't be an artist. That's not a good way to make money. I just thought of maybe comparing it to touch football, or pick-up basketball. If it's a lot of fun, by all means, do it. If you want to make money, get a real job.

So for me, that's why I don't know how many Guardians I made. I've got a strong suspicion that I've made more money than I've spent—[they laugh]—on them. But maybe not, not on the Guardians. In the bowls, for sure.

MS. RIEDEL: Because the pine comes free for the delivery, right.

MR. KENT: The pine was free. The field was growing and I was growing with it. Brings up another important

point: I was making an awful lot of money—more money —when I was less successful.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. KENT: My prices were lower, people could buy them on impulse, but there's a strong ethic in art to protect the people who have bought from you. Those are the people that I owe my loyalty to. And as the field grew, the collectors paid higher and higher prices for my work and brought it out of the range of the casual shopper. Since I wasn't doing it for the money, I wish I could go back to the kinds of prices you see in the gift shops in Waikiki.

MS. RIEDEL: Why is that?

MR. KENT: Because I like the money.

MS. RIEDEL: I see.

MR. KENT: It's not that I didn't like the—and I liked the movement.

MS. RIEDEL: So you sold more at lower prices.

MR. KENT: I sold an awful lot more.

MS. RIEDEL: I see, interesting.

MR. KENT: Now, my bowls are very expensive, but nobody's buying them. Also, in saying I liked the money, that brings up an important thing about me that I've learned: that it was important to me. I kept expanding my market; finding new galleries to show my work, new venues because it was important to me after I finished it, get it out of my house.

I found that when I was surrounded by a lot of work, I wallowed in it. I became—the two words that come into mind are “lethargic” and “apathetic.” [They laugh.] That was when I fixed the screen door. I made some bowls—balls, rather. I did things that had nothing to do with this field that was saying, “Ron, send us more bowls.”

When I had a lot of them around me, there was this complacency. When I just sent off a lot, I'd get up at night to go out and work. This push, this anxiety, this tension that I liked, but then it was, “I've got to make more bowls. What if somebody wants one, you know? I don't have anything to show them.” Then, when I've got them, I don't have that push anymore.

So I learned that about myself. And it turned out to be a valuable thing in my marketing because it had me finding new venues. I've come to believe in another thing I try to teach my friends here in Hawaii. In a simplified way of saying it, “Adequacy or good can become the enemy of excellent.”

Again, good enough—that it's too easy to become a hero in your hometown. It's too easy to win a lot of first places in local art shows and sit back and enjoy it. That somehow, for me, that was never good enough; that it was, yeah, I won this award, but how would I look in New York?

And indeed, when Barry Friedman, Ltd. [New York, NY], featured me—I had a one-man show at Barry Friedman—maybe that was when my ambition maybe tapered off a little. After that. Being carried by—I mentioned, in Santa Fe—Gerald Peters [Gallery, Santa Fe, NM]. These were the heights of my ambition. I've achieved so much in that, I'm willing to sit back and retire.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Doesn't look like it.

MR. KENT: There are still new challenges, okay, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: From the workshop, doesn't look like it.

MR. KENT: Yes, this is where I start contradicting myself, isn't it?

MS. RIEDEL: Well, maybe you don't have to work from one to three in the morning every night anymore.

MR. KENT: Oh, that, for sure. And it's no longer as important as the recognition—well, look at me. I'm doing an oral history for the Smithsonian Archive. I really don't need any more endorsement up here. Down here, it's that—and this is a key thing to understanding me and it's not nearly as true, though still true, it's not as true as it was through most of my life, what I've learned popular psychology calls the imposter syndrome.

To say that I'm an artist still sounds like I'm lying to you. I want to cross my fingers and hide them. I'd learned

that long before I read about it. I tried to explain it to Myra. And these art shows? I get a feeling that if I translated, was “Phew, I fooled another judge.”

My career, through most of it, was a series of fooling judges into thinking I was good and worrying that they would find out I’m not nearly as good as they think I am. I knew better. Ultimately, my brain started telling me I was fooling some pretty smart people. But down here, I knew that one day, they would find out.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I think you’re in good company, from a number of the artists I’ve spoken to.

MR. KENT: That’s what I’ve heard. Have you been finding that?

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I think there is some element of either the fear or the challenge that “I won’t be able to pull it off this time.”

MR. KENT: “Oh my God, how did I ever do that?”

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly. “I can never do it again.” Right, right.

MR. KENT: I could never do that again.

MS. RIEDEL: And that is, I think, an essential part of the working process for certain artists.

MR. KENT: It is, and that, too. I go to places and look at my old work.

MS. RIEDEL: But it’s a good balance to what we were talking about earlier, when you say it gets too easy. There’s too much technical facility, then it’s not interesting to you. Remember when we were talking about that? It’s harder to keep it.

MR. KENT: It’s the challenge.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, and that challenge is an important part of working. And feeling like one is an imposter would make one need to rise to the challenge, no?

MR. KENT: It’s that. It’s that. Off the record, it goes back to some of the moves in my career. That maybe the reason I left engineering wasn’t only because of the excitement of speculating. Maybe it was that I moved up faster than I thought I should have. I told you I’d had a number of jobs and each better than the one—I fooled a bunch of personnel people. It’s a good time to get out.

MS. RIEDEL: Before they figure it out.

MR. KENT: Quick, before they fire me. [They laugh.] I moved to San Diego to start over as a stockbroker and it took about six years to become pretty successful. That’s when I quit, and we realized our ambition to move to Hawaii.

About six years later, I purposely left all my clients. I do believe that cutting ties, burning bridges; that I wanted to know this is where I’m living; this is my future. So I really started over. And about five to six years later, left to buy a small industrial firm.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. KENT: Maybe, again, I didn’t trust my own success. That wasn’t what I knew, though, but I’m looking back and interpreting. Well, there, I lost everything. And two years later, crept back to start over because a brokerage clientele doesn’t stay together, and started the new career. And that grew.

By this time, I was already in my 50s. I hung in there, later started my own brokerage firm and a mutual fund. Only in the last few years, really put away enough money to retire. But until then, I had been starting over and over and over again.

Now, somewhere in the early 1990—and we can look at the flyleaf—David Heenan wrote *Double Lives* [*Double Lives: Crafting Your Life of Work and Passion for Untold Success*. Davies-Black, 2002]. David is a man who has lived a number of lives. He has already—besides his own successful business career, was dean of the business college and then became a trustee of our local Campbell Estate, one of the biggest landowners, and started writing.

*Double Lives* was his second or third successful published book, and a prizewinner. But in it, he named and told the stories of a bunch of people. I rated only half a chapter. [They laugh.] But another artist, a “real artist” who was head of Hawaiian Dredging [Construction Company], one of our biggest construction firms, and has big

sculpture all around the island, he deserved a chapter. But he shared one with me. But he didn't get on the cover. I love it. The cover—did I tell you this joke?

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MR. KENT: It's stories of Winston Churchill, Sally Ride, and Ron Kent. And it reminds me of a bumper sticker we have here that makes fun of the other one: New York, Paris, London. Waimanalo. Waimanalo is a little, very Hawaiian [town]—and I tell people—you look at that book jacket, I'm Waimanalo in that.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] There you go.

MR. KENT: But it's an appropriate—you know, and I see Winston Churchill. I feel that it's not inappropriate. At any rate, oh, I mentioned David because I fooled another guy. David knows—knew the business scene. He knew my stature in that world. It's hard for you and me—for me to convey it or you to know it and I was never at the very top.

But I had enough professional stature that David thought it qualified me to be in that list. Because it's an important part of my identity, what I've done for people in the business world, the message I have to pass on. And David's recognition is an important part of my life.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting, because what you do, in some ways, isn't so different from what a university professor does if they have an income from a professorship, they don't need their artwork to support them and so it does buy them a certain degree of freedom. What's interesting about what you've done is the fields are completely unrelated.

MR. KENT: At the time he wrote that book, and for a number years before and since, I was making about the equivalent of a high school principal as a woodturner. That, along with my other two professions—

MS. RIEDEL: Two?

MR. KENT: Well, starting a mutual fund, starting and running a mutual fund was a full profession in itself.

MS. RIEDEL: I bet.

MR. KENT: It was an adjunct to my financial consulting.

MS. RIEDEL: I see.

MR. KENT: And stockbroker is a very misleading title in the way I was, at least unconventional, both in what I believed as compared to current beliefs. I was ultra-conventional in the old ideas. But in the way I grew it—I told you, a stockbroker is a commissioned salesman. But I wasn't and couldn't bring myself to sell.

What I did was develop what I now recognize were excellent marketing skills. I gave seminars. I taught classes. I wrote a weekly newspaper column and was good enough to get it syndicated. Before it later became popular, long before Suze Orman or these other people that we've now heard of, talk radio was big and I got the idea of buying time on one of the most popular ...

[Audio Break.]

[END DISC 3]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art with Ron Kent at the artist's home in Kailua, Hawaii, on April 22, 2010. This is disc number four.

Good morning, another sunny day here in paradise.

MR. KENT: Good.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's begin this morning with a conversation about your working process. You made reference to it in passing a few times yesterday, but it has been a very important part of the development of your work. And it's been something that you've really pioneered, very unusual working processes.

MR. KENT: The way I would make it, you mean?

MS. RIEDEL: Your way of working, right.

MR. KENT: Yes, the fact that the overwhelming majority, virtually 100 percent of my lifetime work in vessels, in bowls has been end-grain rather than block work. That over the total span, ninety-nine-and-a-half percent has

been in Norfolk pine.

MS. RIEDEL: You are completely self-taught.

MR. KENT: Yes, and that's not the boast it used to be. More and more, I wish I had gotten a formal education when I was younger and more open to learning.

MS. RIEDEL: Really, why?

MR. KENT: Because for recognition within the art world, among the collectors, there is a language. Not merely the spoken language, but among people I've seen who have gone through art [school], they learn a vocabulary of processes. It's nice to have a bunch that you can dip into and pick out, yes, I'm going to burn this or lacquer it. And I had no such mental resource library.

I had to say, hey, what if I? So I think that would have been an advantage—forms, history, just in describing it, when I hear people who had the education. I see that they can talk to each other verbally, in verbal conversation, more readily. They've all learned the same words and the same concepts.

I think that among the collectors, even those who came to it from the outside in comparison to myself quickly learned that to belong in the larger collector community, they've come to—the curators they talk, the people that the curators choose—there is an academic community that doesn't really like the outsiders. And the recognition within that for a number of reasons would be important and would have been easier with at least a BFA.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. KENT: So that's what I now think. And when you see the lists of people who are recognized, leading artists, you notice the overwhelming majority of them do have a formal background.

MS. RIEDEL: Conversely, I've heard it argued that—well, I can also see an argument made and I've heard arguments along these lines, that as someone who has learned outside of traditional academia, you have developed a research model, a formula that has kept your work going for decades, that you've found a way to be self-generating.

MR. KENT: It's true. That would have come anyhow. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. In your case that's true.

MR. KENT: And in generating my children, though I was a poor example of it, what I believe and try to teach them was, first, learn the conventional way and then go off and be a maverick. And intellectually, I totally believe that. If I were setting out to become an artist, I would get the education.

As I've seen so many times, once I come into it, there's a part where I can stand aside and say, now, I wonder how I'm going to change that agent—in the coiled basketry that came up. Something that indigenous people have been doing for years—coiled baskets—and I quickly started doing them in a way that aroused the interest and curiosity of the editor of the magazine that wrote about them.

MS. RIEDEL: You've done coiled baskets? I don't think I've seen those. Baskets out of fiber?

MR. KENT: Put this on hold for a moment.

[Audio Break.]

MS. RIEDEL: Well, the basket that we've just seen is, in form, very similar to—

MR. KENT: You can recognize my aesthetic references of going from a slimmer bottom to a broad shoulder. It reflects the bottles and the bowls.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely, absolutely. But moving back to the working process, you have, over the course of time, pioneered a number of processes unique to yourself?

MR. KENT: It turned out that way; that the procedures I followed weren't conventional.

MS. RIEDEL: To the point that the wood—

MR. KENT: And many of them have been followed since.

MS. RIEDEL: To the point that the wood itself, after all those multiple soakings in Varathane or oil, becomes



almost something more than wood. Because it's so thin and the oil or verithane, I think, polymerizes in with the wood fibers. Is that not correct?

MR. KENT: Yes it does. It brings about the translucence. It also becomes more resistant to easy breaking. It's very comparable in that aspect to porcelain—both the translucence, the thinness, and porcelain often has a surprising strength. It's so thin and bubble-like it seems more fragile than it really is.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you ever see Rudolf Staffel's *Light Catchers [Light Gatherers]*?

MR. KENT: No.

MS. RIEDEL: These very thin, porcelain pieces. I thought about those when I saw your wooden vessels originally. Because they are one of the few examples I can think of that really captures the translucence of your pieces.

MR. KENT: And they are in porcelain?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, and wood. So you worked with the Varathane and the linseed oil, but then you developed another process that involved dishwashing liquid. Is that correct?

MR. KENT: Doing what?

MS. RIEDEL: Dishwashing liquid.

MR. KENT: You know, that has gotten astonishing world recognition and persistence.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, you wrote about it in a nice, long article in one of the woodworking magazines.

MR. KENT: I'll give you the history.

MS. RIEDEL: Please do.

MR. KENT: I saw a material advertised that purported to stabilize wood, a wood stabilizer. I still don't know what that means, but I bought some. And it was called Pentacryl—"pent" meaning "five" and "acryl" hinting at an acrylic base. But of course, it was one of those secret processes they don't want to tell you about. I used it and I liked the results.

Now, nothing in this area, including what I'll tell you that I did, actually does this [stabilizes]. More realistically, it "seems to," "more or less" "tends to," "usually." Being accurate, it's softened a lot. But this Pentacryl seemed to make the wood easy. It gave me working characteristics that I like, but it cost \$50 a gallon, at least here in Hawaii where it has to be shipped in.

MS. RIEDEL: What were the characteristics that you liked about it?

MR. KENT: The way that it—this is very hard to put into words—the wood cut a little more cleanly, the way when we sanded it. We mentioned the dialog. I saw the word "conversation" used by somebody here; same idea. The wood was a little more amenable to my point of view, perhaps.

So I set about saying, gee, is there anything readily, domestically available that might give me the same thing? Because my wood was so absorbent, I got the idea of something that would soak into the wood and stay there and give me those characteristics. The first and most obvious was liquid floor wax. This is crystal-clear and the idea of it soaking in and becoming a wax within the wood—it didn't do much good. I don't know why. I tried it and nothing happened.

I kept experimenting and one day, shopping—it's funny, but Costco comes into the conversation [laughs]—saw what they then called concentrated dishwashing detergent. Peculiarly, that has changed names over the years. And the Costco part had nothing to do with it. Ivory and all of the other manufacturers had very similar versions, changing only the color, but even the same nomenclature.

At any rate, in using that, I found that it did impart these intangible characteristics, that it seemed to me to be at least as good as the more expensive product seemed to be. My first thought, frankly, was commercial: I'm going to buy this stuff by the barrel, put it in smaller bottles and sell it by the pint. [She laughs.] I wasn't that ambitious or that anxious to make money, and it is my nature to share it with other craftspeople.

MS. RIEDEL: And you have been extraordinarily generous about making your entire process very transparent.

MR. KENT: We'll come back to generosity later. Please make a note to do that. I don't think of it as being generous when you're giving away something that you have an infinite amount of. There's nothing generous

about something that is limitless. You know, I'll get new ideas. And I didn't see it as generosity because I wasn't giving anything up.

MS. RIEDEL: While you mention this—you said, I'll get new ideas—where do those ideas come from?

MR. KENT: Who knows? [They laugh.] They are there. The hard part is deciding which to follow up on. They're self-generating.

MS. RIEDEL: We talked about the process generating a lot of the ideas. Is there anything else in particular that comes to mind that has been a source of—

MR. KENT: Often, when I see something that I like, I told you, I want to make it. Within, closer to my own field, when I see something I like, that shuts off that line of inquiry. It comes up with, gee, I wish I had thought of that before he did, or, by God, that's what I did think of; I wish I had gotten to it sooner. Or even that, I did it, but I wish the rest of the world knew it because he's gotten publicity.

I look out to the colored balls. They're not really, in any way, imitative of [Dale] Chihuly's large glass spheres. But Chihuly has so much presence in the world that anything spherical I would do now looks like a Chihuly rip-off, though these were done probably before I had heard of Chihuly, had nothing to do with it.

MS. RIEDEL: And these are resin, primarily, yes?

MR. KENT: These are fiberglass, yes, and a resin. And another new thing—in the balls, I wanted texture, so I buy powdered plaster of Paris, mix it in still-powdered form with the polyester resin and make a thick, heavy paste of it and then plaster that on the outside of these smoother fiberglass balls I had made.

MS. RIEDEL: I think it's worth noting that throughout your career, you have worked on certain forms for which you're very well-known: the eggs, the bottles, the extraordinarily thin vessels, bowls, the Guardians, to be sure. But throughout your career, you have experimented with all sorts of media on the side.

MR. KENT: Media and shapes. Like the seaweed form, the two seaweed forms. Yes, I like other things, too.

MS. RIEDEL: I was thinking after our conversation the day before yesterday about the wave form. And I was wondering what in particular about a certain form inspired you to pursue it in multiples and explore it at length.

MR. KENT: It was more having liked the first one. I'll tell you how the wave came about.

MS. RIEDEL: What year was that piece, the first one?

MR. KENT: The early 1970s. I had already been doing bowls, but with no presence.

MS. RIEDEL: With no presence in—

MR. KENT: In the world. I maybe hadn't even shown one in a show yet. I was still polishing driftwood. And in my other career, I had a very rich client living in our Black Point area. That's a beautiful cliff overlooking the ocean. She had a large property with beautiful, big trees and she was a patron of the arts.

She was my investment client. I got an idea. "Alicia, you know those little redwood whirligigs that people hang on their porch? How would you like a big one hanging from that tree out over the ocean?" She said, fine.

And that evening, I bought the redwood and started stacking it to make one that would have been six feet across. Remember, they're fairly flat. You put on a slat; you rotate and rotate. When it got up about four feet high, it was unstable and I had to lay it on its side. And looking at that same spiral on its side—excuse me, helix—looking at the helix on its side, it had a concave convexity to it that was like a wave breaking.

I got on the phone and said, "Hey, Alicia, instead of a hanging helix, how would you like a wave on a pedestal?" She laid a concrete base for it. So I went ahead to make a rough redwood wave, six feet in each direction, rounded the corners, got rid of the rectangular look that it had, and loved it. Went ahead to make one in—

MS. RIEDEL: This was all ground and sanded—

MR. KENT: No, not her redwood one. That was meant to weather. It had the ocean redwood look to it that you see all along the Pacific coast. The next one—at that point I was also experimenting—I liked the look of weathered brass and bronze. I liked the patina. I got the idea of buying powdered bronze, mixing it with epoxy to make a very thick—now, there were people using a mixture of epoxy or polyester and bronze, but always as a fairly thin syrup.

Mine was so thick there was just enough epoxy to hold the granules together. So first, I made an armature out of foam, the way you would a surfboard, covered it with a crust of fiberglass to make it hard and then slathered on this thick paste of bronze and epoxy that's out on my front porch.

Okay, I made this heavy, heavy, high bronze content that I then plastered onto the fiberglass, found that I could polish it and it would glow as if it had been poured in a foundry. I still preferred the patina, so I poured vinegar on it and left it outside. Bird droppings do wonders for creating a patina, but that was a further experiment—

MS. RIEDEL: Let's pause for a minute.

[Audio Break.]

MR. KENT: Maybe the one downtown came first. I don't remember. But that one is in plywood. It's got a lacquer or varnish surface, a smooth, almost glossy surface on it. I've got a small one here on this shelf. I like that convoluted, concave-convex look.

MS. RIEDEL: So you experimented with that form in scale and in material and then you were pretty much done with that, it seems.

MR. KENT: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: You did four or five and that was it.

MR. KENT: No, I came back to it years later, our own Contemporary Museum [Honolulu, HI], to celebrate their twentieth year. Twenty was an important number here, which they thought, this is a benchmark. So to celebrate it, they commissioned 20 local artists to make benches. Sense of humor. I was one of those and I was very aware—make a little note: "mailbox"—I want to come back to that. I said, hey, there are 19 of the best artists on the island invited to submit a bench to the Contemporary Museum. I wanted to look good in that crowd.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Of course.

MR. KENT: A little side thing: I read in some mystery I was reading once a metaphor that stayed with me. "When you see two sailboats going in the same direction, they're racing." [... RK] Okay, well, here I'm going to be with 19 other artists and I'm racing. I couldn't think, what could you do with a bench?

I finally got to the idea of taking one of my—wave form, chopping it off in the middle and putting a seat there. So you'd have this beautiful, waving, graceful, convoluted wave and it would be a bench. As it turned out, it's two benches with a wave in between. I think of it as a bench for people who don't have much to say to each other. [Laughs.] You sit there, facing opposite directions with a wall between you.

But that was when I got back to the wave form and it worked out very well. What didn't work—that was meant to be a fundraiser for the museum and it coincided with the October [2008 -RK] collapse of the financial bubble in the world.

MS. RIEDEL: So this was just a couple years ago?

MR. KENT: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: I see.

MR. KENT: Two or three years now. So as a fundraiser, it was a flop. They sold two or three of the least expensive benches, but none of the elaborate ones sold. But that was a return to the wave form.

MS. RIEDEL: I think what I was trying to get at, though, is that the wave is something that came and went over the course of your career. Whereas the vessel forms and the bottle forms have been constant. What is it in particular about those forms that has held your attention over time, whereas the wave came and went, but isn't something that was explored over years, in-depth, exhaustively?

MR. KENT: Good question. I'm trying to think of an answer. The bottle form, as we see it here, the one that is strongest in my mind, has an artistic tension to it. There's a word I've learned from my educated [friends]—they want to hear about and talk about tension.

MS. RIEDEL: You've used it a few times and certainly, I think about it in terms of your work.

MR. KENT: I picked it up from them. In my own mind, the word I would use is discomfort, uncomfortable. That it's

not quite what I would have expected. And the way I interpret that bottle form, it's got that little measure of discomfort. The bottom is smaller than you want. It goes up one way or another to the broader shoulder and then comes down to a thin, thin neck, so that may be—we're trying now to analyze something that really just happens, but that's the closest I can come to analyzing that form.

MS. RIEDEL: There's more of a contrast in extremes, it seems, in the bottle and the guardian and the vessel forms than the wave forms.

MR. KENT: Yes, though in the wave form, there's a complexity to it.

MS. RIEDEL: There is, absolutely, which is why I was curious.

MR. KENT: Again, it's concave and yet convex. And that's a form that, here in Hawaii, our state capitol incorporates, the concave-convex. And in architecture, it is sometimes used. So I'm not the only one who gets fascinated by that.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. But there wasn't enough there to hold your attention indefinitely.

MR. KENT: No. I may indeed come back to it in variations, but it wasn't enough. If I were younger or had longer to live, I would just keep experimenting and experimenting and I can't guess where I would go. I would go to spheres with hollow places. I've already mentioned I've done my pyramids with one side missing. I would look at the insides of things whose outsides I liked. There's no question that that's a direction I would like to explore.

MS. RIEDEL: And that explains, in many ways, the ongoing, decades-long fascination with the bowl, because it has exactly that potential.

MR. KENT: The bowl has an inside. Oh, that brings up an important—we were on procedure. I'm the only—I was going to say major, but maybe the only bowl-maker I know who does the inside of his vessel before he does the outside.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, I did read that. Why is that?

MR. KENT: I don't know. It seems so logical to me. I didn't know what they were doing and I don't know why they haven't adopted it, knowing that I do it. They talk about "that Ron Kent," but I don't know anybody else who, having visited me and seen that I do it, went home and switched.

But it seemed so logical. When I decided I wanted to make thin bowls, I pictured centrifugal force pushing things outward. As your bowl spins, it wants to explode. Now, if I'm going to hold a sharp tool against it and cut in, I don't want to be pushing in the same direction that centrifugal force is pushing. It's already got nature making it go that way, expand, so it seemed logical to me to polish up the inside and then hold my tool against the outside to make it thin.

It still seems logical to me, but in statistical terms [laughs], there must be something wrong with it. It has never stopped working for me. I design it from the inside out. I go through, into the inside, till I find the characteristics I like and want to emphasize, and a shape that pleases me, and then thin the outer walls to match that inner wall.

MS. RIEDEL: And has asymmetry been an important part of what you were looking for from the start?

MR. KENT: More important, asymmetry has been—

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Did I say symmetry? I meant asymmetry, sorry.

MR. KENT: Not so much from the start. The idea, it goes back to the dialog thing. Early on, when I was just learning to talk with wood—"with," rather than "to"—I was more open to cues. As I found my own voice, I was more willing to lead the conversation, to stick with this metaphor.

That also tied into the tension and discomfort of asymmetry. There's something in us that makes us like symmetry, and pushing it off to the side introduced that measure of tension more. So the better I got, the more in control I got, the more I sought and emphasized lack of symmetry.

MS. RIEDEL: And with the asymmetry comes such a sense of movement.

MR. KENT: Yes, indeed. It adds a movement, almost volatility to it. And that still is within the imposed symmetry of woodturning. It was asymmetrical appearance within a circular symmetry that the lathe imparts.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you aware of Bob Stocksdale's work at all?

MR. KENT: Bob Stocksedale was in the Jacobson Collection—and from the time the Jacobson Collection showed and I read his book, from that time on, Bob has been one of the top heroes [Book on Jacobson Collection, “The Art of Turned Wood Bowls,” Edward Jacobson, Published by E.P. Duncan, 1985 –RK].

MS. RIEDEL: I can see that.

MR. KENT: If indeed Prestini, which we’ve come to recognize as lending authority and a foundation from which it grew, I think we were looking for a hero there. But if we call him generation one, then Stocksedale, with his recognition, along with [Ed] Moulthrop and [Melvin] Lindquist, the older Lindquist, I would consider the second generation. Prestini is so alone in the way we honor him that maybe these guys really are the first—he was the precursor and they’re the first generation.

And chronologically, then, Rude Osolnik has to be brought into it, and certainly a number of other people who were doing woodturning commercially, but not artistically, in the early days of its growth.

MS. RIEDEL: Who comes to mind? Anyone in particular?

MR. KENT: Palmer Sharpless.

MS. RIEDEL: I’m not familiar with that name.

MR. KENT: In the early conferences—and the books you’d mentioned earlier—once I started trying to learn a little more about the rest of the world, I went to some conference. His specialty was honey-dippers. So there were people working with a lathe. They were making salad bowls, honey-dippers, things like that.

I’m talking in the ’70s and ’80s. They were on a par with—the Moulthrops and the Lindquists and the Ellsworths weren’t enough—and me—weren’t enough of a body of people. We were just seen as an offshoot of woodturning in general, which was just more traditional. Realize, this is my interpretation and trying to understand what I observed. I’m saying it more authoritatively than it might deserve and I know that some of that East Coast bunch will have different interpretations. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: We can count on it.

MR. KENT: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Before we move on, did you want to say something about the mailbox?

MR. KENT: I wanted to look that up.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, we can come back to it.

MR. KENT: I think it was the Smithsonian Archives that sponsored, as a fundraiser, a long time ago, a mailbox auction.

MS. RIEDEL: Is this the one you made, and the base is wood?

MR. KENT: I may have included that among it. But it was only recently it dawned on me; I think it was Smithsonian Archives that had sponsored that. Well, at any rate—

MS. RIEDEL: Or maybe the Renwick?

MR. KENT: No, I think—we can look for the article, but that name, once you contacted me, was rattling around in my mind. I’d like to look that up sometime. But once again, this was a great honor to be invited. I’m amazed to know that anybody on the East Coast knows that I’m alive and wants to include me in something. And I darn well want to look good, but I make bowls. You know, what else will I do? So I used the same technique I had used, in general. The diamond seaweed is a variation on the wave.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I can see that.

MR. KENT: And it occurred to me, I would make an artistic stand for an ordinary RFD mailbox. I would include a handsomely boxed bowl with mailing stickers on it, so that whoever bought it got not only the mailbox, but the mail.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] What a great idea.

MR. KENT: And it was different enough that when the *New York Times* reviewed the event, my mailbox was the one they included a picture of.

MS. RIEDEL: Fantastic.

MR. KENT: So a little at a time, that kind of exposure built a reputation.

MS. RIEDEL: Sort of an aside, but you have had extraordinary luck, or made an extraordinary effort to have your career really well-documented. There have been visuals of your work from very early on in your career, I think, available. Was that something you consciously decided to do?

MR. KENT: One thing, in the beginning, entering mainland shows, it was always, "We have work by David Ellsworth"—by these famous people—"and Ron Kent from Hawaii." Hawaii had its own cachet and got me mentioned beyond what I might have been mentioned as one of the fine bowls. So the journalists liked—that was pure luck.

Also, something else I've tried to teach other artists: to apply as much creativity to marketing their work as they did to making it in the first place. I saw marketing as a creative challenge. There was always a part of my mind, just as there's a part working what shape to make or what wood to use—there was a part, "How can I get people's attention to it?" Now, in teaching that to my colleagues, it has sometimes overshadowed, bluntly speaking, the excellence of my work. They get so fast, "Ron Kent is such a good marketer," they forget, "Hey, you've got to have something worth their attention before you draw their attention to it."

There's no question in my mind among the people we've heard of, whether it was—and I can't remember his name—the doctor who pioneered open-heart surgery; in whatever field—the astronomer who's so famous—he popularized it [Carl Sagan -RK].

MS. RIEDEL: Contemporary or going back?

MR. KENT: Contemporary, in our time. He's the first name that comes into everybody's mind in astronomy.

MS. RIEDEL: Not Stephen Hawking?

MR. KENT: Well, Hawking, too. But these people—Hawking, maybe, he got attention for other reasons.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. KENT: But in general—[Dr. Michael] DeBakey was one of the doctors I'm thinking of—they were not only leaders and pioneers in their field. But Dale Chihuly, if you will. Chihuly always reminds me of—and again, I'm sorry about names—the one who was so famous in scuba diving, the French name.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, [Jacques-Yves] Cousteau.

MR. KENT: Cousteau. Cousteau and Chihuly have an awful lot in common. They're both magnificent showmen. That helps, that ties in with the questions you're asking me. And yes, where I've been willing to—I like being a showman.

MS. RIEDEL: What about that appeals to you? Is it the fun, is it the drama, is it the attention?

MR. KENT: That's a very good question and it has just proven something else, too. Though I had no sense of destiny in art in the beginning, eventually I did see people who had gained reputation and there was a part of my mind that wanted to join that group.

Even earlier, when I became a stockbroker, I set myself what would be called, I don't know, a goal. I wanted to be known and respected within my community. I wanted to be known and respected among my colleagues. And I wanted to make a fair amount of money. Not to get rich, but—and I felt each of the three would go together.

Same thing in the art world: I wanted to be known and respected among other artists. I wanted to be known and respected by people who didn't know anything about art. And I felt that in doing the two I would make enough money to retire one day.

I consider Leonard Bernstein in the music field a wonderful example. He has no betters in the music world, but he's known to the world in general. People who have never heard of anyone beyond [Leopold] Stokowski, who Disney made famous to the public, know Leonard Bernstein and like him. And I guess I wanted to be the Leonard Bernstein of wood.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] And it's interesting that although you're not turning bowls anymore, you're not working with the lathe, you're still very actively working. You're out in your studio. You're working on new Guardians and things.

MR. KENT: I'm glad you mentioned that because I was building up to it and got off the track. And this is hard—in the context we were just talking about. The showmanship we're talking about was never for its own sake. It wasn't for the fame or the glory. It really wasn't. It was a way to build the recognition and the market and the money.

And indeed, now that I at least mentally recognize that I've achieved that, I'm dodging, rather than seeking publicity. Perversely, where I used to have to work so hard and continuously to get attention, it's coming to me. Witness this invitation for the oral history.

This is something I would have killed for a few years ago. Today, though I'm really proud and think it's nice, it's not that important in its own right. It's a very nice thing, but not what it would have been a few years ago. Last year, one of the local galleries, at the community college, wanted to do a retrospective of my show and give a dinner and have a roast and make a big feat out of it. And I wouldn't accept it at all.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. KENT: I didn't want that attention anymore.

MS. RIEDEL: What shifted?

MR. KENT: I had achieved it. Again, I'd always tried to tell my friends and my wife that I really didn't want the glory for its own sake. It was a part of building what I was trying to build. It tied into my plan and now that I'm there and slowing up, I would become more reclusive and more of a hermit. And indeed, it's true that I'm not going to—I haven't attended any of the recent conferences of the [American] Association of Woodturners, though certainly I'd be welcomed as a presenter. And I haven't wanted to go either on the stage or in the—well, I've never wanted to go just in the audience.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Yes.

MR. KENT: But I haven't wanted to be one of the presenters. In the Collectors of Wood Art, the influential association that has bought my work, of people I like—but again, I've never wanted to go just to attend the meetings. And I now have nothing I want to say to them from the stage. So I've missed out on these meetings, which would have been wonderful sales opportunities. And I'm selling. Maybe today we'll get to value.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about it right now.

MR. KENT: Maybe. Well, it's a whole talk in itself, but I will say one thing. Oh, and generosity. When I was producing—I think we touched on this, too—when I was producing, when I knew I would go out in my shop tomorrow and the day after, when there was an endless flow of bowls, it was easy to be generous with them. The idea that it's finite—I think I did mention it but it's worth mentioning again.

MS. RIEDEL: I don't think we talked about it on disc, though.

MR. KENT: The idea that there are a few dozen in galleries around the country. I have no firm idea how many, or even for sure which galleries, beyond one or two that have big collections.

MS. RIEDEL: Where are the big collections right now? Gerald Peters?

MR. KENT: Santa Fe, Gerald Peters, that's the biggest and Laguna, California, Wendt [Gallery]—W-E-N-D-T [Laguna Beach, CA]—are the two biggest. Maybe Florida —Dania Beach, Rakova Brecker—but that's a maybe. And at home, I have maybe two dozen, maybe less. But without counting them, each time I sell or give away one, it's one less.

It really is a number and because I am, frankly, financially comfortable that selling a bowl would not make any difference in how I live. I wouldn't get to buy an extra aloha shirt. [They laugh.] I wouldn't have to do without.

And this gets us to value. What is money worth? There's no question in my mind that my time, my optimism, I use the word "energy," those are the most important and valuable things to me. The money won't change my life—my health, of course. So selling a bowl isn't that important and it's very hard—that's why I'm glad to have galleries. It's very hard to put a value on it.

I'm amazed at how many very rich people I know who treat money as if it were limited and I know these people well enough to know how limitless it is in practical terms. I know people who will be reading your reports, collectors, who lost tens of millions of dollars over the last few years. That's because they still have tens and twenties of millions left, but often are so worried about what they've lost in the financial meltdown, that they don't realize how fortunate they still are. So money has never been a prime mover for me.

MS. RIEDEL: It's been a tool, it's been a means.

MR. KENT: A tool that's shown up in many ways in my life. And the money I had, I've used well. The renting for years instead of owning, allowing me live in nicer houses than I could have owned, things like that. We're getting way off.

MS. RIEDEL: No, no, I think that could lead into the question you wanted to discuss about value, but—

MR. KENT: Yes, good.

MS. RIEDEL: But let's change the disc before we get into that.

MR. KENT: Value and investment.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

[END DISC 4.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art with Ron Kent at the artist's home in Kailua, Hawaii, on April 22, 2010. This is disc number five. You were just starting to talk about value and investment.

MR. KENT: Good. This anecdote will tie together a lot of things and will bring in a little more information about the Post-Nuclear [series] to illustrate these things—

MS. RIEDEL: Series, right.

MR. KENT: Let's go back. Our discussion of value is not recorded, is that correct?

MS. RIEDEL: Everything up till a minute ago is recorded.

MR. KENT: Is recorded, good. So we did say what things are worth to whom and some people don't recognize the value of money. I hadn't said that, but I know people who wouldn't drive downtown to save \$1,000.

MS. RIEDEL: Would or would not?

MR. KENT: Would or would—

MS. RIEDEL: You know both. [Laughs.]

MR. KENT: Yes, people are very inconsistent where money is concerned. And I'd mentioned people don't like talking about it and especially don't like being told that they really don't have to worry about it. [They laugh.] It's a very personal thing. And what business is it of yours to be telling them that anyhow. And besides, they are worried about it. [They laugh.]

I was doing the opening night walk-through at a one-man show in the Gerald Peters Gallery in Santa Fe. As is my style, I get flamboyant. I use my hands a lot. There must have been some Italian somewhere in my background. Maybe a milkman or something, we don't know. [They laugh.]

But I waved my hand, once, too wildly and knocked one of my own bowls—a very nice one—off of a pedestal. It broke in three pieces. Wow. [Laughs.]

I think every craftsman gets used to breakage. If we really let it get to us, we would have quit years ago.

MS. RIEDEL: And you're more used to it than most, I must say, from the way you discuss it. You expect it. You court it to a certain degree.

MR. KENT: Yes, yes. So I certainly was shocked, but not enough—so much that I couldn't pick the piece up, show the audience that by seeing the wall now through the break, I could show them the uniformity of the walls [to] make a point, and then went on with the rest of the show. But I had friends who very ardent collectors in the audience who were quite insistent that I should use the stitching—what I call the “post-nuclear” treatment to repair it.

Now, until then, I had never used that treatment on a bowl that had been broken into pieces. I'd use it for hairline cracks. I took it as a challenge and for my friends and collectors, tried it. It came out as perhaps—if I had to name my one—gosh, I couldn't—if I had to name my three or four favorites in my whole career, this certainly would have been one of those two or three or four.



MS. RIEDEL: Really? Interesting.

MR. KENT: I'll show you pictures of it later.

MS. RIEDEL: Is it on the front of the catalog?

MR. KENT: It's in the foldout catalog. But it was three pieces, stitched together, in what was a graceful, translucent, beautiful bowl. Make another note, please, to come back to hole-in-one.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. [Laughs.]

MR. KENT: I want to discuss the hole—that's a metaphor I'll use.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm sure.

MR. KENT: But in any rate, that I loved it. I love the very ugliness of it. The contrast of these metal stitchings in this otherwise pristine, beautiful bowl, which is what gets me to the Post-Nuclear anyhow. Have we named—told you why we named it Post-Nuclear?

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MR. KENT: Let's come back.

MS. RIEDEL: We actually haven't talked about that—the whole Pat Hickman collaboration. We haven't mentioned that at all.

MR. KENT: Good. The—after I started doing those bowls—this is a side talk—they reminded me of movies which were then more current, *Mad Max*, *Waterworld*, movies about a world in which a nuclear holocaust had destroyed all society and the things people had were clutched together from the scrap piles of the 20th century.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. KENT: They took broken things and mended them with parts of other broken things. And my stitched bowls reminded me of that. Hence the name *Post Nuclear*.

MS. RIEDEL: And that's very much of a Japanese aesthetic in certain ways, too, that sense of repairing something.

MR. KENT: In the Kanazawa 21st Century Art Festival, to which I was one of 21 American artists, again, this tie, in 21st century—21 European, 21 American, 21 Japanese.

MS. RIEDEL: So this was 10 years ago? In 2000?

MR. KENT: Two thousand and one. They were a little late. [They laugh.] But the bowl I included, because I did see it as fitting in with the Japanese aesthetic was that one and it subsequently has been accepted into the Kanazawa Museum of Contemporary Art [21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan]

MS. RIEDEL: Perfect.

MR. KENT: So they did like it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I would think so.

MR. KENT: Okay, so here we are with the one I had put together and loved.

MS. RIEDEL: What year was this, roughly, do you remember? Late '90s?

MR. KENT: No, we're in the early twenty-first century already, maybe 2005, perhaps, '04, somewhere around there. Closer to the end of my turning career. And this was also meant to illustrate values. And the fact that in retirement, I'd done a good job of planning for it.

MS. RIEDEL: You retired in '97, correct?

MR. KENT: I retired from the other profession in '97.

From the stockbroking profession, right. But was still actively doing woodturning. That was when woodturning became my only profession rather than a full-time profession along with two other full-time professions. So I did have, for much of the '90s, for the mid-'80s through then, three full-time professions.

[... -RK]

Well, let's go back to that. I became a stockbroker. Among other things, I talked about the real reason I see of getting out of engineering, before they fired me. [They laugh.] But once in, I was dealing with people more than money. And I learned a lot about people's attitudes towards money, which is terrible.

MS. RIEDEL: Is it?

MR. KENT: On all levels, money screws people up.

But also, I went back to some very old, traditional ideas and built a career based upon the old concepts of investing. In the older and the old world concept, they differentiated between investment and speculation. I've built my whole philosophy—and here we're going to get to art, too, on defining an investment as something you buy for benefits you receive while you own it.

And something you buy for benefits you hope to receive when you sell it to somebody else. Something whose market value—what is it worth—comes into play, traditionally, was called a speculation. It's worth what somebody else will pay you for it.

The outstanding example of that—though in today's life, people will tell you everything is an investment. But gold—short of the fillings in your teeth [they laugh] or showing off to your friends that you have it on your wrist—gold has no practical value to you unless or until you sell it. Gold is purely a speculation.

MS. RIEDEL: Unless you're a metalsmith.

MR. KENT: Now, to the extent that you like showing it off, it becomes an investment. A Mercedes-Benz, to the extent that it gets you from here to the grocery store, is an investment. To the extent that it shows your neighbors that you can afford it, it's an investment. After you buy the Mercedes, in your mind is the idea that it will have a resale value—that's the speculative end of it.

Art is the same way. Take away the things we infuse it with—the knowing that it's an original, knowing that it's an original by Leonardo da Vinci—a fine print of the *Mona Lisa* could give you as much aesthetic pleasure as the original.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure, if it's well done. If it manages to capture—

MR. KENT: A good print of any—yes. Or a fine work of art by somebody who lived down the block and nobody will hear of. So coming back to my definition of art—of investment, coming to my definition of investment, art is an investment to the extent that you enjoy owning it.

MS. RIEDEL: You're speaking as a collector or as a—

MR. KENT: Of anybody. Anybody who buys an artwork.

MS. RIEDEL: But not as a maker. You're speaking now about art as an object that somebody purchases. You're not speaking as someone who makes art.

MR. KENT: Yes. I'm speaking to the person who goes into the gallery or to the crafts fair and buys art. To the degree that he enjoys it, whether by looking at it or showing it off or in some of these fabled collectors we've heard of who have private collections that nobody ever sees, the satisfaction they get by owning it.

All of those things fit my definition of an investment. And only that person can tell you what that is worth to him. Value is personal. To the degree that anybody has bought it with the idea that its market value will go up, it fits my definition of a speculation. And most of what people call investment art is truly speculative art.

An immense amount of art that is bought for its own beauty is backed up without words by the conviction that it will retain its value and maybe become more valuable—so when I answer the question “Is it an investment?”—because of the financial consultant in me, I give the long answer that I've just given you.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] As a maker, what do you think? Does it even come into the process? I would think not.

MR. KENT: No, no, no. It would certainly be different if it were my source of income. If I were making it with the idea of selling it, it would be a whole different set of ideas that I can't answer fully. For me as a maker, that didn't enter into it at any stage.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm sure it has value, but I would imagine a value that's separate from the way you've just defined investment or speculation.

MR. KENT: It's not a dollar value. It was out of the dollar category.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. KENT: An advantage to people like myself or to artists who have a rich husband—

MS. RIEDEL: Or a teaching profession.

MR. KENT: Or in my case, a second job, is that we are less constrained by making to somebody else's standards, that we can go off on these tangents just because they're challenging to us.

MS. RIEDEL: That leads, I think, perfectly into a question about commissions and have you done many? Do you like them?

MR. KENT: The idea flitted into my mind and I lost it. I'm glad you asked it. I wanted to. I've learned that I cannot accept a commission. I learned that when people, early on, when somebody would come along, see something I was working on and give me a deposit, that somehow, I never got around to finishing that piece. [They laugh.] There was always something else to do.

To making commissions, even if it was the kind of work I'm doing—"Ron, make me one like that, I know that one's already gone." Or "like the one I saw at the museum" or even just "Make me one"—I think I've come to understand why I can't—[can] never do it.

MS. RIEDEL: Why?

MR. KENT: I want—might want to—a fear of rejection. That enters into a lot of my thinking about a lot of things. We all hate rejection. I might hate it more than most people. [They laugh.] Because it has affected so many things in my life in each of my professions. And in the case of accepting a commission, it's never fine enough.

I always know how much better it might have been, how much closer to what they wanted and it creates an immense psychological block for my work. So I learned years ago not to accept commissions. I had one—perhaps the one that tipped me over the edge and absolutely from now on, never—was a collector and a friend who wanted a work similar to one that another collector—you know, the same general format.

I ended up making four or five so they could choose between, because none seemed to be quite what they wanted. They ended up accepting and paying for one and both of us knew that it wasn't what they had in mind. They were gracious enough not to show that, but—

MS. RIEDEL: And somehow, it was lesser rather than more.

MR. KENT: It was different, whatever, not even lesser or more.

MS. RIEDEL: But they were disappointed as opposed to—

MR. KENT: It wasn't what they were looking for and they felt that having once done it and my having put in so much work, they had to buy it. That was the one day—boy, from now on, I will never even flirt with, no matter how similar it is to what I do, I'm going to make it, finish it, put it on display, welcome anybody to look at it, and buy it if they like it. But I'm not going to make it for them.

MS. RIEDEL: Goes very much against your way of working as we talked about it a couple days ago, which is that whole concept of "good enough." And if you always see how that it could be better or closer to what you think somebody's commissioning, I could see how that could be frustrating and just completely antithetical to your way of working.

MR. KENT: I've learned that I'm talking for all of my colleagues when I say that each time I see one of my pieces, I immediately see the little place where it might have been better. I see the little thing that I know is there and I think that all of us makers have that in common.

I can walk into a room. I'll spot my work—and particularly if I wasn't expecting it, I'm delighted with it. First, I see it objectively and I love the shape and the characteristics. And then it dawns on me: Hey, that was mine. [They laugh.] And then I see, oh yes, that's the one where that happened. [They laugh.] Those three steps happen.

MS. RIEDEL: That is really funny.

MR. KENT: It reminds me of another anecdote from early in the career, from the piece that's in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you go and see the mistakes with that one too?

MR. KENT: No, no. They wouldn't let you close enough. [They laugh.] It was in a glass case when I saw it, but the curator then, Penelope Hunter-Stiebel, in selecting, made it plain that it was me she was selecting rather than the works. She wanted a sample of one of my bottle forms and a bowl form. This was a long time ago. It was very shortly after the Bud Jacobson show.

MS. RIEDEL: So late '80s, early '90s?

MR. KENT: Yes, early, mid-'80s. But on a later trip to New York—and you're not always this lucky because museums rotate their display. But I went to the Metropolitan and went to the twentieth-century wing. That means you go through the Egyptian wing. I did it that time and then I went through the armor, you know, the coats of mail and all.

MS. RIEDEL: The furniture, I imagine.

MR. KENT: You round a corner and they were really early—I was—early in their twentieth century. They've gone much bigger since, but it wasn't a room this large at the time. But at the other end of that room was another smaller room, darker, with my work in a case with a light shining down on it.

And you know, I was winding my way through the museum, I rounded this corner and saw that. My knees collapsed. I didn't quite fall, but, at that stage in my career, to see this piece glowing in this dark—wow—I'm getting teary remembering it. That was an experience of my life.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. And that was fairly early in your career.

MR. KENT: It was.

MS. RIEDEL: That was 20 years ago, at least.

MR. KENT: You and I talked earlier about the pope and the president. This beat it. This was a heavier experience. Yes, it was very early in my work. It was one of the early museums to acquire my work. I've got to credit, if I may give another name, Jonathan Fairbanks. Jonathan was then curator in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

And a very influential name in acquisition of turned wood. And Jonathan was buying three of my bowls at that time and he was the one who suggested that I—he asked—in the Metropolitan collection. And then he called Penelope and said, "You should look at this guy's work." We were on our way to Canada. This was an incidental visit to Jonathan.

We turned around and went back to New York City the next morning when she was willing to talk to us. There weren't very many living artists in the twentieth—they were just starting. Again, we may have to look this up to see if I'm right, but my feeling is they were early on in their twentieth-century collection. And being a live artist in the Metropolitan was fun.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. And Jonathan Fairbanks became familiar with your work through the Jacobson exhibition? Is that correct?

MR. KENT: I guess so, I don't know. I contacted him. The Museum of Fine Arts was already recognized as being influential, and Jonathan. And since we were going to take a driving trip through New England to Canada, I called and asked if we could stop off and meet him.

MS. RIEDEL: And show him some work?

MR. KENT: And show him the work. Everything about him then and since—he's a big, big figure in our world.

MS. RIEDEL: But that ties into something you were talking about earlier, which is the importance of marketing, making the work known.

MR. KENT: Yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: To people who may be interested in that—

MR. KENT: He may not have known of me at all back then. I don't know, but I took along bowls. He liked them immediately and bought them on the spot.

MS. RIEDEL: How extraordinary.

MR. KENT: Yes. And Jonathan, later, wrote one of the essays.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes, for a catalog, yes.

MR. KENT: He's a gigantic figure in the art world.

MS. RIEDEL: How did retiring from your other professions in investment, stockbroking, how did that affect your career as an artist?

MR. KENT: It cut back a little on the amount of effort I put into it, in that I've learned that the structure of having the multiple careers brought out high productivity. I used every minute productively.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's address that question first. How did you manage to fit three careers into a regular day?

MR. KENT: Let's look at the far end of that and come back to it. When, for various occasions, my wife would move to the mainland on a trip or on a vacation with our daughter, I found myself—oh boy, I'll have all that time to work and look forward to all the extra time that I might have spent in family endeavors, which has always been a priority with me.

MS. RIEDEL: So you would take the trip or you would stay home?

MR. KENT: These were trips she took without me. So I would be at home with no family responsibilities. I wouldn't even have to quit to come in to dinner. It turned out that I lost all discipline and maybe got nothing done during the days and weeks of that happening, that I needed the structure of the other life to be productive.

MS. RIEDEL: Limitations, to use the words you used—

MR. KENT: It goes back to creativity that we'd talked [about] earlier—same thing. I needed the limitations to be productive, as I needed them earlier always to be creative. Did that fully answer you by coming in from that direction?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

MR. KENT: Other than that, it was just using every minute and usually using it in at least two ways.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Yes, we did talk about that. So when you retired from stockbroking and investment in '97, there wasn't a great flourishing of activity in terms of the woodworking. Did it actually fall off a bit or did it proceed pretty much—

MR. KENT: No, it dropped—it was the same, but there was an awful lot more wasted time during the day.

Maybe more gardening and more—and almost any retired people will tell you this, we don't know where the time goes. Sometimes, writing a check and getting it into an envelope is a morning's work [they laugh]—or three or four, maybe, and then getting that envelope out to the mailbox is the next day's task. [They laugh.] I really—that happens.

MS. RIEDEL: I find that hard to believe. I still see a studio out there full of work.

MR. KENT: Oh yes, but there will be days in a row that I don't get out to that studio. Certainly, now—no, yesterday, I did a lot of work. But there will be days in a row that I don't get out and do anything, or that a trip to the hardware store is considered a day's work. So in retirement, an awful lot of people, certainly including me, become less productive.

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds as if there has been no set routine to your working process, but there has been a routine, it's just been—not erratic, but it's been more spontaneous and you've worked when you've had time.

MR. KENT: Exactly. If we're expecting company that night, if I'm smart, I put on dirty clothes. If I'm not, it occurs to me I can go out and make one little cut and all too often, I ruin too many good pieces of clothes because one thing leads to another [they laugh] and it ends up on the clothes.

But yes, using every available minute; and then priorities became very important because family and family things were always a very top priority. And when I was responsible for other people's money, that was a close second priority. So the art and craft, though certainly a high priority, was second both to family and to financial responsibilities.

MS. RIEDEL: You mentioned your client, Alicia. Was there much overlap between your financial and your artistic careers?

MR. KENT: If I were giving a speech, now, I'd repeat the question always for the audience. Which I caught myself about to do.

In the early days of the art being a hobby, no. In the early days, when the hobby began being a second profession, it became very important to me to let my financial clients know that I wasn't thinking of bowls when I should have been thinking of bonds, that just as you and I don't want to know that our doctors are good golfers, we don't even like the idea that his Wednesday afternoon is on the golf carts. We want to think he thinks only medicine.

And, in fact, because of the priorities, that was the case. I worked at letting people know that. Later, people became proud of me for—they recognized there was no conflict. And by the time David Heenan wrote his book, it no longer bothered me to have him say it. But that was something that was important for people to know.

MS. RIEDEL: We've talked about how your financial expertise and background has benefited your art career. Did you feel there was a symbiotic relationship in any way between the two?

MR. KENT: No, it benefited it primarily by giving me an income that let me not worry about selling my work. Other than that, I don't see any overlap. Nor really—and I've been asked this question—my engineering education; minimum overlap.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, that was my first thought, originally.

MR. KENT: Some of the engineering philosophies spilled—the logic that engineering demanded spilled into the financial world.

MS. RIEDEL: There's also, I think, in terms of engineering and your work, I keep thinking about mass and actual mass and the absolute, almost eradication of mass, to the point where it's almost—the wood is so thin that it's barely there.

MR. KENT: Are you saying mess, M-E-S-S?

MS. RIEDEL: Mass, M-A-S-S, mass.

MR. KENT: Good point. The first thing that pops into my mind when you say it is that most people don't understand the concept of mass, that mass and weight are two different things.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. KENT: That's not so sure to a lot of your readers and my listeners.

MS. RIEDEL: But when one looks at your work, you look at the incredibly thin bowls and then you look at the very thick, massive bowls.

MR. KENT: Very, very little mass.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. So it seems that mass—

MR. KENT: That comes back to the discomfort we were talking about, to, yes, that it brings in the tension.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Exactly, the tension seems to be the issue. And there's some pieces such as the Guardians and the bottles that have both the very thin and then the much thicker.

MR. KENT: And there was a series—and I use the word "massive"—massive, solid, heavyweight bowls.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, that just had almost a slight indentation and that is what made it a bowl at all, as opposed to pure form.

MR. KENT: And the sense of mass that you were asking about.

MS. RIEDEL: But it seems that that's not something you spend a lot of time thinking about.

MR. KENT: No. No, that's something that just happened.

MS. RIEDEL: How much do you think your environment, living here in Hawaii, influenced your work? I look at your forms and I think of Hawaii. I know there's not a huge ceramics tradition here. Do you think it had any influence

at all other than the obvious—

MR. KENT: Not that I can—yes, there is a Hawaiian tradition in bowls.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, absolutely, and wooden bowls.

MR. KENT: And I visited that. At one point, I made a few of what we call Calabash.

It is blowing. [Inaudible]—the rain.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. It's pouring. Close the windows.

MR. KENT: Are we on?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, we're on.

MR. KENT: I didn't find the calabash a very satisfying form. I ended up—do you know the phrase "calabash cousin," or is that strictly a Hawaiian phrase?

MS. RIEDEL: I don't.

MR. KENT: Here, that phrase is used to denote somebody who has been a part of your life, you grew up with them. They're not really in your family, but it's like family.

MS. RIEDEL: Sort of like a kissing cousin, I would imagine?

MR. KENT: Same—well, no, kissing cousins really are cousins.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, are they?

MR. KENT: Kissing cousins are a cousin that's close enough that you kiss. Calabash cousin is somebody with no real family tie, but you've got—there's something close to it. Well, when I got started making Calabash—I don't think I made four in my life, but one of them I liked a lot. And I gave it a name.

It was called *Calabash's Cousin*, "calabash"-apostrophe-S. It was visibly related to the calabash, but I like to jokingly say this is what calabashes might have looked like if I had been a Hawaiian 500 years ago. The calabash squats down on the top. My calabash came to a refined little base.

It flared out again with that going-from-convex-to-concave, with a thin little foot on which it sat that lifted—it gave it a lightness and showed you the entire curve above the surface. So that one—I don't know, maybe I made a couple of them, and named them, which was unusual for me.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I was going to say.

MR. KENT: But other than that, the calabash certainly was not a recognizable influence for me. And other than that—

MS. RIEDEL: Given that you've experimented with so many different media, do you think you would have worked in wood if you'd stayed on the mainland?

MR. KENT: Yes. I would have worked in wood, as I did on some of the furniture that we brought with us. So I was working in wood.

In the kayak I made, which was a wooden framework with stretched cloth on it. Wood was always accessible, easily tooled up for; it didn't need a lot of education. Wood was the thing that was there to do things with. If I'd lived and grown up in Japan, it might have been bamboo, but the things that were all around me and inexpensive were what I would have worked with.

Hawaii did supply—well, first of all, we go back to the gift—Myra's gift of a small lathe. Then the chance finding of Norfolk pine. Those tied in with Hawaii. But if Myra had given me that lathe in San Diego, I would have found wood to have worked on it and it would have addicted me to lathe work.

MS. RIEDEL: I associate your work so much with the Norfolk pine. It's interesting to think about what might have happened in another location.

MR. KENT: You'd do that more if you stopped at any of the shops that sell woodwork here, again, because of the immense—I don't want to be heard saying it—but recognizably immense influence I had in what was—even without me—a gigantically growing community of woodturners. Whether or not I was here—

MS. RIEDEL: I think it's why you were recognized, I think your piece—

MR. KENT:—woodturning would have found its way here. But there were all of these people that saw me and what I was doing and the wood I was working with. So as they came to woodworking, I was clearly an influence.

MS. RIEDEL: One thing I think we talked about over dinner but maybe didn't mention on disc was the progression of lathes that you had over time.

MR. KENT: Yes. I went from this \$35 toy lathe to a secondhand Delta lathe—Delta was the big maker of home workshop tools—to a Sears Roebuck Craftsman lathe, again, home workshop things. Thinking of this just totally as a hobby along with other hobbies, but one that was becoming increasingly addictive to me. And from there, to design—oh, from there to another Delta that I modified, had it beefed up, and made larger and stronger, and then finally, to designing and having built my own lathe.

MS. RIEDEL: Because the pieces of wood you were working with were extraordinarily heavy.

MR. KENT: I got the big, heavy—well, I was called, too. Earlier, you asked me about scale. I liked the heft, the mass of the heavier woods. You'd asked or we'd discussed hau—H-A-U—as a beautiful wood with no heft. The density was too light for me to like even the nice-looking things I made in it. So yes, I liked heavy woods.

MS. RIEDEL: And the pieces you'd start with could weigh 100 pounds or more, correct?

MR. KENT: Ultimately, they could weigh two [hundred] or three hundred pounds.

MS. RIEDEL: That's extraordinary.

MR. KENT: I had a hoist—a mechanical—electric, mechanical hoist built in to swing around as part of my last two lathes.

MS. RIEDEL: That actually leads to another question. Has technology had any impact on your work?

MR. KENT: Yes, it's made it easier and less challenging. In the case of the lathe itself, when I got into the field, they were still using the traditional lathe, where the so-called dead center, the part that wasn't forcing the wood to turn was an iron cone, a sharp cone that stuck into the wood and held it in place against what was then called the live center.

Shortly after, and as I was growing within the field, people introduced a ball-bearing tailstock. Now, this fixed comb, almost invariably, burned into the wood. The fast, spinning wood with a metal comb got hotter and hotter. Having a tailstock that would spin on ball bearings got rid of that entirely. That was an immense help to people who were doing what is called spindle turning, turning things between two centers.

It didn't matter much to most of what were now emerging bowl turners, because most of them weren't doing much spindle turning; maybe, as I later did, between centers to start the log, but ultimately, they were working cantilevered off of the drive center so the tailstock didn't matter. But the technology of a ball-bearing tailstock was important. Also, the tools got better and better and better. In my early tools, the first one I might have mentioned was a sharpened screwdriver.

MS. RIEDEL: I remember that.

MR. KENT: From there, I, and a lot of people like me around the country, were sharpening up automobile springs and other pieces of spring steel we could get our hands on. The tools that were available got dull quickly, but as the metallurgy improved and as the number of people buying [increased], turning tools grew.

And as—let's go off into an anecdote. Once I got into the field, I learned that one of the leading toolmakers and an ardent woodturner was a man who had been my boss's boss when I was an undergraduate engineer.

I was working in a high-technology turbo-machinery company. That's where metallurgy was very important and I was just the intern, the summer intern. But my boss was a full engineer and his boss later became the top toolmaker for custom woodturning tools.

MS. RIEDEL: Who was that? Do you remember?

MR. KENT: Jerry Glaser.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. KENT: G-L-A-S-E-R. Jerry is still alive, still making tools well into his 80s. You know, he's three-quarters



retired and has been very influential in the tools that woodturners in the various tools, in the steels we used. So the technology has affected all of our woodworking tools was important to us.

It let us do things that we would have done anyhow. You know, because you look at what craftsmen did in the Renaissance and before the Renaissance, fine craftsmanship never let itself be limited by the tools. That might be too broad a statement. But the finest artists and craftsmen found ways to transcend the technology of their era.

MS. RIEDEL: To innovate, sure. Absolutely.

That leads into another question, which is, do you think of yourself as part of an international tradition? Or do you think of yourself as a tradition that's particularly American?

MR. KENT: No, I—that's an excellent, thoughtful question. The artistic woodturning, I think, could be documented as having been American. I think it was spotty around the country. It may have been without my knowing examples. But people may have come and gone without recognition around the world.

But it, again, comes back to the recognition that elevated it to its own market in America that then has spread and is continuing to spread to the rest of the world, to the point that we have famous, well-known, well-recognized German, French, Israeli, now Japanese. Japan was slow to enter the artistic wood world with their very fine aesthetic. It was one of the newcomers to—for want of a better term, we'll call art—art in woodturning.

So the international—which is the word you used earlier?

MS. RIEDEL: Community? Tradition?

MR. KENT: Community, thank you. The international community has grown and I'm a part of that, as witnessed by my e-mail. Particularly, we'd mentioned the detergent project. Though I'll get inquiries of various sorts, the broadest range of international inquiries I get are to ask about the detergent project.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting, interesting. They don't have Costco? [Laughs.]

MR. KENT: And they don't—yes—"Does it have to be bought at Costco?"

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Exactly. We talked about this in passing, but I'm curious to know if you have any other thoughts about it. You have taught a few woodworking workshops, a few workshops for artists in places I'm thinking of, like Arrowmont.

Have you taught many? What has your experience been with them? When we talked about this earlier, you did mention that you weren't so interested in being a teacher, but more interested in being a demonstrator and that in terms of workshops, you felt that perhaps the financial workshops that you offer to artists have been—

MR. KENT: That I had more to offer in that field, that because my techniques were indeed unconventional and many of them awkward, they're just ways I learned to do it. It's not a terribly good metaphor, but think of me as an author who's still typing hunt-and-peck. [They laugh.]

The unconventionality of my techniques leads me to believe that people learning would be better following the trend and learning to do it the way everybody else does it. They might develop their own little quirks, but mine was too individual and too quirky to want to teach it as a way.

The other noted teachers teach, first, basics, which I can't do, and then they'll go off with people who already know the basics and show how to do their particular specialization. And mine was specialization from the ground up.

So I don't think that I had that much—and my impatience as a teacher. I want them to go out and learn by themselves. [They laugh.] "Here's the lathe, here's a gouge. Go make a bowl. Call me if you get a question, but don't ask too many." [They laugh.] You know, when you start asking, "Oh, should I use my right hand or my left hand?" it's, "Hey, go and figure it out. That's the fun."

And that is a trap in helping people. I get inquiries and I'm quick to answer them and pleased to, but then they come back and essentially want me to give them all the answers.

And it's getting those answers; so somebody once asked me, "Where can I go to learn to improve my woodworking?" And my answer was, "Go out to your workshop." He, of course, wanted to know which school. But I think that your own experience is your best teacher.

MS. RIEDEL: You have to put in the time.

MR. KENT: The demonstrating thing was pointed out to me in looking for people at some of these symposia and conferences. Somebody else had delineated between a demonstrator and a teacher. And I saw that there is a point. In my demonstrations, I think of myself more like Victor Borge. Do you remember him?

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MR. KENT: A pianist comedian, a very fine pianist and a very intellectual comedian. B-O-R-G-E, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: S? Or no?

MR. KENT: No, I don't—maybe an S; accent over the E, I think. Victor, I'm sure, is the right first name. But his routine would be combination of playing something pretty impressive, but familiar, and then interrupting himself and talking. And it was a combination of the piano and the high-level comedy. Real intellectual guy ...

[END DISC 5.]

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art with Ron Kent at the artist's home in Kailua, Hawaii, on April 22, 2010, disc number six. You were talking about demonstrating for guilds or—

RON KENT: Right, there were things I was anxious to say because I like educating. And even more, I love debunking the great amount of baloney that's extant in the world, so when I travel—and I like meeting my colleagues—I would get in touch with the local woodturners—and letting our hair down, metaphorically. It was going along with the goal I had of being known and respected. Off the record—no, you don't have to—[they laugh]—it was more that [goal] than that I liked meeting them and listening to them.

That was how I got known in the world. Yes, being honest between ourselves, that was it. But for whatever reason, I got in touch and they welcomed me and we enjoyed it. I got high on the meetings. And they liked seeing—though they wanted to ask, how do you deal with the galleries? How do you decide on the price? I could give you a long talk on that, the lowest price at which you really don't care whether or not they buy it.

A bargain with myself. You know, really, truly, honestly, what's the lowest price at which I won't call them back and say, hey, would you go lower? So things like that I could tell them and help them.

But along with that, along with setting the price, they like to see the chips fly. They like to watch you work. So I thought of myself as the Victor Borge of woodturning. I would turn a little and talk, I'd turn a little and explain why I made this kind of cut, why I sharpened my tool in this fashion. Those were things they wanted to learn. I'd go back and forth between the working and the talking. So that ties in with demonstrating and educating.

MS. RIEDEL: I guess there was no way to demonstrate the finishing process, the oil and your sanding.

MR. KENT: No; we talked about it. In one or two of the museum shows, where some particularly smart curators wanted an up-close exhibit—show us some of the unfinished works and things that the kids who are visiting can handle—I would cut up my vat with the amber stalactites and mount a section of it on its own little pedestal and send it to the museum to be shown along with the various exhibits they had. And that made a very flashy exhibit.

MS. RIEDEL: I bet. I bet.

MR. KENT: Those are a work of art in themselves.

MS. RIEDEL: Did those accumulate over time? How did that work? Was that the drip racks?

MR. KENT: Oh, I should have told you, of course. And it also helped me understand what was going in.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about that.

MR. KENT: I've mentioned how I got into repeated oilings.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, and that that was what mattered—not the duration, but the number of times.

MR. KENT: The number of repetitions.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. KENT: And that the oil is expensive. I had a big vat with 100 gallons of it.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was Varathane? This was linseed oil? What was it?

MR. KENT: Varathane is a brand name. Watco was a brand name. Eventually, Varathane and Watco were—they were constantly merging within the field, and they all claim to have their own private resins. But my strongest suspicion has been that it was always basically a linseed oil derivative that they had bottled expensively, put a label on. And that if we worked just with boiled linseed oil, we would have gotten the same result.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you try it?

MR. KENT: No. I never came back to it.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. KENT: If I did, I don't remember it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, that's surprising. For the number of things you experimented with, I would think that would have been one.

MR. KENT: I was already getting such good results that I didn't want to try; I didn't want to play with that formula. And it would have taken so long to demonstrate whether or not it worked. I didn't want to put in the months of experimenting that my process called for. So I just stayed with the oils that I knew worked. They cost more money, maybe twice as much, but it wasn't an important consideration in time and effort.

But in this process, where I had a couple of old refrigerator shelves stretched over my vat, so the oil I used to oil-sandpaper my works ran back down into the main body of the oil. And ultimately started forming what looked like gold and amber stalactites hanging below the grate.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. KENT: And this is easy. We know how stalactites and icicles are formed. As the water, or in the case of stalactites, the calcified water drips down, it leaves a little bit of itself behind—originally, just a little droplet-shaped bump, but as that gets longer and longer, it becomes more of the sharp icicle look that we know. And my amber-oil stalactites looked just like that: irregular, some longer than others, some slightly jagged, all rounded out, as it would be, but coming to a point.

And I finally realized that the oil was leaving behind this tiny layer, this incremental layer that then polymerized. I can't say hardened because it never got rigid. It was more like gel. But it was a different chemical structure. Polymerization is the forming of longer molecules. Chemically, it is the same chemical, but it's a chemical that has formed into longer molecules.

MS. RIEDEL: I see.

MR. KENT: And in the case of my oil and many other polymerized forms, it would no longer go into solution. I couldn't take those stalactites and put them in alcohol—

MS. RIEDEL:—and melt them down.

MR. KENT:—or any substance I ever found, or grind them up. They were now, if not hard, at least a gelled chemical. And that is what I now recognize happened within the fibers and matrix of fibers of the wood.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. KENT: Did I start that as part of a longer answer?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, this was the cutting off the shelves and sending them as part of the exhibition.

MR. KENT: We're sort of on demonstrating, too—but those were an interesting demonstration to send to some of the museums that were showing our work.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

[Audio Break.]

MS. RIEDEL: We've talked about problem-solving as a way of working and an important way of working, as an important working process for you. We've talked about your interest in Japanese aesthetics. Are there other influences in your career that have been significant—early, late?

MR. KENT: In your asking that, it reminds me that we got away from and sidestepped your question about magazines, which I might come back to. But I'll give you a more specific one first. The short answer is, not that

I'm aware of, or even no, comma. But there are some things I can think of. In learning to turn, I spent a couple of days trying to make thick bowls like Ed Moulthrop did.

More recently, when I was wide open, I wasn't making bowls—not actively—but I was certainly open—I did see a picture of a woodturning artist out of art school named Michael Bauermeister. And it showed him standing next to one of his pieces that was taller than he was. I've met Michael at some show, but what he does are largely turned, I guess, though the surface is a very important part of it. He gets artistic in the surfaces. Oh, he's got a broad range.

Anyhow, the idea of making something big, that's what launched the, gee, I like the size of that; if I wanted to do it, what would it look like? And it bothered me even to the extent of having been given the idea by another artist. [They laugh.] I called, first, the del Mano Gallery. Ray is a confidant—[gallery co-founder] Ray Leier—and asked him, you know, would it look like ripping off Michael? And called him.

MS. RIEDEL: Called Michael?

MR. KENT: Bauermeister. And neither saw any connection with what I had in mind. Mine was still in the drawing stage, but neither in any way saw it as any kind of an encroachment on something he was doing.

MS. RIEDEL: And are you referring now to the large-scale bottles or to the Guardians?

MR. KENT: The Guardians. That was what gave birth to the Guardians. And probably, side by side, you wouldn't even—you wouldn't draw any connection. They're totally different. But the fact that it was that picture of him that got me thinking about it nagged, and I still go out of my way to give him this credit when I'm talking about them at any length.

So that is about as close as I can come, to say, to a place where I was influenced by a person or a style.

MS. RIEDEL: And they are by far the largest, tallest pieces you've ever made.

MR. KENT: Yes, totally—no, no.

MS. RIEDEL: No? Oh, in wood, yes.

MR. KENT: In wood. I made an eight-foot trilon of iridescent glass. I just loved it. It was nice, slender.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, given the importance of light in your work, I'm not in the least surprised that glass would be of some interest.

MR. KENT: Yes. Again, if there were more lives—I've tried working with rainbows but it takes too bright—short of the sun, it's hard to get a bright enough light to throw; even given a good crystal prism. But any light that's bright enough to make a good rainbow will burn itself out. I want something that I can turn on and walk away from, so I haven't been able to work with prisms and light in that fashion. But the pure, bright colors of a rainbow are very exciting to me.

MS. RIEDEL: So the color—I think of the volcano bowls, certainly, the painted ones, and they feel like they're very much about color. But there is certainly strong color also in the Norfolk pines, where the knots are. But I don't think—

MR. KENT: Earth tones. Oh, there are reds.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, very strong reds.

MR. KENT: Even though they were all earth tones. I can show you a couple examples in the other room. But I like the bright light. I love the flowers.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yes. Looking at some extraordinary hibiscus. And what is the yellow one here?

MR. KENT: The yellow one—all the trees, what I'm using as a hedge here, it's the hau wood that I mentioned that's too light. It may not show it cut, but normally, this will turn a rust-orange/yellow by the end of the day. So even on the tree—

MS. RIEDEL: This is the flower from the hau wood.

MR. KENT: It comes on golden yellow and then turns darker during the day.

MS. RIEDEL: Just exquisite. And the hibiscus are—and that's another one of your passions now, is gardening?

MR. KENT: Yes. I think I walk around the yard no less than five times a day. Just looking at things and seeing where a new little sprout has come up. What do I look at? I don't know. I've just got to look at them, and once in a while I'll see a new flower, a new bud on the amaryllis that are growing there. But why five or more? Whenever there's nothing else to do, I just look at them, so I guess you've got to count it as a passion.

A new thing I'm doing now is tying orchids to the branches of the trees, and it's working. Looking at those blossoms as they—yes, it's a passion.

MS. RIEDEL: Hawaii. [Laughs.] Quite extraordinary.

How would you say that your sources of inspiration changed over the years, or did they?

MR. KENT: Remember, I mentioned that to the best—and I tried to—I am introspective and I tried to, and I'm objective about myself. And as nearly as I can tell, there are no sources of inspiration.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, but I mean separate than influences. Inspiration, what inspires you to work?

MR. KENT: It's all internal. It all comes from inside.

MS. RIEDEL: And has it changed at all over time? Is it a curiosity to see what will happen if you actualize in physical space an idea that you have? Has that been fairly constant throughout?

MR. KENT: It may be that as my own circumstances improved, I was more willing to spend money on my experiments. That kind of thing has changed. So sometimes, things that 40 years ago might have remained just an idea became a reality because I was willing to send away for or buy the materials to try it.

MS. RIEDEL: We were just looking at one of the Guardians made with a more expensive material. Is that a case in point?

MR. KENT: Yes. And making the first one out of good material instead of making, as I had earlier, the first one not. So that has broadened what actually happens, somewhat, but in terms of the psychological, inspirational part, I don't think that has changed appreciably.

I'm thinking even as we talk. I'm still largely unaffected. You know, with traveling, Myra loves to go through museums. I breeze through it quickly. My idea is to walk through, looking in both directions as I walk. [They laugh.]

But I feel confident in saying I don't get inspired. Oh, going back to the magazines: I did read them to keep up, particularly when I was a participant, to know what shows I'm going on and have an idea of what's going on the world, even if not terribly interested. But now that I've retreated more myself—I've just recently got this issue of *American Craft*, noticed there was an article by Glenn Adamson in it. Didn't read it; in essence, discarded the magazine, unlooked-at, and made a mental note not to renew my subscription.

If they have any effect on me at all—and this goes back; this is what has not changed—and I mentioned it, too—they discourage me. I look at all that wonderful stuff and say, oh my God, I could never do it. How did they get attention? If I were starting—becoming a known artist is an impossible dream. I'd just as well set my goals on being a pitcher for the Yankees, you know? And to be included in this book or something like it is a statistical anomaly.

And instead, when I talk to those other woodturners, when I talk to anyone, I identify with the beginners. In my own mind, I told you earlier how I used to think, whew, I fooled another judge. Also, I found myself in conversation—somebody would mention David Ellsworth or others—I think of them: they're the *real* woodturners. That's what goes into my mind. You know, then that little voice: No, they really are the real ones.

MS. RIEDEL: I've heard a number of artists speak of similar feelings.

MR. KENT: The people we've heard of. The magazines do that to me and I feel better not thinking about it.

MS. RIEDEL: Then they serve their purpose.

MR. KENT: That applies to all of them, yes. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: We've just seen your studio that you've had for the past 12 years. What was your working space like for most of your career? Did you always have a garage or someplace you could work outside, day or night?

MR. KENT: When we moved here and I was still doing furniture, or keeping the house running, it was a double—like, a closet—

MS. RIEDEL: You worked in a closet?

MR. KENT: Right. [Laughs.] I came out of the closet.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm just trying to make sure I understand—

MR. KENT: No, it was this deep and like a double-wardrobe wide.

MS. RIEDEL: So 12 feet by eight feet?

MR. KENT: Ten feet, maybe, by four feet, three feet. Well, that was only when we moved here. We left everything behind, we decided we'd go all-out and rented a nice house for six months to get our feet under us.

MS. RIEDEL: This is after you retired from the stockbroker business?

MR. KENT: No; oh, no. Not when we moved here—when we moved to Hawaii, when I left the stockbroker business in San Diego to start over.

I'm going to close the door. The screen door just blew open and I don't want birds to fly in and be hard to get out.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I imagine. Okay.

MR. KENT: That was only six months. Subsequently, we bought a house. When real estate started looking too much like a bubble for me, we sold it and for the next 20 years rented. And in that case, there are a lot of even fine homes here with only carports. Others had garages, sometimes without a door.

But whatever it was, instead of a place to keep my car, that became my workshop, with the important consideration that one or two, or in one case, nine years later, it had to be restored to the shape it was in before I got there. I had to be careful of the floors, to not make holes that I couldn't handle. So my workshops, for all this time, looked like a garage or a carport.

MS. RIEDEL: For all these years. And so this studio that we see now, that actually has four walls and doors that close—

MR. KENT: We built it.

MS. RIEDEL: And that's 10 years old?

MR. KENT: Twelve, now. One of those fun stories: We moved into one of those houses and they said, "Well, it's lucky it had a garage, isn't it, Ron?" And it took me a minute and I said, "No, it's lucky it had a kitchen." We knew it would have a garage. The kitchen, of course, we had, too, but that expressed it pretty well. We wouldn't have taken a place in a neighborhood where I couldn't have worked.

MS. RIEDEL: And even so, you would work set hours. You wouldn't be turning the lathe in the middle of the night, though you might be polishing in the middle of the night.

MR. KENT: Oh, it was very frequent. I don't think I found and sent you, but in a public television thing that I later found, we talked about what I then was calling creative insomnia. But I was getting by—did you get that one?

MS. RIEDEL: I remember the phrase.

MR. KENT: I was getting by on three, four hours sleep a night.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm so jealous.

MR. KENT: And spending the middle of the night listening to that kind of music and doing things that didn't make noise.

MS. RIEDEL: That's one thing that we noticed, too, when we just stepped out to the studio, is that you listen to music constantly when you're working, and all sorts of different kinds of music.

MR. KENT: Yes. I've got to be a little more pedantic than you. I don't listen to it. I like it there. I want it and need it there, and listening, whether it's concert, opera, or anything else, implies an audience fixation that isn't me. It's background.

MS. RIEDEL: But you want it there?

MR. KENT: But I definitely—see, it's very important to my working environment to have. And I long ago learned—when I was a kid already, buying phonograph records—just buying my favorite records, and playing them got old very fast. I like my favorite things mixed in with a more random sampling. I like them coming on random, not the way I stack them. So there we had, ultimately, 200 CDs in that turner.

I've since converted it to an iPod Nano, but the content of 200 CDs—many of them low-priced from Ross's, where you can get—I've got an awful lot of Three Tenors and Pavarotti because those were always easy to find at \$3 an album. So he's disproportionately represented. But the skipping between the various genres, I like that a lot. I've got a lot of klezmer, the schmaltzy Jewish music. And in fact, I have a *Nutcracker Suite* played in that klezmer style. It's so much fun when it comes on.

MS. RIEDEL: You mentioned bluegrass; you mentioned classical. Do you listen—well, is there jazz as well?

MR. KENT: A lot of jazz, of what was jazz in my day. That has lived on. [Dave] Brubeck kind of thing, Benny Goodman before him. And they're all mixed in enough to always be welcome when I hear them.

MS. RIEDEL: I think that's very interesting.

MR. KENT: And *Jesus Christ Superstar*, modern opera is in there, and each is fun when it comes up.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I think we have done a very good job here of addressing most of these questions. I have a few final ones and then we can see if you have any final thoughts. But as a way of winding up, what do you see as the importance of wood as a means for expression? What are its strengths and its limitations, and what does it do better than anything else—the essence of it—that's appealed to you over 30 years?

MR. KENT: Honestly? Or in the story I would give that people want to hear?

MS. RIEDEL: Both. [Laughs.]

MR. KENT: I could talk about the warmth and the fact that it was living. The fact is, the real fact is—and people talk of "Ron's love affair with wood"—it's just another stuff to me. The importance is that it's available, inexpensive, easy to tool up for. I think I told you those things. But I have no romantic stories about wood or anything else.

MS. RIEDEL: It fits within the limitations.

MR. KENT: It what?

MS. RIEDEL: It fits within the limitations.

MR. KENT: Yes. Oh, easily within—yes, except for those limitations, I'm certain there would have been an awful lot more glass. There would have been more pure color. There would be a lot of kinetics, a lot of motion. I don't know how far I would have gone. I would have had to try various forms of rock and polished rock, marble and so forth. But I can't see a whole direction there. But these other things I'm mentioning—welding; I could see a lot of room in fabricated steel and aluminum.

One of my all-time favorite works—speak of tension—in the Sculpture Garden of the Smithsonian—and I knew the name of the gallery when I started saying it, but in—

MS. RIEDEL: The Renwick?

MR. KENT: No.

MS. RIEDEL: The Smithsonian American Art Museum?

MR. KENT: No, but one of the museums there in that complex. I've got it in my file; I can pull it up. But it soars up into the heavens. It's a bunch of rods connected by cables, so none of them are rigidly connected to each other. It's the tension in the cable that holds these independent, crisscrossed rods up, soaring maybe four stories [*Needle Tower* by Kenneth Snelson -RK].

But picturing the tension of it—you know, it's not like a radio broadcast tower, which has beautiful lines. But there, everything is welded to each other and they're solid. In this case, it's the pulling that gives it its strength.

I'd never quite analyzed why I liked it so much, but that's what it is and that's one of my all-time favorite sculptures everywhere. I've mentioned the triangle before.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. KENT: Okay. You've got me, you know, stream of consciousness.

MS. RIEDEL: Good.

MR. KENT: Oh, we're back—we started with wood. I don't want to—I'd hate to betray my collectors and fans and people who really want to see me as being romantic about it. I love the smell; I love the feel, but no more than I would love the hard density of glass or the characteristics of many other media.

MS. RIEDEL: When you look back on your career these past few decades, do you see it in terms of episodes and periods that are distinct? Do you see a thread of continuity that runs through the work? I mean, obviously, there's a big thread of continuity, but—and what about it, in particular, matters to you?

MR. KENT: There is a continuity and an evolution in that continuity. There were side trips. And as in much of my life, I've been willing to take detours and side trips, but usually with an idea of their rejoining the main path. And though I don't have specific long-term goals, I've had directions. I used to say, setting off from Los Angeles to New York, I would plan very carefully how I'm getting to Pasadena. Then I'd have a rough idea of San Bernardino and maybe Las Vegas. And from then on, it's just east.

And as I got farther, the detail might progress, but it was more a question, in the early stages, of direction rather than specific.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting.

MR. KENT: Did I get off of your subject there?

MS. RIEDEL: Well, it's a metaphorical answer, but that's fine by me.

MR. KENT: Okay, ask the question again.

MS. RIEDEL: When you look back on your career, what about it, in particular, matters to you?

MR. KENT: When you like where you are, you've got to value all of the things that got you there. So it's hard to pick out any one because, smug as it sounds, and I don't like the smugness of the sound, my life is wonderful today. An awful lot of lucky accidents occurred to get us here, but all of them were important because I like where I am so much—metaphorically and physically.

I like Hawaii. I don't remember whether it was in our conversation, but I know many other beautiful spots in the world; Costa Rica comes quickly to mind. But the fact that Hawaii is in the political United States gives it something that none of the others have, and living in this year—to diverge just a little, living in the late twentieth century in the United States are the two luckiest things that anybody could ask for.

So that ties into answering you. Besides the lucky accidents—

MS. RIEDEL: Is that because of the opportunities that you feel were available?

MR. KENT: There have been more opportunities. I'm getting corny now. More opportunities than anybody can take advantage of, always. Now we're getting to spirituality, if you will. The universe is full of opportunities. I've been awfully lucky in what I inherited, physically, mentally, intellectually, talent-wise. That random throw of the dice—I'd have to be stupid not to recognize the levels that I have and stupid to think that I can claim the responsibility for all of them.

A whole lot of lucky things came together in who and what I am, including the equally lucky talent of putting them together and using them. Because we do know people who have all of these talents and somehow lack whatever catalyst is required to make something out of them; others who are more financially ambitious and make more demonstrable material of them. But, you know, trying to be introspective in your question, those are the things that pop into my mind.

MS. RIEDEL: How or where do you see yourself and your work fitting into contemporary art?

MR. KENT: I think I'll be remembered. Again, there's the objective, and I think I can step aside, and without judging myself—

This is something I learned long ago—don't think to try to judge myself; anybody. Forget "him," and start looking at what has factually, observably been accomplished by him, what he has done. And then work backward from the facts and try to surmise what might have been in the person.

Now, what I see is that I'm represented in 20, maybe 30 of the best museums in the world, that I have an oral



history with the Smithsonian Archives, that I and my work will be a part of history. I see that I'm mentioned in a nice book about the Metropolitan and another about the Cooper-Hewitt [Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, New York, NY]; that I'm in dozens of catalogs [*Modern Design, 1890-1990, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* by R. Craig Miller and *The Look of the Century* by Michael Tambini in association with Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution -RK].

And this is all history that—if anything, things like that grow with history. There's a critical level. There's a point where, if you haven't achieved enough, if you haven't had enough works, no matter how great you are, you can be a footnote. But there's a point that by its very volume—it's like the people who are famous for being celebrities. I liked that expression when I heard it. There are people—you don't know what else they have going for them, except that they're well-known for being well-known.

There is a mythology about me already. And it has allowed me to be a little less of a braggart because I have the idea that—I've learned people will talk about me. And the stories they tell may not be accurate, and in some cases may be exaggerated—in almost all cases won't be complete. There are, in the packet I sent you, so many things that could be said, but they grow.

Recently, one of my wife's fellow docents at our art academy was in Cleveland and dropped in at the Riley Gallery [Thomas R. Riley Galleries, Cleveland, OH] and saw three of my Guardians. Well, she couldn't wait to get back. Now all of the docents know and there's an authority to having seen—in spite of all the things they knew about me—to have actually come upon my work in another city, lent something to it. And she's come back and told all of them. The myth grows. So my position in modern, contemporary art is that I'm a part—I'll be remembered as a part of the history, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you miss woodturning anymore?

MR. KENT: Yes. Yes and no.

MS. RIEDEL: And where next?

MR. KENT: No idea at all. I know two things: I know there will be a next and I know that it will be the way I'm doing it. Like I took a class in ceramics just recently, and a thought went through my mind: If I really got interested in this, I wonder what innovations I would bring to it? Because I just know that I would come up—like the basket I showed you—I know I would come up with something. I like, again, to be my own audience.

Somebody wrote me, complimenting me for thinking outside of the box. And my immediate answer really summed it up as, "What box? You know, a box?" Another way of stating that in my approach to things is if it isn't specifically forbidden, it's allowed. Until they say, "The rules are that you mustn't do this," then there's no reason I shouldn't.

And in engineering, in finance and in art, one of my characteristics has been taking things that are done here and using them here. You'd asked, are there easier—I warned you of long answers. Going back to the technology question, woodturning was much more fun for me before it became a viable market for people who were producing tools and supplies and things like that. When I had to invent procedures and tools and remember things I had learned in one field and see that they could be used or applied to the woodturning. That I liked.

Now I get four catalogs a month, filled with things that couldn't have been bought 20 years ago, that didn't exist. And that took away a large part of the challenge and fun. The satisfaction is still there, but not the challenge. So you asked about the turning. It still would be very satisfying to go out to the lathe and make a bowl.

[Whispers] Turn this off for a minute.

[Audio Break.]

MS. RIEDEL: Well, Ron, that's all I've got. Any final thoughts?

MR. KENT: It's been a pleasure.

MS. RIEDEL: It has been a pleasure.

MR. KENT: A stimulating, exciting—and I have a new friend in my life.

MS. RIEDEL: Thank you so much. I feel the same.

MR. KENT: Do you want to have dinner with us tonight?

MS. RIEDEL: I'd love to.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]