



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Kenneth Noland,
1987 July 1-16

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

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Kenneth Noland on 1987 July 1 and 16. The interview was conducted by Avis Berman for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The original audio recording was transcribed in the late-1980s. In 2017, the full audio was reconciled with the transcript. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

AVIS BERMAN: This is Avis Berman talking with Kenneth Noland on July 1, 1987. You said that David Smith talked to you about the advantages of working in series. And you never really discussed or elaborated on what you thought those advantages, or what he thought those advantages were.

KENNETH NOLAND: David came out of the '30s and '40s, when artists, didn't—had difficulties in getting materials to work with because they didn't have any money. So, oftentimes they didn't have canvas to work with or they didn't have paint and in his case he didn't, I guess, have a lot of the conventional sculpture material because in the '30s steel wasn't—especially scrap steel and so forth—wasn't considered a sculptural material. Under the influence of Gonzalez and Picasso, Picasso and subsequently probably Gonzalez, who was the source of working directly in steel, welding steel, and that is also scrap materials, not casting bronze or anything like that. So, it was a process in this sense of being practical about how to keep working as an artist. So, David would buy, say, as much scrap steel as he could buy or get as much wood because in the '30s he did make sculpture out of nailed wood together—anything, in order to keep working. David was very aware of the problem of an artist needing to practice his art. I mean, like, to be able to work every day. He almost predicated his whole life's work on a work ethic, I guess you could say. That might not be the right way to say it. So, David was a very practical man about making art, not just in terms of the making of it, but in the way that he thought about making art. He was practical in the imagery that he chose to use and was very aware of natural processes of things. This was the way David talked. So, when I first met him, I was a young artist that didn't—as it was in the late '30s and '40s and '50s—didn't know how to go about setting yourself up so that you could work. A lot of artists would just buy a paint box and an easel and would maybe stretch up a couple of canvases and paint on them and put their paints away and fold up the easel. That was—[laughs]—kind of a basic primitive way of trying to be a painter, as you were having to do other things like have jobs to support yourself and so forth. So, when he wanted to talk he'd say, Buy materials when you can in quantity. Don't just go get one stretcher and one tube of paint. He said, It's more practical to accumulate as much money as you can and buy as much canvas as you could buy, buy as much paint as you could buy in quantities, because you got more that way. Also, it would sustain you longer when you got the opportunity to use it. So, it's just a practical kind of advice and working in series—also, this wasn't new. I think that maybe the way our adaptation of this concept was probably different than the way the Impressionists work-worked, but I think starting with the Impressionists, it became a thoroughly standard way of working. But this is something artists have always done—they would—a landscape painter like Corot, as an example, would probably go out and paint a lot of landscapes in one particular area and they would go back and the next week or the next day make drawings and stuff or paintings. Obviously the Impressionists did, because they would go back and paint the same situation. Monet being the great master of that at that time, painting at different times of day, at different days, even setting up his place so that he would have a kind of a changing situation so that he was practicing and he was seeing new things relative to the context of visions. So, there's nothing—it has been—that's different than making serial art, you know that distinction, don't you? There's a difference between working in series and working in serial art.

AVIS BERMAN: Why don't you define it?

KENNETH NOLAND: Hm, let me see. The serial artist meant, I think, to make a serial so that that was something like a complete work in itself as it were. Whereas working in series is just when you get focused on a certain context that you develop a kind of, maybe, multi-approach to that context. So that you can look at it from one angle. You can make a painting from another angle. It begins to be—the series is defined by the execution of the sequential work, if that makes sense. Do you understand what I mean?

AVIS BERMAN: Had you actually been thinking about or had you been working in a series before you talked to Smith about it or before or did he mention it to you?

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, yeah, I think it was a natural tendency anyway, and particularly [audio break] that artists that get involved in—let's call it mainstream art—I think that part of the growth and the development of young artists is to look around, to look at paintings done by older artists, other fellow artists, as they become

professionals. Because that's—I think that in mainstream art or any kind of art that artists look to what's been done and they choose what they're interested in, what they want to be influenced by in their taste, by what they like. Some artists in various movements, when you look back, you can see that the artist—you can see what they're looking at and how they were developing new attitudes, new vision, towards visions that they had—that their curiosity had led them to. Now this was something that David Smith wrote quite insightfully about. In discussions with him, he told me that you choose your family in art. You know, you're stuck with—[laughs]—your mother and your father and your brothers and sisters, but as you grow as an artist, you can choose by your taste or your vision, what you're curious about. It's kind of involuntary because it's something that you can't help, you know, it's something that you like or you're more intrigued by than something else. So you want to look into it. I have always felt under compulsion to try anything that grabs my curiosity. So, influences make artists very nervous, if you don't know that, but it does because artists like to think that everything—[laughs]—originated with what they do in themselves. It does in the sense of that involuntary curiosity I was mentioning, but they don't like to admit necessarily that—or they like to say they were only influenced by the great artists, rather than saying that they might have been influenced by some odd artist that wasn't very good.

AVIS BERMAN: But influences are never really one-to-one, anyway, I mean—I think that influences are—

KENNETH NOLAND: Let's open that up, because influence, like another artist's work or liking works, or admiring of, say, an older artist, doesn't mean that you're necessarily even imitate or you try to copy or you try to find out what it is that they're doing by doing it yourself. A case in point would be, let's say, Miro. Now, I think that Miro has had a tremendous influence on American art, as well as Paul Klee, that largely goes unacknowledged. It's not even necessarily by looking like Miro or Klee, although it could, but it affects the—an attitude about making something. Or, there are artists that imitate other art, which is a slightly different thing, and then base a kind of career on that. Sometimes they can overcome it or go beyond it and sometimes they can't. It also doesn't necessarily mean that they are lesser than the artist that they've been influenced by. The obvious case in point would be Gorky, who in a funny kind of way never overcame the influence of Picasso and Miro, as an example. But just the same was painting great paintings right under—right in the style of, right in the manner of Miro and Picasso, for instance. Probably there's some limitation to what Gorky achieved, but in terms of numbers of good pictures, he painted some great paintings. So you've got to call Gorky a great painter, he was a great painter.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, plus when he spread the knowledge of Picasso and Miro during the '30s, the heuristic influence was very important too.

KENNETH NOLAND: There was a context of Gorky a little later, that started in the early '30s with Milton Avery and younger artists, Gottlieb and Rothko and David Smith. Now, you've got to really understand that in the '30s there was no art world. There were only people that kind of, out of their interest in art, say, went to the Art Students' League, which David did, and he met some other young artists. He met Gottlieb and Rothko when they were in their 20s.

AVIS BERMAN: And also in that group were John Graham and Stuart Davis.

KENNETH NOLAND: And Stuart Davis was kind of around and they got onto him.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, they looked up to Davis. He had been in the Armory Show and all. He was also trying to do something a little bit different.

KENNETH NOLAND: Right. So, there was an accumulation of things that were kind of taking place there by several, a few, artists, and they talked. So, they began to make a kind of a context. All of this later, what with the infusion of the refugee artists from the Second World War, brought all those forces together and then there were other artists that came in later like de Kooning and Pollock was out there blowing in the wind, as it were. Somehow or another, this coalesced into what became, I guess, America's first, come to think of it, movement. Although there were those Philadelphia artists, the Ashcan painters, and those other groups of artists. So, it appears that their context of artists that historically, in western art, goes back in the history of western art. Titian, Tintoretto, Raphael and the Dutch so-called schools. So there they were, all these artists knowing what the parameters and the context of art was in what was accessible to them, and that helped everybody.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, they wanted to be measured against international standards. That was their big difference.

KENNETH NOLAND: You mean the American artists?

AVIS BERMAN: Right, that group. And they also knew about what was going on internationally and that was important, too.

KENNETH NOLAND: That, but I don't think they were thinking that way. This was more out of the excitement of new resources, materials, and insights that were liberating that creative flow. [Cross talk.] David grew up around mechanics. As I said, I think his father did work for a power and light company, or something like that, as I did.

When I grew up in the '20s and '30s, I grew up where one of my grandfathers was a blacksmith. This was—during that time all of the craftsmen—the plumbers, electricians, carpenters, people that did a lot of—the workers—considered themselves artists. They really did and they were considered artists because they were very adept at doing things when people used to have to do a lot of things with their hands, and they had to have knowledge of the craft that they were doing. So, whenever you looked around you could see people that were proud in terms of their mechanical skills. It was wonderful to see that. Now, ten years ago or so, there was some art criticism about myself, which I was being accused of being an elitist. Leo Steinberg—[laughs]—said that I was making art that appealed to the industrial-military context. [Laughs.] Now, I minded that, being you know, called an elitist. It was not just myself. It was also Clem [Clement] Greenberg and our general group of artists: Tony [Caro] and Jules [Olitski] and Morris Louis and so forth. And that our art really appealed to this kind of upper-class taste. I had to think about that. I thought, how is that? Then I had to figure out, if artists are elitist, they're not elitists in the sense of privileged people or upper-class people. Since artists are mechanics too—we work with our hands, we make things—then if we're elitists, we're elitists of the working class, not elitists of the upper-class; our aspiration is not that. Therefore, artists are involved in the nature of creativity, the nature of skills, the processes of the makings of things, the revelations of making things, actually executing things. Artists are not people that come by this as intellectuals, necessarily, or upper-class people, but as workers.

So, I learned a lot of that from David, and I learned a lot about that from a lot of the other artists like Pollock. Those are the kind of artists that were involved in the nature of work, and their art was coming out of the processes of work, is what I was fascinated by and I still am. I still think that making art is a lifelong practice of this.

So, I believe in working, and not necessarily arriving at one way of working and just repeating that way of working as an image or as a style, but that I think that you have to work every day and it's the working that's the gratification. It's the learning, it's the seeing something new evolve, making something evolve out of various trial and error methods, fooling with stuff and taking chances on it not working.

So, I—as was pointed out by Susan Sterling who did her Ph.D., on me, on my earlier work, she basically was really writing about all of the influences that have gone into my work. It was kind of embarrassing because she says I was influenced by students—[laughs]—at that time of mine, who were working in the context that I had set up as a work.

So, it makes me nervous, but I admit it, I'll try anything and if I see something that is interesting, I'm willing to pursue it to see whether there's something in it for me. I'll take whatever I can take to feed into my art. I feel confident enough that my art is original enough that I absorb these influences.

I might owe a lot to a lot of people, but I feel confident about my way of working. I got this kind of attitude also from David. David would try and—David said, You learn more from your failures than you learn from your successes. He says, If you repeat your successes then there's a drop-off of interest and quality, but if you're trying and messing around and fooling around and aren't able to achieve something, then there's something in you. Something's bothering you that makes it hard for you to overcome whatever that problem is you're failing at. Sometimes you—you always get something out of whatever you do.

So, it's a matter of sources, and working in series is a matter of sources. David said, shortly before he died, he was very proud of the fact that—he said, I've got about fifteen different ways I can work. And he says, I would have more if I had more time and had more material. And he did. He worked simultaneously. He worked on, say, the stainless steel sculptures as he was making those Palladio pieces of sculpture, you know, those various names. Are you familiar with his work?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, yes.

KENNETH NOLAND: But he was making all those things at the same time. He had room to do it and he had the vision to do it. They don't look like anybody except David Smith.

AVIS BERMAN: Minnie [Secretary] said that you were beginning a new phase of your work?

KENNETH NOLAND: You mean now?

AVIS BERMAN: Yeah.

KENNETH NOLAND: Yeah, in a way I've gone back to things that were left over from earlier phases of my work, which have somehow assimilated in me and I'm starting some pictures that are very abstract again. I just finished a series of new chevrons, which was hair-raising for me to do. Some of them are awful, but I think some of them are very good.

AVIS BERMAN: What we're talking about these three-part constructions.

KENNETH NOLAND: Yeah. They're kind of constructed pictures or a kind of constructions. In one sense they're like collages, in another sense they're like sculpture. Cause I've got separate component parts. I can now make up, find different kinds of material to use that I can assimilate as color—pieces of color. And I can build these new paintings, these new works out of parts that I've accumulated, like the plexiglass. I'm using doors to stretch canvas on because it's a given size and shape and it's cheaper than having stretchers built, more practical and just as archival. That's probably not the word. So, I'm feeling—I'm starting up on something new again. I've done this.

AVIS BERMAN: They look very classical to me.

KENNETH NOLAND: I've done this over my whole life of work, anyway. I've had different phases that I've gotten into and usually run with them for five or six years until I—need to make another change.

AVIS BERMAN: Does the work of kind of a, say, I guess what we would call, I hate to push labels on people, but a Constructivist painter like Leon Polk Smith interest you?

KENNETH NOLAND: I never thought about him particularly. You know, I know his work and I never thought of him particularly as a Constructivist. There was that Biederman, was that his name?

AVIS BERMAN: Charles Biederman.

KENNETH NOLAND: Biederman, out in the Midwest somewhere. I find now, you see, that's another thing. You arrive, say, I've started to do this, these new kind of pictures, and then suddenly you can look around and see that it's—or you can recall that it's running into something that some other artist had done. Now, you can let that stop you or you can let it happen and go with it because even though maybe it's something that's not conscious in your mind, it's something that's buried in your memory somewhere, as are a lot of other things.

AVIS BERMAN: Artists have to come out of a tradition, there's no way around that.

KENNETH NOLAND: A lot of traditions. It doesn't have to be a tradition, necessarily. It's like reading books. You're a writer. You read Faulkner. You read Joan Didion maybe. You read Saul Bellow or Naipaul or you read magazine articles. You read a lot of different things, so it all is in there.

AVIS BERMAN: That's education. Well, just when you were saying you can let something happen and run into other artists, did that happen to you? I guess about '71 or '72 you had begun to do the paintings, the long paintings with the open fields with the narrow bands around them, and you were beginning to run into someone. Obviously, Olitski.

KENNETH NOLAND: Olitski, right.

AVIS BERMAN: So, I guess I thought they were very successful paintings. How did you deal with that? Were you worried about that sort of thing?

KENNETH NOLAND: Of course. I knew that I was very conscious of what Jules was doing, very aware of it and very impressed. But then if you really look at what I had done before, there are some precedents in my own work for staining that go back to an influence of Pollock and, say, Morris Louis, Paul Klee. There's a painting of mine called *Bedsread* that has borders around it. It has a vacated center.

AVIS BERMAN: Late '50s?

KENNETH NOLAND: Late '50s. And others. There were other pictures about that time, where I was making lines at the top and lines at the bottom or sometimes putting material around the edges and vacating the center. So, there are some precedents in my own work and they can be confirmation by your contemporaries of various things that you have started in a way that's latent. There comes a time when there's some confirmation from somebody else's doing something that recalls that, and you've found a use for it at a certain time. Or you want to pursue it, you want to find out where that will lead you. I consider books open. This is not a way of working that is reassuring to the people who see your work, necessarily—say, dealers or collectors or critics. They are ready to—[laughs]—you know, to point out where you might have gotten something from or what it looks like and that makes you nervous. But, I would feel if I didn't pursue these things I would be—not doing justice to my needs.

AVIS BERMAN: I wanted to ask you a couple of other things about—[side conversation]—the Washington climate because it's been very well documented. I'm not going to ask you about Louis or Greenberg's visits or other things per se, but I was curious—obviously you went to the Phillip's Collection, but did you get to know Duncan Phillips and did he take an interest in your work?

KENNETH NOLAND: Kind of—Phillips took a little interest as a young unknown artist in Washington and he

bought a couple of pictures for fifty dollars, sixty dollars or something, which was good money because I wasn't selling anything. I got more art supplies. But it was just an encouragement kind of purchase. He had his own taste. If you noticed in the Phillips Collection, he had very few Picassos and he had Braque and Bonnard and always he used to have Rouault. [Cross talk.]

AVIS BERMAN: He had a lot of Tacks, of course, too.

KENNETH NOLAND: Oh, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: There was an early painting of yours that reminded me of him.

KENNETH NOLAND: Very much. I was very interested in Tack.

AVIS BERMAN: I saw it again in the video.

KENNETH NOLAND: And of course' along came Still, a little later and I remembered seeing those Tacks. Which again was another confirmation of different things, of other sources. At the same time that Clyfford Still came into being known, or at least known to me, there was a revived interest in the Impressionists and it was that movement that went on called the Abstract Impressionists. So that was another current that was coming. It had the suggestion for us, for me and Morris Louis, of disembodied color or color that was nonrepresentational, non-descriptive, but was expressive, which I think was a significant thing that hasn't been particularly mentioned. Rothko was around, the geometric painters had been there, the AAA painters, Bolotowsky, Burgoyne Diller, Albers. Even before Mondrian and Von Doesburg and so forth. So,—[cross talk]—there are all these streams that feed into art and a lot of time they're in different contexts, and they only get brought together later, like what's going on now, which is basically out of Dada and kind of Expressionist, Blaue Reiter kind of paintings.

AVIS BERMAN: Just to go back to Phillips, did you find the encouragement of him buying the paintings meaningful to you?

KENNETH NOLAND: Not very much. I wasn't ready. I was floundering around, and plus having children and teaching and et cetera.

AVIS BERMAN: In Washington—not counting your group of painters and the interchanges between Washington and New York, but the larger, shall we call it, art world in Washington—did you feel that there was such a thing in Washington in the '50s?

KENNETH NOLAND: A Washington kind of painting?

AVIS BERMAN: No. I'm not talking about the artists or the artist's community, just talking about the—I guess did you feel that there was an art world in terms of collectors or anything else there that would encourage you?

KENNETH NOLAND: Yeah. They were encouraging, I mean there were—mostly at that time there were hardly any art galleries. There was one at a movie theater, there was a book store. There was a conservative gallery.

[END OF TRACK AAA_noland87_5837.]

KENNETH NOLAND: [Inaudible] which was a local art, which was a kind of a general, provincial kind of painting.

AVIS BERMAN: Did that discourage you?

KENNETH NOLAND: This was at a time that there wasn't —you have to understand that in the '40s and '50s, outside of the fact that I went to Black Mountain and knew about the international art, . This is at a time when painters weren't making a living. It wasn't in the realm of possibilities. The possibilities were that you could teach, or that you could paint maybe some kind of Impressionist kind of pictures, possibly, kind of Cubist, semi-abstract pictures. There were artists that were making an average kind of living out of that, but it wasn't interesting art, interesting painting, or interesting art, particularly. So, it was very hard for a younger artist to have any vision of having a career as an important artist. It just wasn't there or even the possibility of, say, being a major artist. That began to be possible in the '50s when the dealers in New York began to show American artists. They really hadn't shown American artists very much in the context of European art like Valentin, Curt Valentin's gallery, Kootz, etcetera cetera. They were showing European art, Picasso's and etcetera, etcetera, etcetera., et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So, until Pollock and de Kooning and [Franz] Kline began to make it, there was no thought of it particularly. It's not like now.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Well, that's what I'm trying to establish, to get the context. I also wanted to ask you in regard to Washington. How did you meet and what was your relationship with Jacob Kainen, and where does he fit in?

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, Jacob—I've forgotten how I met him. Jacob was an artist who had settled in Washington that had been on the New York scene, I think, probably in the '30s and '40s, and he knew a lot of the artists there. So, he could tell, he told us a lot about these artists because they wasn't in magazines. There was no way that you could know about them because you couldn't see them in exhibitions, either. You didn't see them. So, you had to hear about it from another artist, an older artist. Now, there was—it's not so much now because art is very highly publicized and it gets published in magazines and goes all over the world, so influences take place very rapidly. But at that, time there was a kind of a lore that was passed back and forth between teachers and guys that were trying to be artists. So, Jacob was a good source for that. He knew about levels, too. He didn't follow that much. The Abstract Expressionists arrived. He didn't follow the trends necessarily. So, we were all affected by the success of the Abstract Expressionists, particularly de Kooning's influence was pervasive and took all over the place.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, about the first mature work, that is the circles, did you feel—I guess I'm asking you at the moment something that might be a matter of consciousness, and I don't know if this can be easily categorized and remembered. But did you feel that you were actually renouncing something, I mean, did it sink in? Did you feel as if you were giving something up? You were giving up something—Cubist facture, allover [painting]? I don't know if you felt you were renouncing or opposing Abstract Expressionism? I guess that's what I'm curious about.

KENNETH NOLAND: Yes Yeah, of course, but it was hard earned. Again, given that artists were coming from all different kinds of places—to the degree that they were conscious of, aware of what had happened, what was happening, . There was a general accumulation of information that, again, to have almost a simultaneity of accumulations of things that began to break through possibilities. Those were both the possibilities for Pop art and so-called Color Field art and so forth, or Abstract art. So, again, the influences were of a confirmation nature and I'd say that what Morris Louis and I were doing had its confirmation influence on what a lot of other artists began to do. I know that this is true because I saw the effects of it. I knew that there were some things that I'd been doing that began to have currency in other artists' work, including the Pop artists.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you realize at the time with the circles that you were really on to something?

KENNETH NOLAND: Yes, I did.

AVIS BERMAN: Can you reconstruct that?

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, I don't know, what do you mean, reconstruct?

AVIS BERMAN: Oh I don't know, did you think that you were suddenly doing something innovative or here all of a sudden, I've got something that's mine?

KENNETH NOLAND: Indeed. I did. Yes, I was conscious of it. But, the way I work, being conscious of what the possibilities of something new happening comes from having done the work first, in a way. I mean, it's like suddenly you can kind of see that there are a range of possibilities. That makes it possible to keep inventing and extending and spreading some of the things that you're doing. All of the digging and the struggle kind of comes before and then it's like once something opens up, then it makes it possible to imagine a lot of things to do. So, the influences are kind of somethings that you've been aware of at some time and forgotten, but didn't have any use for, didn't know what to do with, that would become useful at a later time and that's the advantage of messing around and failing at different kinds of things. This goes back to David Smith.

AVIS BERMAN: Actually, I want to talk about failing. I mean, how do you edit your work in terms of when you know something isn't happening?

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, sometimes I destroy pictures. I'm more apt to destroy pictures that are mediocre than I am to destroy pictures that are just failures. So I don't edit that much. There are other artists that edit out, cull out their pictures and destroy them. I haven't done that so much. They're around.

AVIS BERMAN: Is—I mean, is it better? Also, maybe ten or fifteen years later you might feel different about something.

KENNETH NOLAND: It happens. It's not that it necessarily is better ten or fifteen years later, but it's interesting that maybe they're failures and bad pictures or something like that, but. But, there is something that is going on in that work that you don't mind so much where there is an honest failure.

AVIS BERMAN: I read somewhere that on the advice of Clement Greenberg you had done some very early work that he felt was too similar to Morris Louis's and you did destroy that group.

KENNETH NOLAND: Not all of them.

AVIS BERMAN: How many were there?

KENNETH NOLAND: Not so many. Maybe 30 pictures or so. Morris Louis destroyed another, a whole phase of his work at one time. I think there were a hundred or so pictures. But, no, no, a lot of those pictures exist. It's not as if I'm trying to edit them out of existence.

AVIS BERMAN: It's always interested—interesting to me because artists should be—

KENNETH NOLAND: [inaudible] To throw away a lot of pictures.

AVIS BERMAN: Artists usually tend to be their own harshest critics, as they should be, and I guess I'm always interested in how the process of self-criticism works.

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, I don't, I have to put up with the fact that I make pictures that—I don't do things that I know that I could do to make a picture better, necessarily. I'll try different things. In the later years, I don't really bother to throw anything away much. I don't clean up the record. I don't really like the idea and besides, I'd rather have a bad three weeks' work, three months' work—I'll let it go at that. So what? Because I know that I've got, there are other times when I get deeply involved with something, that I can produce very, very, beautiful, elegant works. But they're not works that I tried to make conform, to make better by doing things to them necessarily. I like to let them stand.

AVIS BERMAN: You used to use the phrase "one shot" paintings. Do you still feel the same way about reworking or not reworking?

KENNETH NOLAND: I do, indeed. That's the way I work. And you do know—you know what that means?

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I was going to eventually ask you, acrylic dries so quickly that you really can't rework it.

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, acrylic paints are suitable for that purpose, plus the fact that you can work faster. Pollock said that he stayed in contact with the painting, which was a significant statement to make. Another thing about influences. You can make paintings that quite consciously look like other artists' work but—it depends on who the artist is. But I think that the thing that really influences me the most is an artist's attitude, various artists' attitudes toward how to go about doing things. Pollock is an example. He's pretty rough and I liked his nerve. And others.

AVIS BERMAN: I think that really began to change in the '30s with de Kooning, Pollock, with Smith was the way of how one is an artist and lives like an artist. Something that's important that they may have introduced is the way they thought about their lives.

KENNETH NOLAND: It's a—excuse the expression—you know, male bonding kind of thing. I have to use it in that context in order to get the point across.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you still stain?

KENNETH NOLAND: Stain? Yes—yeah, sometimes.

AVIS BERMAN: Why did you say before that it was hair-raising to paint chevrons again?

KENNETH NOLAND: Hair-raising is not the right word. I've been painting chevrons for the last three or four years. In a way, I was really painting chevrons because I didn't have anything else to do at the time. I was waiting for something to develop out of that or something else to happen. Again, it's another phase of my work as there has been in my past, usually about four or five years of all of the other kinds of paintings that I've made that you know about. It's complicated. It's a complicated thing to talk about. This led me as far as I needed to go in doing those pictures. I'll probably pick it up again, pick something up out of this, maybe another five, ten years from now. Also, it was partly, it wasn't just the chevrons as such. It was the image, a kind of a convenience that does a very certain kind of thing, which is to focus the eyes on one image, as it were one configuration, which is what the circles did, and which is what the chevrons did. Other pictures that I have done haven't done that. It suited me because I'd been making paper—papers and working with colored fibers and then making monoprints where I could disburse many colors in a surface and I could see into the colors by making the paint that way. I've gotten very interested in the simultaneous levels of seeing different depths of colors, scales of colors, that exist simultaneously. It's not, I really don't like to talk about what I do. I don't like to talk about my own work, particularly. But it was useful for me to do this because, again, I could use my manual facilities—I guess you could call it that—in applying paint in a lot of different ways, colors in a lot of different ways.

AVIS BERMAN: It seemed that it was very useful to revisit an older image but this way put the paint on differently and draw and leave more marks on the surface than before.

KENNETH NOLAND: The marks were the color drawing and getting these levels of color resonances and things.

AVIS BERMAN: And certainly you were able to concentrate on that because you really weren't trying a new format—that was going to take care of itself. You could look at other things, perhaps.

KENNETH NOLAND: There are things that happen in painting that don't get talked about as such very often, that I've noticed. Paintings have, color has pulses and those pulses can lead you from one dimension to another dimension to another dimension. A stain painting, as an example, can cause you to follow a color into another color to another color, by juxtaposition, by the difference of transparency, of matteness, warmth, coolness. So that different colors have an accumulation of these pulses and give you a different kind of general resonance in a painting. So, I have been very interested in being able to see into these pulses in a different way. The chevrons suited that purpose for me as a general layout.

AVIS BERMAN: I found it interesting that when you did begin your mature work, two things that were important that you gave up were drawing and certain traditional design principles, at least in the beginning. It seemed that the two things were the two things that you had taught for quite a while at Catholic University, and I was wondering if there was any significance in that.

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, you're speaking of drawing as a means of depiction, a kind of illustration, or to indicate—make the appearance or the suggestion of other imagery. Actually, drawing is not just that. Drawing is also a process of making. It's the process of making that I'm interested in, that part of drawing. Depiction is not. That's why I say that the chevron as such is not. You're talking about an image. I think of it as—the chevrons as possible armatures or drawing only in that sense. Do you follow that?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, it's interesting, because you couldn't avoid it. I also found it rather amazing that you've talked at length—and it's been written about—the impact of Klee for you. But it seemed to me that most other people seemed to turn to Klee first for his line. And his amazing—

KENNETH NOLAND: Or his depiction of the—and not so much for the really abstract nature of his work.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

KENNETH NOLAND: Which is what I was always interested in. But it's not that I didn't love his depiction.

AVIS BERMAN: I have a couple more questions on this Washington period and then we'll just skip to about '71. Did you feel that it was difficult that you were saddled with this epithet of Washington painter? Did you find it too regionalist or anything?

KENNETH NOLAND: What do you mean, the other painters in Washington?

AVIS BERMAN: No, no. You were called a Washington painter and I know that most painters do not like to have that regional appellation because it does pigeonhole them or make them sound provincial.

KENNETH NOLAND: I wasn't ever properly a Washington painter. I think that the Washington painters were mostly artists that painted in semi-abstract Impressionist kinds of ways. Not that I wasn't affected by it. What later became known as the Washington color Color School or color painterspainters was not something that I defined. It was defined by some of the younger artists that had been students of mine—Howard Mehring, Tom Downing and some others. They coined that expression, Washington color Color Field painters. So—

AVIS BERMAN: This is some social history. Did you realize what it would mean to you when Clement Greenberg, who was after all the preeminent art critic of our time—

KENNETH NOLAND: But he wasn't then.

AVIS BERMAN: He was still influential. He was still brilliant. He was listened to.

KENNETH NOLAND: Oh, he was himself.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. I guess what I would ask you is that maybe to have an influential intellectual take your part, did you realize what that would mean?

KENNETH NOLAND: Of course. I mean, I was conscious of it. Probably more later than at the time because, again, like David Smith and other people that I met at Black Mountain College - there were people that came to Black Mountain College that weren't famous at that time. At Black Mountain there was John Cage and Merce Cunningham, Buckminster Fuller, Clem, Paul Goodman, and lots of people that came to Black Mountain that were there because they were recognized by the other educators there. They were interested in them. So it was an intellectual context. We younger students and artists and so forth had the advantage of that, but Black

Mountain was not a famous school. There was a heightened kind of intellectual level that was going on there that was interesting enough in itself. In the case of Clem, in discussions with Clem, he had a wealth, and still does, of information and insight into a lot of things. That has been enough in itself. The fact was that during the '50s particularly it wasn't even a question of Clem. He didn't particularly like what I was doing, but it was in a way beside the point. The point was what I was learning and this is a source. It was only in the late '50s after Morris Louis and I had learned to find our own way.

AVIS BERMAN: It was the art after the article.

KENNETH NOLAND: The art that Clem began to acknowledge our work, or my work, or subsequently to Morris'. That it began to be any kind of a—what would you say, asset? In the late '59, '60, '61, and so forth.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. To I guess to have a champion in print.

KENNETH NOLAND: To have somebody that was really—But you see, by that time we were on our way.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative], well, I was rather interested in reading the literature that, culminating in some of the writing about the '77 retrospect with Guggenheim. Is that so many people were clearly jealous of you. Or people who were maybe really talking to Greenberg—it seemed to me that the—the writing, the other critics and some of the other people, they really seemed to be—. I was really shocked by some of the savagery of the writing, which was much more directed sometimes at Greenberg than at you. Although, obviously you had to bear the—

KENNETH NOLAND: Some of it. Well, yes. But, so it had its advantages and it had its disadvantages right? The association, but the association, my association with Clem over the years hasn't, despite the advantages or the disadvantages in terms of career, is what you're talking about.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. People seemed to want to strike back at you because you had had this association. It didn't seem that they were always evaluating the art before their eyes.

KENNETH NOLAND: No, There's a lot of things that fed into that. There are lots of things that we don't necessarily need to go into. That you know, that I think you might infer what I'm driving at. It was the fact probably that he asserted in that piece that he wrote in 1959 that Morris Louis and I were the only artists, younger artists, that he considered were making art of major significance. And he said that. Given the fact that he was known to have pointed to Pollock and a little later on David Smith. Well no, at the time—and Hofmann and some other artists as being major artists. A lot of other artists and other people, I guess, would have liked to have had that affirmation. So—if you read Clem, if you've read him—you've probably read those two books that Clem's put out. If you haven't read what he's written since then, Clem bases his opinion on his reaction to art.; that's quite enlightening. He can also articulate those reactions. A lot of the artists I've been associated with, it's not conversation, these kind of discussions are not one-way streets. It's not as if, you know, Clem was out there in front all the time with those opinions. There is a context. David Smith was part of our general—as I've said before, there were artists and there were other critics. There were younger artists, older artists, some museum people. Who understood the relevance of all these kinds of opinions and discussions that were going on and were feeding into this context certain things that were relevant to the context. So it got known as Formalist art, which was used in a derogatory way by some other critic who was bitching about it. But it took as a general kind of description of what we were generally doing. You've got to understand that the labels come after. It wasn't as if, like in the case of some of the other movements that have taken place in American art, where amongst the artists and their general crowd they had looked around for some way to describe what they were doing. Such as ABC art or Minimal art or Conceptual art, Earth-Works, et cetera, et cetera. Or now one of the latest things I hear is appropriation.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, or Neo-Geo.

KENNETH NOLAND: Or Neo-Geo and all of these things, or Hard Edge painting, a Color Field painting or et cetera, et cetera. They're not particularly useful to artists. I've never tried to paint a Color Field painting and I never tried to paint a Hard Edge painting and/or a Formalist painting. You see what I'm getting at?

AVIS BERMAN: I think it's the famous Barney Newman quote, or something like that labels in art, "Criticism is to artists as ornithology is to the birds."

KENNETH NOLAND: Dog on, Barney said that.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, unfortunately, because we're speaking in words we are sometimes stuck with these labels or that you want a short cut an abbreviation and—

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, I always think that these words, or these phrases and these definitions, cover up, put

a blanket, as it were, on a lot of information. But on the other hand, there were the Impressionists, and there were the Expressionists, and there were the Cubists and there were the Fauves and there were the Dadaists and —

AVIS BERMAN: But the Impressionists and the Fauves both got their names the same way you did; both those names were coined by hostile critics.

KENNETH NOLAND: Oh isn't that something? Yes that's true.

AVIS BERMAN: The "Impressionists," that was a sniff, and certainly "the Fauves" were. And Ash Can School didn't even come along until 1934, thirty years after all those, the beginning of it just as a cute name.

KENNETH NOLAND: Yes, so, anyway

AVIS BERMAN: I would ask you, in how much that you do, " Let's put Greenberg aside" thing, it's a different kind of association. If you ever learn anything from criticisms of your work, from reading criticism of other, of other people?

KENNETH NOLAND: Yes, I have. Mike Fried, Clem Greenberg. Also from negative criticism, I've learned things. But, yes, sometimes. Not very often,—[they laugh]—because I don't think they're really writing—the tack that's taken in criticism is more positional and it's not real, it's not a kind of criticism that strikes home, that makes me see something that maybe I haven't seen before. But then, again, I get brought up short—[laughs]—because somebody does say something that makes me realize that there's something that I should think about. As an example, I personally—I haven't been discussing this with anybody particularly, but I'm very interested in the question of subject matter, artistic content and that area of art effect. That kind of area of art, that how art in terms of the subject matter, life of subject matter, the nature of the subject matter or the artistic expression, or the artistic content, what kind of effect that has. Why, as an example, at this particular time there's a return to a kind of figurative, expressionist, symbolic kind of art, art symbols expressionist kind of subject matter, if not content, is acceptable today. Which it is, it's very acceptable.

AVIS BERMAN: Well I would say, this isn't in answer to your question, but what is very interesting is that your generation was probably the first that never had any beginnings as figurative painters. I mean, all of the other abstract, the first generation of it all started as representational painters.

KENNETH NOLAND: I would say that's not true. Because, I would say that even in my generation, although it wasn't emphasized at Black Mountain College, most of the other artists that came up about my time had been to art schools and had studied drawing, and what would've been—

[END OF TRACK AAA_noland87_5838.]

KENNETH NOLAND: Freedom to making art, a lot of other interests are probably more important. I'm more interested in what is happening in life than I am in art. [Laughs.]

AVIS BERMAN: Well, maybe we're getting over into subject matter again.

KENNETH NOLAND: Yes, and artistic content, and what, say, abstract art, abstract art really—what a subject matter really is, or what its artistic content is. What artistic content is, is what artists will think, or do think, and what they will feel and what they won't feel, what they don't want to think about. I think that those are very central ingredients of what art is that don't get discussed very much. It's very difficult to interpret an abstract art unless you're open to certain kinds of feelings or certain kinds of thoughts. Because, frankly, there's very little art in art that's going on that really interests me very much. I can be interested in it, but I don't really admire it. I don't really get anything from it particularly, except indications of malaise, is that the word?—that's general now, pervasive—is malaise?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, I think malaise is right. Possibly ennui, too.

KENNETH NOLAND: Such as what we had talked a little bit about the other day. A generalization that I like is that we are living at a time of inflated mediocrity. I said that the other day to you, I think. I think it's true. It's not just an inflated mediocrity, it's also that there's a general kind of total pollution, and it's totally pervasive. It's emotional. It's mental. It's in the environment. It's in the concepts. It's in all of the human activity.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, then why should most art escape? Because art does reflect its times, and you can always find the times—

KENNETH NOLAND: Not really. It doesn't always reflect its time. I mean, at what part of its time does it reflect? That makes a question.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, certainly in this case, the art is maybe—many artists are not different from the prevailing values of their society.

KENNETH NOLAND: No, no. Did I say that they escaped it? [Laughs.]

AVIS BERMAN: No, but therefore, if you're part of your time you sometimes can't escape it. It comes in and you put it in whether you want to or not, or you think you are or not.

KENNETH NOLAND: That's true. That's true. But how conscious are artists of this? Particularly at a time when I noticed that, as I noticed, and it was pointed out to me by a friend of mine, James Wolfe. He put it succinctly. That most of what goes on now in, say, intellectual life is a kind of activity that's kept going so that people don't think about more important things. That there are more important things that are not being thought about and not being faced. Saul Bellow has been saying this lately. That communication, a quote, is precisely about not communicating, really. Not really facing some things that people just don't want to think about. So we have a whole kind of culture and social economy that's based on not really dealing with much more serious issues and questions. Isn't that true?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, and we also have fun art, too.

KENNETH NOLAND: We have art that does the same thing. That's why that at this particular time this is a period, say something like the '20s, the Roaring '20s, where the styles and fashions were pervasive in life.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, it was certainly much more consumerist than the preceding decades of the Progressive Era.

KENNETH NOLAND: Yes. And it is a consumption activity. [Cross talk.] Incidental information; nonsense; humor; beside the point; always steering things away from—really talks me out of anything that's really.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, that's what people don't want to think about nuclear arms or other things. They'd rather have toys, grown up toys.

KENNETH NOLAND: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: You know it's interesting, cause you often bring up the context of things and many of the great Abstract Expressionists' works were created in an atmosphere of alienation, fear of annihilation, asserting an individual personality against a very hostile, conforming outside world. That was what the artists were after but many of the people today they don't see that. I mean, of course, because the aesthetic qualities, I guess, have made themselves so felt.

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, after the Second World War a lot of things had to be reestablished and rescued, as it were. The United States, since it hadn't suffered a lot of the destruction that the rest of the world had, was able to recover.

AVIS BERMAN: Post-War.

KENNETH NOLAND: Yes, after the Second World War. When the European, a lot of the European artists had come over here to escape the devastation, so forth. It also made it possible for American artists to meet real, important, great artists and to see these people, not as something you read about, but a person, to meet Mondrian, et cetera. And to see that this was a human being and, therefore, wasn't some like, god. It wasn't just talk, but it was a person, and that they were also a person and it was possible. This was something else that took place. So art had to be reconstituted and saved again, as each new generation has to come along and save art again. Painting always goes on because major painting, mainstream painting, et cetera, all of the movements of painting only go on because younger artists come up and somehow reinvent it again. And it's not easy to do. It's a difficult thing to do. That's why the survival rate in art is,—[laughs]—in terms of becoming an important artist is so low. So after the Second World War there had to be more freedom in art, in the making of art. It also had to get bigger in order for it to assert itself as still a valid form of expression because it was a resistance to it as an activity. So it opened things up, it made expansive, in order to reinvent its future for itself again. This even came down to the '60s when the Minimalists and Conceptualist artists were saying that making paintings and sculpture was dead and finished. It's in the literature. You read it.

AVIS BERMAN: I would say the Minimalists were saying something else but they were both very. Conceptualists were really upset with the idea of, "you make it and you sell it." I mean, they didn't know how to get around the art as a commodity, and I think the—

KENNETH NOLAND: That was their problem. They didn't have any trouble getting around the fact that this was also another way to be successful as artists, in the name of art. Right?

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative], right.

KENNETH NOLAND: So it opened up art to, this expansion of art, spread of art, that was done by the pioneers also made it possible for art to become a form of entertainment. Not just theater, theatricalness, but entertainment. That it became an activity that was something like the movie business or some of the other kind of performance activities. And that also that there could be a star system and that it could succeed. The opening up of—the breakthrough in art also opened up the possibility to become rich. We were talking about this: The Beatles, The Rolling Stones in music. And it had all of the appearance, all of those kinds of expressions had the appearance of being rough, and tough, and primitive, and anti-intellectual. It was anti-egghead. It was a kind of a working class, folk kind of an art where the possibility of becoming a star became almost a paramount involvement. So in a lifetime of creative people, in general, The Beatles, for instance, can make hundreds of millions of dollars. That's a kind of success. It's also kind of a confirmation of a certain part of what, as an artist, that I don't think, a sense that it becomes a consumable product, immediately consumable. I'm not sure that this is art as I know it and as I like it and as I've known it and what I like to consume in the name of art. I don't think it's like Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Bach, and like that. It's not of that quality, and I know it's not.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative], Well interestingly though, that those, you know the classical musicians—because the art form is different, they're resistant to consumption. Yes, they can be played. You have a Mozart concert people will come and it will be a success. But to take the obvious example in both exhibitions and of course, the auction is now, that van Gogh, I mean a pillar of integrity has now been a terribly consumable quantity.

KENNETH NOLAND: How about that?

AVIS BERMAN: You can't resist it. You can't protect it. I mean the Metropolitan, I guess not the second van Gogh show but the first one, they had actually made a scarf of the painting with the bandaged ear. I mean, that made me very sick.

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, Wilhelm Reich said that all of those natural virtues that have been lost from human beings' living process has reintroduced themselves into their lives as ideals to be striven for but never attained. So they're idealistic in their virtuous, but they're not so, they don't really, the people that espouse this, are not—

AVIS BERMAN: I guess, well, I sort of see it more as the first time it appears as tragedy, the second time as farce, and it's not fair to be stuck in the farcical age. Even an artist who is interesting, who is really in the middle of it said which was Eric Fischl, I was talking to him and he said, "You know, I'm really jealous of these artists in the '50s. They had the Club. We have the Palladium. They had the existential and we have the Prudential." I think that some of the artists who are very involved in this ethos, I mean, there's a certain wistful, perhaps proving what you said—quality. I think they'd like to be in something else. I don't know if it's possible.

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, they've got to get their asses out and do it and they got to resist being a success. They've got to find ways of thinking, ways of working; ways of existing to. They have to cause things to happen to them where they are not successful rather than giving in to the things that do happen to them to become stars. That's a large order.

[END OF TRACK AAA_noland87_5841.]

AVIS BERMAN: This is Avis Berman talking with Kenneth Noland on July 16th, 1987.

AVIS BERMAN: Is there anything you'd like to start with or anything you'd like to say?

KENNETH NOLAND: No.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Then I'm going to ask you to continue our discussion. In the interview that Diane Waldman did with you [in Art in America] there was an interesting idea, there was a quote from you in which you were saying what you and [Morris] Louis found was you said, "You didn't have to assert yourself as a personality in order to be personally expressive." You said, "We felt that we could deal solely with aesthetic issues and with the meaning of abstraction." And I was rather curious about this in how one deals with the idea of personality in art, because one would think that the expression is a function of the artist's personality.

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, it's not an expression of a personality necessarily. Let's see. The way you framed it implies that it's kind of a conscious effort on the part of an artist to express his personality, and you get that question a lot. A lot of people who don't know too much about art ask you what you're trying to express—what you're trying to express. And, if you're self-conscious or you're conscious of, say, you project an image, then that's one way that something gets expressed. But if you're not necessarily conscious or self-conscious of the kind of feelings that you're having, but you're, kind of say, lost in what you're doing, or not self-conscious subconscious. But you're dealing with your perceptions of the use of materials to make something, then in a way that's a different thing. And, the effect of that also reads differently, too. It's perceived differently. So that, as an example, it's very possible to look at a representational painting. Say a Cezanne or a Matisse, or a Rembrandt,

as an example, or an Ingres, whatever, and not be really conscious in a way of say looking at a figure, a landscape, or whatever. Although its presence is there and there's some kind of—it's acknowledged and your perceiving a painting such as that. It's not the likeness in the Rembrandt, but it comes very close to the likeness in a Rembrandt—probably almost closer than any artist—to direct your most of your attention to a person. But, I've noticed that in terms of the expressive effect of a work of art and the way it's been made, is that there's a very closer threshold. The process of it being made and if it's suppressed, like say, in the sense of a Dali, where you can't see the paint quality. You can't see brushstrokes; you can't so much. You see the color and see the optical illusion of depth and space and so forth, but it's to direct your attention also to a kind of a surreal, a super-real effect. That doesn't necessarily mitigate against the quality of it, but it also doesn't mitigate against the quality of the like of that. Where, say, in the case of a David Smith, where if there is an image that he's used, it doesn't get very far from the material he's using and the way he put it together. So there's a little, it's a very fine threshold between the stuff and the expressive nature of it. I hope that answers the question.

AVIS BERMAN: I was wondering if you might subscribe to T. S. Eliot's famous notion of escaping from one's personality and the idea is that you surrender yourself, as I said, to get something more valuable.

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, I think that's very appropriate, very apt at this, you know, at this point. Yes, because I think Klee had things to say about that, too. It's the difference between an unconscious function, where you're doing something and you're enraptured in a state of that. So, that it's an unself-conscious act. You're not stepping back and you're not—you're doing it as a function. It's a functional activity, and not a self-conscious functional activity.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you think the Abstract Expressionists were self-conscious?

KENNETH NOLAND: I think it became self-conscious very quickly as it got defined. I think because, as I think we said before, that a categorized kind of art, such as the movement of Abstract Expressionism, then makes it become a self-conscious event. I think Harold Rosenberg, when he was talking about it being, calling it Action Painting, then it became Action Painting and quite consciously Action Painting. I remember that back in the late '50s—[Side conversation.]—

KENNETH NOLAND: What was that question again?

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you had stopped by saying that once Harold Rosenberg had called it Action Painting. It became that and became self-conscious. Did you find that there was any drain or any difficulty once there was the label Color Field Painting?

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, first of all, what was kind of going on in the late '50s, mid late '50s. There were characteristics that people were—of the kind of painting that was going on then which got called Hard Edge Painting, and I minded that because it—[Side conversation.]—I minded that because, I didn't mind being lumped, in a way, with all of the artists that got called Hard-Edge painters. I think that Newman was kind of in that general classification, Ray Parker, I can't think of other names, but then, or Ellsworth Kelly. But then they began to be Hard-Edge painters. If they were asked what kind of paintings they painted, they said, "Hard-Edge paintings." Then when Color-Field Painting came, I don't know where these—[laughs]—they came from various kinds of people looking for a handle to get. I didn't feel that that was—I didn't object to that as much as I minded Hard-Edge Painting, because it didn't really spread that much. It didn't become, people didn't go around calling themselves Color Field painters. Clem Greenberg was looking for some kind of general term to describe the kind of painting he was interested in. He called it "Post-Painterly Abstraction," which in a way kind of went back to Color Field Painting and got to be known also as Formalism, which was another term that came from somewhere else. I tried not to pay any attention to this, because—I guess that maybe at the time of the Impressionists, again you pointed out, that that was a word of criticism towards the painters.

AVIS BERMAN: Derision, a real derision.

KENNETH NOLAND: I don't think Hard-Edge was, for the majority, anyway. Maybe Color Field was, maybe it wasn't. I don't think so. I know that Formalism was. [Cross talk.]—

AVIS BERMAN: [Cross talk.] Yes, I would say that it became negative.

KENNETH NOLAND: But then a lot of the people that were called Formalists called themselves Formalists, too, or don't seem to mind it. I think that, say, that term Formalism came about. For the fact that there were a group of people, such as some critics, some dealers and artists, let alone the artists, who were showing basically in the same places, being collected by the same collectors and also were friends, were, first of all, friends. So, I try not to pay any attention to those things. I don't think that they serve a very good purpose other than just simply defining an area of art as say, not Pop art, or not Super Realism or something else.

AVIS BERMAN: In the Waldman interview, you also made the point of how artists would always live traditionally

and use the minimum means of technology. You seem to be very interested in that. Is that something that you still find to be true or do you still find it to be important in what you're doing?

KENNETH NOLAND: Oh yes, and I think it's true. Something of this has to do with the fact that art—I don't think it functions as decoration. I don't think it's function is decoration, and I don't think it's function is embellishment. But the activity of making art in another sense is a kind of embellishment of reality, or a kind of, not a decoration of reality. But it's a position apart from utilitarian purposes. It's an expressive distance from utilitarian purposes and almost in that sense, too, since it's a perspective and a distance from that kind of reality. It's reflective and it can be insightful. It can be creative. It can be those other characteristics that we'd use to describe what art is.

AVIS BERMAN: And this ties into the minimum technology groove? [They laugh.][Cross talk.]

KENNETH NOLAND: [Cross talk.] Oh, I'm sorry.

AVIS BERMAN: No, that's all right.

KENNETH NOLAND: No. The fact is that if there are any left over rocks from building a building then they can become useful for carving. Or, after they've used the paint to paint whatever they were going to paint to actually decorate something, then artists could use that paint to make other things; junk, waste, byproducts. Artists don't need very much of technological ability to make art because it's insightful and expressive character is so powerful; the effect can be so powerful. Musical instruments, which don't really use very much wood or metal, they're just very, very highly executed. Stradivarius, of course, is a great instrument.

AVIS BERMAN: But you can still use a piece of paper and a pencil.

KENNETH NOLAND: You can.

AVIS BERMAN: Or a burnt stick.

KENNETH NOLAND: You can use your fingernails in dirt. You can use spit and blood or you can use mud and blood. Or you can sing. Or you can make poems. Poets are not journalists.

AVIS BERMAN: No, you can chant.

KENNETH NOLAND: You can chant. You can dance. So, it's a very wonderful kind of activity that somehow in almost the nature of it, making it, that has that wonderful quality of being not needy. It's how it's used, and it's the imagination of the user, the creative abilities of the user. Today even the spinoffs from computers and video systems and industrial new materials, that type of materials and so forth, that doesn't take much. That's what that means.

AVIS BERMAN: Not like science.

KENNETH NOLAND: No, science on the other hand doesn't need very much either.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, certain ones. I think, medical research needs more new tools.

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, they sure are using a lot more things.

AVIS BERMAN: To see and describe. They need to see smaller and smaller units. I don't know if art needs that.

KENNETH NOLAND: The machines, you mean, they're using in medicine.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, they want to look at the gene. Their aims are different.

KENNETH NOLAND: I know, but I don't think that's necessarily the best kind of medicine; [Cross talk] or the best kind of science either, necessarily.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, well this is a true digression we probably shouldn't get too into. Maybe we should go from science to something like MIT, because I think that is, sort of an, interesting, in retrospect, is looming as a very important project that you did. And I won't actually go into a lot of details because they are in the catalogue, but I would be interested in how you hit on painting the interstices in between the squares, which was such a great idea; or having them painted. Or how—what you looked at, or what you decided to do.

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, when I was first approached to get involved in that, I'd never done a commission and I wasn't interested in doing commissions as such. Because I like to do what I want to do, work where my curiosity leads. But the building was presented as a cube, an exact symmetrical cube, with an atrium inside that was also a square; it was a cubic space. They had planned to use two-foot square modules of aluminum panels with

interstices, with recessed lines between. Now, that's a kind of fairly simple layout and it suggested the possibility of dispersing colors throughout a given layout, either on the panels or under, or recessed around the edges. The idea of say, putting a lot of color on the surfaces didn't appeal to me for the very simple reason it would have been a too strong kind of an effect. Also, I was talking to, in discussion with I.M. Pei, I said, "Well, you know, I think that this would have to be a very subdued kind of thing". Because I didn't want the effect to be environmentally compelling to look at away from the totality of the building. We went down—he knew of a bank over on Park Avenue, it was about 68th or 69th Street, Park in the 60s, that they had just built. And in the inside of it they had these horizontal stripes of red about every two feet running horizontally. So the idea of using the interstices kind of jelled around that idea. It became something that suits me better because it was more discreet. And I saw the possibility also of being able to project larger scales, smaller scales and have the effect be that if one chose to look at it, to look into it as it were, that the eye would be moved along by differences in color into various kinds of playful effects.

AVIS BERMAN: I can definitely see how much movement there was in that, even in the reproduction. I thought it was fascinating. Did you, was there any kind of progression, either mathematical or chromatic? I guess I can't tell from the reproduction if there were repetitions or unities or what happens there.

KENNETH NOLAND: No, absolutely not. I don't use a system. I don't use actual measurements. I use my eye to make measurements and then after—they can get measured and put into place. But that's the only way that I work. I don't really use any kind of module, I don't use modules or graphs, or anything. Stella uses graphs, like graph paper.

AVIS BERMAN: So, you never used a grid before.

KENNETH NOLAND: Not as such. Even when I made the so-called plaid pictures, the spacings of those were not done by any kind of measurement. They were done by visual choices.

AVIS BERMAN: Even in any of the geometry?

KENNETH NOLAND: I don't use geometry as such.

AVIS BERMAN: Shapes, shall we say?

KENNETH NOLAND: Or even in the shapes, either. I don't really, say, choose the difference between one square and another square on the basis of that as far as proportions.

AVIS BERMAN: So just as you went along, you decided this was going to be, say, a third of the length of the square and this was a little one and you moved those around all the time?

KENNETH NOLAND: I moved them around. It's like improvising; kind of a process of improvising and change. Sometimes I would have to change.

AVIS BERMAN: It seemed that you would have had to have changed a lot from the way that building went.

KENNETH NOLAND: Yes. Even after the building was finished, I mean, the mural had been done; it required some change. For the very simple reason that on the maquette that I made I couldn't grasp the actual size and the effect of different scales until it was being executed and then I had to change some things.

AVIS BERMAN: Were you surprised at how well it came out?

KENNETH NOLAND: No, I thought it was going along pretty fine. [Laughs.]

AVIS BERMAN: It seemed to be even Kathy Halbreich said that, in this incredibly candid catalogue, she said it was clearly the most successful one, which was rather daring.

KENNETH NOLAND: That's very flattering.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, flattering, but you've got a couple of other artists there.

KENNETH NOLAND: Oh, I'm sure.

AVIS BERMAN: Did it interest you in doing other kinds of walls? You didn't like the commission experience very much, but working on something like that a similar kind of—

KENNETH NOLAND: Yes, it did. It made me think a lot about Matisse's chapel, which I think is just absolutely incredibly magnificent. I saw it and—case in point, it was, when I went to see it, did you see it?

AVIS BERMAN: No, I've never been there.

KENNETH NOLAND: You should see it some time, it's a lot smaller than the photographs tell you. And it's also much more sculptural, much more painterly in actual effect than it looks in photographs, which reminds me of Monet. When I went to see Giverny,—[Cross talk.]—again I was startled by the fact that it was such a small area that he'd set up in order to paint those incredible paintings he painted there. Because it was a small area that he had optically created in order to paint those pictures that took on kind of a vast—

AVIS BERMAN: There was a vista in them.

KENNETH NOLAND: A vista effect. But the little pond across the railroad track, where the bridge is and so forth, is just a little, a little pool, it's a little pond, it's a little wet area that he cultivated and put in the bridge.

AVIS BERMAN: That was the Japanese part, to be able to use the detail.

KENNETH NOLAND: But then it looms large in the paintings. So he made a kind of dimensions, as Matisse maybe did in the chapel. So, it's in that order, I think.

AVIS BERMAN: I guess that was—you got the commission in '79 and it was finished in '85? I'm just guessing because there was no date on the catalogue.

KENNETH NOLAND: It was something like that. It wasn't supposed to really take that long. Some of the artists dropped out that had been originally been chosen for it, because it was getting tedious and it was getting involved. The only reason it took that long wasn't for artistic purposes but for financial and design purposes economy, how to deliver the building. So it was changing. The character of the building then became not a cube but an elongated building. Therefore, the horizontal stripes of the building got changed; all kind of things such as that.

AVIS BERMAN: How come you didn't drop out?

KENNETH NOLAND: Because I'd gotten into it. I thought about dropping out many times; plus the fact that they weren't willing to come up with more money. Originally it was twenty-five thousand bucks to an artist, to each artist, and this was six years. I'd spent, I'd put a lot into it so I didn't want to give it up.

AVIS BERMAN: Were you interested in it in the beginning, because it wasn't your sort of thing?

KENNETH NOLAND: My interest was a curiosity because to me it was kind of a diversion away from my own painting, my own work. I didn't want it to take too much of my attention away from things that I was more interested in. I got interested in it. [Cross talk.]

AVIS BERMAN: [Cross talk.] Well, when did you realize that it was going to have—that it was beginning to have an effect on, that it was becoming your own work, that was having an effect on your other paintings?

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, the difficulty was figuring out how to design the thing, or how to get into it. At that point, this was at a point, at that time, that computers weren't developed enough in terms of graphic color possibilities for me. And I didn't have access to any computer. But, if I'd had had a computer with the kind of programs that are available now, I could have done it on a computer. Because I could have put together everything by selecting it out of the colors that computers have. So the point that really got—because from a two-foot square, the spaces between them are a half-inch, the every alternate horizontal was three or four inches at the top. How to reduce that to some way that I could be able to put the colors out, spread the colors and follow the colors through, required a half-inch to become an eighth of an inch of color rather than a half-inch. And a two-foot square became six inches I think, a six inch square. So we finally found a place to have a panel built that was fifteen feet high by about thirty some odd feet long that represented the wall. And then the wall went down yet another level to a basement level, to an underground level. We had to lay that out flat on the floor at the foot, at the base of the—

AVIS BERMAN: So, it was L-shaped.

KENNETH NOLAND: Right—[They laugh.]—so I had to kind of imagine the colors projecting down below the street level. So but it was interesting. It was fun.

AVIS BERMAN: What interested me was some of the paintings. Well you had been doing some of the works on paper which you were working more with a more obvious surface and then you were also working on these chevrons, which have a lot more surface incident.

KENNETH NOLAND: No, I wasn't working on the chevrons then. I was working on shaped pictures.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, but—

KENNETH NOLAND: Chevrons were late. These last chevrons that I painted were after that.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, because there are some in the *Love* catalogue [Richard H. Love, *Kenneth Noland, major works*. Chicago: Haase-Mumm, 1986] that say '83, '84. But—

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, that can be that the design was finished by then, in essence. But, I think it was kind of concurrent with making shape pictures.

AVIS BERMAN: I was interested in that you had been exploring surface incident more in your canvases, and then —

MR.NOLAND: Well, that came from making paper and ceramics. That was a sub kind of work that I was doing.

AVIS BERMAN: With drawing with the squeegee and other things was sort of interesting.

KENNETH NOLAND: That was a little later. That was after I'd made quite a lot of handmade paper works. And they are different in character. Maybe that's what you're getting at. But, I don't think that it's necessary for an artist to, at least for myself because my personality is not that way. I like to make things in a lot of different ways. I'm not particularly afraid of influences. I'm anxious about influences, but I'm not [Cross talk.] I don't let it stop me.

AVIS BERMAN: These would be self-influences. [Laughs.]

KENNETH NOLAND: And other influences, too.

AVIS BERMAN: I guess what I'm trying to work toward or figure out is how you determine what you're going to do next.

KENNETH NOLAND: Usually what I do next has had its germination in just messing around, just fooling around, just making things. Like making paper and splashing paint around or whatever, and I go back to the things. The things that go so far at a certain stage and then something useful comes back up. As I told you before, I think that for me making art is practicing and let things develop out of practicing. When I can get into a certain kind of culmination to an extended amount of work. In fact, these new pictures now, kind of hark back to what that role was meant for, very much.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I guess I should ask you if you were surprised or if you surprised yourself that something, such an interesting development in your work came out of something like that.

KENNETH NOLAND: It's always a surprise, but it's a surprise after the fact. It's after I've begun to do something that I realize where some of the sources have come from.

AVIS BERMAN: The horizontal strips. Also, I think using the Plexiglas is very interesting, coming from maybe that idea of stripping. I noticed that in the catalogue you had wanted to use a certain kind of tape but they didn't do that, or you wanted to add something. Instead of using paint you wanted to put this other material in.

KENNETH NOLAND: As a matter of fact, these new pictures are very much, they're like made versions of that wall, but they also hark back to the horizontal stripes, to plaid pictures I've made.

AVIS BERMAN: I think they're very unified. I mean they seem to be very, they seem to be very you. It's just interesting that these horizontal movements certainly are—

KENNETH NOLAND: It also comes right after, say, making these very painterly kinds of chevrons.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative], painterly, yes.

KENNETH NOLAND: It seems to be fate.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative], right. Well I guess, now I want to really back-track, since you mentioned the plaid paintings, I just wanted to go back to ask you how they came about and some of the main issues that you feel you were dealing with in those works.

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, the plaid paintings kind of came out of when I'd been making horizontal stripe pictures and was using those large centers of color with stripes at the top and the bottom. Print stripes that sometimes went all over the whole surface. I was worried about the, I was—thinking a lot about the—In the horizontal pictures the stripes were horizontal and that was a very abstract kind of way of putting colors down. It's probably

the most removed from any kind of associations with any external imagery. The colors are non-descriptive. Excuse me the lines are non-descriptive. And how I didn't particularly want to make vertical. I was looking for ways of getting into vertical quality. And if you narrow a horizontal stripes beyond a certain point, in a funny way they become more descriptive. So then I got the idea of crossing colors and what do you do with the spaces that are between, unless you fill it totally with just a grid, presented a lot of problems. But it did open up the vertical, and made available a vertical and horizontal quality so that I could narrow not only horizontally, but vertically too. Those intersections of colors become very specific in a painting, visually. They're details because you can go from one line and all of a sudden you come to something going across.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, and which goes over it and which goes under it.

KENNETH NOLAND: Which goes under and which goes over. So I found that I had to paint, actually paint, what went under and what went over in terms of what the colors would do; very difficult pictures, too.

AVIS BERMAN: I was going to ask you. I would think also they would have been very, they must have been really hard to do also because suddenly you were dealing with more depth and illusion, and because of this idea of over and under.

KENNETH NOLAND: Right, and that was begging another question; the optical depth. That might have had something to do with my interest in making paper too, because of getting into some kind of an optical depth. You could see different layers of colors, or see through them and then see others, but they're still very flat pictures.

AVIS BERMAN: I'd say there was more depth in the—well, you allowed yourself to—

KENNETH NOLAND: I think that just in general, you're never, an artist is never in a way—no artist that's in the mainstream of art is ever really separated from what's going on, not only in terms of what other artists are doing, in terms of feelings of the times, too.

[END OF TRACK AAA_noland87_5839.]

AVIS BERMAN: I wanted to ask you; there were almost administrative details. Besides Andre Emmerich you had some shows with David Mirvish in Toronto. I guess also admires and collects your work. I don't know, seems to me that, I don't know if it was just him or not, but in Canada, I noticed in Edmonton and in Toronto they seemed to be very interested in Formalist/Color-Field painting. I was wondering if there was a school up there or if there was a reason that you knew of.

KENNETH NOLAND: I think that we were being shown up there. Also, Jack Bush, a Canadian painter, I would say, was influenced by Color-Field painting. And, Emma Lake, where a lot of artists had gone, including myself early on, and there had been some interest on the part of the artists in Canada, some artists, a few in Hard-Edge painting and Abstract painting. So somehow or another, I don't know why, an influence took there even more than the United States.

AVIS BERMAN: Definitely. I think in Edmonton and Alberta, the university up there.

KENNETH NOLAND: Also, England, too. I was showing in England as well as some of the other so-called Formalist artists. Tony Caro is a sculptor, or is a sculptor that is associated with the Formalists. At one point, at St. Martin's in England, a tremendous influence on English art that the Formalist artists had, as well as Minimalism, that kind of combination. There was some incredibly, beautiful sculpture that came out of St. Martin's, you probably don't know who they are.

AVIS BERMAN: Maybe a couple of the names. I mean, Caro, of course, I know, but I don't know if I would know the other ones.

KENNETH NOLAND: I can't right off hand think of the names. Mike Bulbous, David Ansley, Tim Scott, that's another sculptor, a couple of, a few others, Isaac Whitcomb. Bill, what's his first name? He lived in America

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, do you mean William Tucker?

KENNETH NOLAND: Bill Tucker who renounced his association with the Formalists. But it didn't develop, Minimalism, somehow as a force kind of knocked it out. I liked it better than minimal art, minimal sculpture, myself. I think that they were probably, frankly, I think they were, a better sculpture was being made than the Minimalists did.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you think going back to Canada, do you think it was David Mirvish's influence that helped propagate it, or do you think it was more Bush or did Greenberg go up to Canada a lot?

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, David Mirvish, when he first started to show so-called Formalist art, his mother had been to Emma Lake. She was a painter, Hard-Edge, I think. He was nineteen or twenty years old, and she began to like the kind of art we were making and he, as a young man, was affected by it. So when he began to, when he opened a gallery when he was twenty, twenty-one and he began to collect our art, as did Kasmin in England and Larry Rubin who was in Paris at that time. These were all very young men. They were in their early twenties.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I don't know about Kasmin, but, of course, Mirvish's father was Honest Ed so he could, you know, collect and I mean there was—

KENNETH NOLAND: I think that's what he wanted to do. David wanted to open a gallery.

MR. BERMAN: Right, well, he has the book store now and it's beautiful.

KENNETH NOLAND: He does some publishing, I understand.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative], And also, you had some shows at Castelli? How did that come about?

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, about the time of my Guggenheim show, I wasn't doing so well at Emmerich. Or Emmerich wasn't selling our work and I had met Leo in 1964. Before that I'd met him, as a matter of fact, going all the way back to French and Company. When Morris Louis and I were showing at French and Company and it closed, Leo expressed an interest in showing us at the same time that Emmerich did. But, Castelli had already begun to establish himself with Johns and Rauschenberg and a different kind of art and we chose to show with Emmerich. So, I knew Leo and I knew he was friendly disposed towards my work, so we had a discussion and I left Andre and went to, Emmerich, excuse me, to Castelli. I had been showing with Larry Rubin. I left Larry Rubin to go back to Emmerich and then eventually I left Leo to go back there. Emmerich and Castelli shared my contract for a year or two along with Lester Waddington in Europe. So at one point I had three dealers at the same time.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, in retrospect do you think it is better for an artist to show in a gallery in which some of the artists have a kind of a similar aesthetic outlook or beliefs? Or is it better to be in a gallery where your work is manifestly different?

KENNETH NOLAND: I don't know, you know. other artists have different purposes.

AVIS BERMAN: Well I guess for you.

KENNETH NOLAND: For me I didn't particularly want to be bothered with having to do very much about selling my work, so I usually made exclusive arrangements with dealers so that I didn't have to worry about selling of my work and so forth. I just didn't want to have to handle that aspect of my career, as it were. It was useful for my purposes to have exclusivities. But if I ran into trouble with a dealer for whatever reason, I've always felt free to go to another dealer. I've shown with, I guess, the best of the contemporary dealers: Larry Rubin, Castelli, Emmerich.

AVIS BERMAN: How did the dealers react to your sculpture?

KENNETH NOLAND: How did dealers react to my sculpture? Not very favorably. Oh, I mean to the extent that they wanted to show it, because the only sculpture I really made has been big sculpture, very big unwieldy pieces. Very difficult to make for me because I spent four or five years on a piece of sculpture. very difficult, so I really haven't made that much sculpture.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative], now I wanted to talk about that, the sculpture, things which would begin after David Smith's death. But I wanted to ask you what, if you felt it had any impact at all and sort of what kind of things that you made when you studied with Zadkine?

KENNETH NOLAND: I really basically painted. He wanted me to make sculptures, so I made some portraits and a few clay pieces. Because he taught clay more than any other material.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you carve?

KENNETH NOLAND: No, I didn't carve. I didn't construct sculpture, but I did make some ceramic portraits and things like that, but I was basically painting.

AVIS BERMAN: So, really none of that had a bearing on what you made later.

KENNETH NOLAND: Not much, if any.

AVIS BERMAN: Now this, from what I read, you and Tony Caro bought material from David Smith's estate. Is that correct?

KENNETH NOLAND: More precisely, they had to do something about the materials that he had, and tools, and they were going to sell the materials off for scrap, or used, used steel. They were going to sell the machinery off as used machinery and they weren't being offered enough for the stuff, so I bought it. And then Tony, I sold Tony half of it, or he took up half of it. I still have a lot of that stainless steel and bronze and I'm just keeping it. Because I can't, I can't, I don't have the time to use it and I don't have enough money to use it, frankly. Because it's expensive to get people to do it. I can't cut and weld the stuff, so I would have to get somebody else to actually cut it and weld it and so forth. I'm holding it for some future artist, my son, possibly, who's a sculptor, my son Bill. If he can ever get to the point where he can afford to use it, it's his, or it's down the line.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you own any works by David Smith?

KENNETH NOLAND: I have three pieces. I have a little piece of sculpture that he gave me that he scratched on "you, me and Uccello, for Ken, from David." It's just a little piece and it was in circles, two circles, so it was kind of a personal thing. Then I have a piece that I bought from Clem Greenberg and then I have a piece that I bought from, a piece of scrap sculpture that I bought from the estate. And I have some drawings that David gave me. My kids have, I think he gave each one of my kids one.

AVIS BERMAN: I love those drawings.

KENNETH NOLAND: I do, too. [Laughs.]

AVIS BERMAN: Did Caro meet Smith through you?

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, through me and Clem and Helen [Frankenthaler]. Kind of, he met him at French and Company because when he first came to, but he came to, Tony came to Bennington College at Clem's and my persuasion, to teach. Then when he came to Bennington College, David was over at Bolton Landing, NY, which was seventy miles away and we went over to see David. And David actually set up the sculpture department for Tony at Bennington College.

AVIS BERMAN: How fascinating.

KENNETH NOLAND: Because Tony couldn't get over at the beginning of the term so David took it upon himself to buy the tools and tell them to set up the shop. He had it all set up for Tony and he even came over to teach a class or two before Tony could get here with his family. And then when Tony came in, it was all set up for him.

AVIS BERMAN: Now did this affinity, or the Bennington College connection, did that originally come through Helen Frankenthaler?

KENNETH NOLAND: No. They actually kind of, well, originally Helen had gone to Bennington College.

AVIS BERMAN: That's why I asked.

KENNETH NOLAND: And had been a girlfriend of Clem's for seven or eight years. But I think basically it kind of came through Clem and also Paul Feeley. He was another one of the ones that would have been called a Hard-Edge painter. He was very visionary, because he had a series of exhibitions at Bennington College with Pollock, Newman, Louis, myself and, I think, Gottlieb and so forth. So Feeley was very open and was part of our interest.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, do you think that sculpture, that you got this material because you wanted to save the material or do David Smith honor?

KENNETH NOLAND: No, no. I got it with the intention of using it, but it became too expensive for me to use. I mean, am I interested? I guess if my interest had gone that way strongly enough, I would have.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, it just seemed to have been this tragic event that caused you to do it. I can't, from what I have read, it doesn't sound as if Smith had been alive, you would have been doing any sculpting.

KENNETH NOLAND: I might have. I probably would have, what with David being around and also Tony being there.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, so I think it would have been, I don't know if there was something that you were missing in painting, if you wanted to get into more three- dimensionality, or different kind of. Also, as you say, it was handling stuff. The stuff was different.

KENNETH NOLAND: The stuff was there. But I was painting. Tony was making sculpture. Jules began to make sculpture a little bit later, and oh I'm proud of the pieces I've made.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you, let's see, let's go back to your sculpture. Do you think that some of the dealing with anti-

gravity was important to you?

KENNETH NOLAND: What do you mean, in sculpture or painting?

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I think that there's some of that in the painting, but I was curious in the sculpture if that had the same importance.

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, therein is a bigger question than you're asking. Because in Abstract art to get over the differences, the bottom in terms of gravity, and the top of a picture or the left or the right, where the left and right stay pretty much the same in terms of limits. That took place in painting. It didn't take place in sculpture. That has been one of the big problems of sculptors; [Ellsworth] Kelly. That was a problem for David Smith because David used pedestals or would use a base and then build up. It was a very hard move for David to move away from using a base, even though it was just a piece of steel underneath a piece of sculpture. To get to the point where he could spread a piece out was a very abstract kind of step. Kelly, probably more than any other sculptor, had more to do with taking sculpture off of the base and letting it be, not dependent on gravitation, a sense of weight for its existence. I've talked to many sculptors who are trying to be abstract sculptors. Who wondered how to get it off of, to get the thing up so that it didn't have gravity and so that it didn't have to sit. It also has to do with the horizon line in painting, the ground, the sky. And that was a very difficult turning point probably in American Abstract art and it took place in the United States. I can't think right off hand. The Impressionists were getting around it by dematerializing everything so there was a kind of a field effect.

AVIS BERMAN: I think Dove probably was one of the first to begin to look at that.

KENNETH NOLAND: Dove was a very good artist. He's an underrated artist, too.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you still think so? I think that he's—

KENNETH NOLAND: Avery's a great artist. Dove is a great artist. Dove was one of the first abstract artists. He and Kandinsky were the first two. Good point. You tend to forget Dove.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, he was quiet but he was always someone—Pollock, of course, said, "I am nature," but Georgia O'Keeffe had said first, "Dove was nature."

KENNETH NOLAND: Real nature in an abstract sense.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, he also worked very small.

KENNETH NOLAND: Had to. [Cross talk.] No money in the '30s and the fact that the artists in the United States were dispersed. They weren't together.

AVIS BERMAN: And also he lived sort of this weird life and he was always away from the center. I think he wanted to be. I don't think he was a city person. It was just his life was, his lifeline was Stieglitz, letters to Stieglitz.

KENNETH NOLAND: He was a good photographer, I think. If I remember. He took some good photographs, I think.

AVIS BERMAN: I don't know.

KENNETH NOLAND: He was a wonderful artist.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative], in using COR-TEN steel, which rusts, which has a surface in which different colors and things and tones happen on them, did you think of the surface as pictorial?

KENNETH NOLAND: No, not any more than I would think of one of those centers. No. As a field?

AVIS BERMAN: No, as a pictorial kind of surface.

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, that raises another point. I can go to another point. What kept sculpture back from developing as an abstract art was that sculpture could only be seen as a three dimensional with volume. You had to see around it. That was like a prerequisite for sculptors to make sculpture, that you could see around it. They thought that was like a natural law, but it took painting to get more abstract so that sculpture could be seen as a thing in itself. Like a painting as an object, you see sculpture like an object in the same terms. David Smith and Gonzales and Picasso influence. Gonzales did the same kind of thing but it was really Gonzales and David Smith that began to make, say, a small piece of sculpture for you to be able to see it the same way you'd look at a small picture.

AVIS BERMAN: Does Noguchi fit in here at all?

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, he had nothing to do with that.

AVIS BERMAN: No, well, but in making the art as an object? I mean, obviously his materials were different.

KENNETH NOLAND: But he made, I don't mean object, I mean object in the sense of the painting as an object, circumscribed.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, I see what you mean. No, his are always—

KENNETH NOLAND: Yes, unity of effects.

AVIS BERMAN: So it was actually, it was Noguchi, I was reading that he didn't like COR-TEN steel because he thought that the surfaces it would be like painting because the surfaces could become so different. He thought it was too pictorial.

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, therefore, it should be three-dimensional. I mean it should have—but paintings are three-dimensional, too. It took spreading painting and opening the shape limits of painting into field painting, in a way, or into large spaces of painting and lateral incident to make it possible to come back down and make the shapes pictures—this is hard to say. I can't follow up.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.

KENNETH NOLAND: We won't go off there.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, I can't tell this myself, but do you think that your sculpture looks like it came from a painter? I can't tell. I'm just throwing it utterly open to you.

KN: Well, I'd say, yes, a contemporary painter. Just like Matisse's sculpture looked like it came from a painter. Renoir's sculpture looked like it was a painter's sculpture. [Cross talk.] Painters have always been good sculptors. Sculptors have not necessarily been good painters.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, is there something in common that makes something a painter's sculpture?

KENNETH NOLAND: Probably. [Laughs.]

AVIS BERMAN: Know what it is? [Laughs.]

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, what with that digression I was getting ready to make we could have gotten into that but it's too complicated to go into.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. When you say, when the beginning with the circles, your art was in a sense a criticism of some illusion and symbolism and all. What do you think that your painting as it has gone on, what it criticizes or what it questions? I guess some of the important questions it asks.

KENNETH NOLAND: It would be presumptuous of me to say. I know that a work of art has to be about associations that come from some other source than the kind of, in a way, kinetic perception of a work of art. In other words, how the color, shaping, proportions, quantities cause a kind of energetic reaction. Again, that would be something maybe like looking at something beautiful or something that's not beautiful, expressive to look at, like another person.

AVIS BERMAN: You are obviously an advanced painter. You were part of the continuation of the, say, the avant-garde tradition. Do you think that we have an avant-garde anymore or can we have an avant-garde?

MR. NOLAND: I think that the avant-garde, as we define it, is being continually captured by an economy, by a consumer need to assimilate any kind of new expression into a form of consumption and entertainment. It drives the creative person, I think, a real creative person, into a resistance against those characteristics of the avant-garde that have been captured by a consumer, entertainment activity. In a way, it's driven the character of a kind of an original, expressive impulse to resist a certain thing that goes over that readily, and therefore it's causing the best artists to become in a way more elegant, rather than rougher appearing, which is not really rough, which is acceptable. But elegance and a kind of fineness of expression is not something that people want to be reminded of because the appetite is voracious now for something that can be consumed readily.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, it's also very strange that what is consumed, is if people are taking risks, then they don't become risks any more.

KENNETH NOLAND: They're not risks, no. They're taking a risk of their sensibilities, though, if you ask me.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, I guess now I'm confused as to who "they" are.

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, "they" being artists that are successful in these very same terms, that are producing the kind of art that is readily gotten and that's entertainment and its entertainment nature is very quickly exhausted. Although, I think that the best of the artists that are successful still have a character of expression in their work that is sentimental and nostalgic and harks back to a longing for a kind of quality. I find that there's a residual of that but it comes out as a sentimental quality and a kind of nostalgic quality for something that is not really being gotten out of the work.

AVIS BERMAN: Sometimes I see the sentimental quality in the so-called dumb art, when things are sort of, figures childishly painted., or something.

KENNETH NOLAND: Kind of like that.

AVIS BERMAN: Who are some of the other artists, younger or not, that you do admire? That you find elegant, that you would say you find interesting?

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, it depends on how far back young you mean.

AVIS BERMAN: I don't know if we want to say people exactly of your generation, but maybe—

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, Darby Bannard and Larry Poons, obviously. Some of the sculptors: Jim Wolfe, Mike Steiner, my son Bill Noland. Some of the younger painters like Darryl Hughto, Roy Lerner, Stewart Waltzer, Mike Williams, and others. But there are some whose work I like.

AVIS BERMAN: Well none of them would be what one might put under the postmodern rubric?

KENNETH NOLAND: Now, I can't say that I think very much of those artists. Let's see, the one that does those kind of stick figures.

AVIS BERMAN: The upside down-ones, you mean Baselitz?

KENNETH NOLAND: Who?

AVIS BERMAN: You mean, Baselitz, the upside down?

KENNETH NOLAND: No, no. Not him.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, Keith Haring?

KENNETH NOLAND: Keith Haring. I kind of like what he does, I don't mind his painting, his art very much. I don't particularly like it so much, but there's something in it. I like the fact he's interested in children. He doesn't mind doing commercial works or whatever. There's something kind of free and loose in Keith Haring that I like. I kind of like that guy that was around a few—you don't see him so much, that was painting those black silhouette figures on the corners.

AVIS BERMAN: You're not talking about Borofsky doing the sculptures?

KENNETH NOLAND: No, no. He just used black paint and he went all over New York and other cities painting black silhouettes on figures.

AVIS BERMAN: Of course, now Haring did some of that, but it wasn't Basquiat that you're talking about?

KENNETH NOLAND: No. I think his name starts with an H. He painted those black, he just took black paint and painted these funny, kind of wild-looking black figures on the sides of walls all over the city.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, I think that was a real good anti-art gesture—

KENNETH NOLAND: But he had something—laughs—something kind of free and kind of—

AVIS BERMAN: Another thing that maybe we're getting to is that you served a long apprenticeship, you did a lot of different things, but by the time you got to the kind of painting that you began to be satisfied with you had a certain mastery. I don't know if the concept of mastery is an old-fashioned one anymore.

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, it was by necessity, for the very simple reason that I couldn't paint anything that I had enough conviction about to keep painting. So I had to flounder around for a long time. The younger artists have

more available education. There are art schools all over and they get good educations and they learn how to paint very well. You can't fault successful artists on the basis of not being able to paint well. They paint well, they paint, Schnabel and a lot of other artists, they paint, they can paint. Almost any successful artist you know paints well. The problem doesn't lie there. It's other places.

AVIS BERMAN: I was thinking more of the mental or spiritual seasoning and I didn't mean being poor first, but I don't know, there's a kind of a.

KENNETH NOLAND: I don't know that that, there are a lot of temptations and there are a lot of influences. Everybody's influenced and what you're influenced by can lead you, lead you in a lot of different directions. That's where an artist's sensibility, a person's sensibility comes in. What they'll get interested in. What they won't get interested in. What they're just not interested in. What moves you. So you're first of all a perceiver and then an artist.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you've been working, you have gone out of your way to try to invent formats, to look for something that was your own, that no one else.

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, that interested me.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, well I was curious, and then in terms of postmodernism, do you find it annoying or do you resent these people who just quote rather shamelessly?

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, the idea of modernism had been around a long time. And then, I guess the history of the concept of modernism had began to be a historical study and it was found by a younger generation of, I think, first of all, architects under the influence of art. Under the influence precisely of Pop Art and Minimal art saw that as a way of releasing some of their creative energies. They needed, in a way, to knock out the principles of modernism in order to, in a way, in a way also to be part of the economy, the growth of production, of modern production; the stylizing of automobiles; things that they'd been influenced like as they were growing up, like Walt Disney, comic books, early television. This was what was the education, the visual and emotional kind of education they were getting. I think it came out of all that. It in a way threw over modernism, but it also threw over some of the principles, the main principles of modernism, the best principles of modernism, which was economy, efficiency, purity, a minimum use of technology. Some activities that were going on that in essence should have made the economy change and become more efficient, but didn't because science outstripped that kind of impulse in terms of making available a surplus of technology, a surplus of materials that could be used, a kind of a waste economy that things could be used and thrown away, except you can't throw them away, right? So, again, going back to the consumer economy problem.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you think an artist has either a moral or an aesthetic duty to try to find something original of his or her own, to really to search in a certain, in a way that the Post-Modernist, the appropriationists purposely aren't doing?

KENNETH NOLAND: Well, I think that every person, and I think that we should raise children so that people become, people that don't get disassociated in terms of their own take, their own senses, where their own senses of their own perceptions doesn't come first. Where they go along and become consumers rather than people who react to things that they are consuming.

AVIS BERMAN: Has there ever been a generation before where artists were such consumers, too, along with the rest of the population?

KENNETH NOLAND: I imagine so. Artists have always have had to, including today, have had to depend on patronage and it's true today, too. It can be big companies or it can be individual collectors. It can be dealers, et cetera, et cetera. So that's something that you have to think about. After all, there were court painters and there was Rubens and there was Velasquez and the rest of them.

AVIS BERMAN: But they were the exceptions. Usually the best artists at the time were not the court painters. They were sort of the exceptions as court painters.

KENNETH NOLAND: Some, but they weren't the exception, only.

AVIS BERMAN: Of course, Van Dyck was a court painter.

KENNETH NOLAND: Even like in music. I still like to go back to Haydn and Mozart and Beethoven because it's so well documented and there's a lot of letters and there's a lot of information about it, and how they coped with, how they managed to become the great composers that they were. But, they didn't lose sight of their taste and their perceptions and of their interest from one to the other to the other. They were all very aware of each other.

AVIS BERMAN: But generally, historically, artists, the greatest artists were not alienated from their society until of course, famously, [Cross talk.] Delacroix and Manet began the real—

[END OF TRACK AAA_noland87_5840.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]