



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Karen  
Karnes, 1971 Oct. 4

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Karen Karnes on October 4, 1971. The interview took place in Stony Point, New York, and was conducted by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The original transcript was edited. In 2023 the Archives retranscribed the original audio and attempted to create a verbatim 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

[00:00:05.49]

PAUL CUMMINGS: So, it's the 4th of October, 1971, Paul Cummings talking to Karen Karnes in her house in Stony Point. Okay. It's very hard finding out about you, actually. [Laughs.]

[00:00:19.68]

KAREN KARNES: Really? We've been talking for two hours.

[00:00:22.83]

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, I mean statistics, and reference books and things like that.

[00:00:26.04]

KAREN KARNES: Not many references.

[00:00:27.69]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, that's something we'll solve. Could we just start—you know, give me some idea of where you were born.

[00:00:37.30]

KAREN KARNES: Born in New York City, in 1925, to immigrant parents, and raised in the city. I went to—first in Brooklyn. No, the Bronx, I think, and then went to the High School of Music and Art with an art interest right from the beginning—I mean, in painting. No artists in my background, in my family, anyway, really. They were working-class people. And I never had heard of any art interests.

[00:01:08.90]

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think got you interested?

[00:01:11.39]

KAREN KARNES: I don't—I think it was just some natural—

[00:01:15.11]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Inclination.

[00:01:16.16]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah, because, I mean, I suppose most children sort of start drawing and painting, and some stay with it, and some don't. And—

[00:01:22.79]

PAUL CUMMINGS: You stayed with it. [Laughs.]

[00:01:23.80]

KAREN KARNES: It seems to me that's all that I was doing as a child.

[00:01:27.08]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, did you—

[00:01:28.22]

KAREN KARNES: Not classes—I mean, maybe, but not teachers, not as a child, so much, just did a lot of drawing.

[00:01:33.23]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Did your parents approve or disapprove?

[00:01:36.10]

KAREN KARNES: Yes. They were always supportive in anything. But they weren't against it at all. I don't think they ever thought I would become anything [they laugh], any kind of professional.

[00:01:48.74]

PAUL CUMMINGS: When she grows up, she'll know better.

[00:01:50.21]

KAREN KARNES: When she grows up, she'll get married and have a family. [They laugh.] She'll be all right. No.

[00:01:56.45]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well—

[00:01:57.17]

KAREN KARNES: But I think the High School of Music and Art was the first—

[00:02:00.05]

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you select that—

[00:02:01.34]

KAREN KARNES: —training.

[00:02:01.67]

PAUL CUMMINGS: —school?

[00:02:02.18]

KAREN KARNES: Well, my mother tells the story. I had been going in the Bronx to a rapid advance of junior high. And she now tells me—has a good story of a past, that when I was 11 years old, I heard about it, went down to the High School of Music and Art, found out how to apply, came home, and announced that I was applying, and sort of did it all very independently.

[00:02:23.88]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:02:25.32]

KAREN KARNES: But I was a very independent child because, my mother worked always. So we were little city children who were raised with keys around their necks.

[00:02:33.69]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Other brothers and sisters or—

[00:02:34.95]

KAREN KARNES: One brother, five years older.

[00:02:36.69]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:02:37.47]

KAREN KARNES: That's all.

[00:02:38.31]

PAUL CUMMINGS: And he didn't get involved in the art culture—

[00:02:41.31]

KAREN KARNES: No, not at all.

[00:02:42.45]

PAUL CUMMINGS: —world?

[00:02:43.23]

KAREN KARNES: No. No, it just was never thought of. I just sort of did it. It was just the thing to do.

[00:02:51.84]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what was it like growing up in New York? Because this was—

[00:02:54.75]

KAREN KARNES: Well, in those years, it was fine.

[00:02:56.34]

PAUL CUMMINGS: —through the '30s and—

[00:02:58.86]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah. Well, we lived in the Bronx, on the borders of Bronx Park.

[00:03:02.40]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:03:03.42]

KAREN KARNES: And it was, I think, totally different from now. It really was a safe place, at least we thought it. My mother was working and didn't come home until five or six [p.m.]

[00:03:14.00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:03:14.40]

KAREN KARNES: So that means that the children were all on the streets, not just me, but lots of other working-class children. And we went—I remember going—we went to the museums all the time. I mean, it was marvelous.

[00:03:26.24]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. It was fun.

[00:03:27.42]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah, well, really, we just went, and went to the Metropolitan and just—we sort of just used the city all the time.

[00:03:33.90]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you have any memories of the Depression, though, because that was —

[00:03:36.88]

KAREN KARNES: No, I think I was a little too young for that. It was '25. The Depression—

[00:03:45.24]

PAUL CUMMINGS: But still—

[00:03:46.20]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah, but it was—

[00:03:47.22]

PAUL CUMMINGS: —tagging on the end of the '30s.

[00:03:48.09]

KAREN KARNES: They were both working, you see.

[00:03:49.63]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

[00:03:50.55]

KAREN KARNES: Since they were both garment workers, and since they both worked, we weren't really hungry. We were poor, but it was all right. And that's the difference. I mean, for the Depression, if there were one parent earning, then I think it was much harder.

[00:04:06.32]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, did you have an interest in reading, or music or—

[00:04:16.33]

KAREN KARNES: Reading, not music so much, but reading.

[00:04:18.23]

PAUL CUMMINGS: No?

[00:04:18.52]

KAREN KARNES: All I did was read and draw.

[00:04:20.11]

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of things did you read?

[00:04:23.67]

KAREN KARNES: Boy, let me sort of start in the library and go from here straight through—  
[They laugh.]

[00:04:28.43]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Down one wall and up the other.

[00:04:30.52]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah, well, Dostoevsky and [inaudible], Tolstoy, and really, heavy things and light things. And just—I remember, literally, because it was a small library, sort of start, and you sort of just read your way—

[00:04:42.54]

PAUL CUMMINGS: One after the other.

[00:04:43.33]

KAREN KARNES: —and walk to school holding the book.

[00:04:45.37]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was that a public library, then?

[00:04:46.90]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah.

[00:04:47.32]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:04:48.55]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah, there was a little local one, and a bigger one.

[00:04:53.23]

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about Music and Art? This is getting into a group of—

[00:04:57.41]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah.

[00:04:58.15]

PAUL CUMMINGS: —busy children who had a sense of direction at that age.

[00:05:01.30]

KAREN KARNES: It's then when I started high school. Then we moved to Brooklyn. But still, it was always over an hour trip just to school on the subways. We'd all meet on the subway, and ride out.

[00:05:13.24]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where was Music and Art then?

[00:05:15.01]

KAREN KARNES: Same place, 135th Street or something, and St. Nicholas Avenue. I think it must still be up there, next to City College.

[00:05:22.45]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, right, right.

[00:05:23.41]

KAREN KARNES: I don't think they've moved it. I think they're going to.

[00:05:25.42]

PAUL CUMMINGS: A part of it used to be someplace else. [Telephone rings.]

[00:05:26.32]

KAREN KARNES: Right in the middle of Harlem. I think I would say that Music and Art was a very classical painting course then—no crafts at all, no clay, no weaving, so that I didn't even know anything about clay until I was about 23.

[00:05:48.04]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:05:49.42]

KAREN KARNES: And what we really did was absolutely—well, classical, in that sense, although we did drawing, and drawing from the model and painting and painting still-lives. And it was all right, and I did well. But it wasn't really—it wasn't really—I think they must have been interested in turning out painters, I guess. I don't quite know.

[00:06:11.78]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you remember any of your instructors?

[00:06:13.76]

KAREN KARNES: There was only—what's his name? There was like one man that I really liked in my senior year. I won't remember his name. And he was the architecture teacher.

[00:06:27.11]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:06:27.41]

KAREN KARNES: And I somehow just took a class with him, and I thought that was—because the painting, I really was not going to be a painter, though I had been drawing and painting all the time, by that time.

[00:06:38.76]

PAUL CUMMINGS: You figured out—

[00:06:39.56]

KAREN KARNES: That was not what was my feeling about things. And everybody else in the class seemed to be much more turned and tuned to painting. I mean, I don't think—I did well enough, but I was not one of the best students, because it wasn't—I mean, I should have had a different kind of training. In fact, I would say that they left big holes in what they were giving. They weren't really working with materials. They were working much more with line. They were working with materials in term of paint, but more drawing, which maybe is useful. I mean, one can't even question it. Perhaps it has made a difference now that I did that then. But at that time, it wasn't that much. I don't remember his name. Maybe it will come back to me.

[00:07:21.50]

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about other academic subjects?

[00:07:23.30]

KAREN KARNES: Well, they had—

[00:07:23.42]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were there things that interested you particularly, though?

[00:07:26.45]

KAREN KARNES: No, just the general things. But I wouldn't—couldn't remember. Art really always seemed very much a dominating thing, though the music and art background was everything. You took all the regular subjects, as well as the art. It was kind of a heavy course.

[00:07:47.89]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:07:49.90]

KAREN KARNES: I think adolescence was just a hard time.

[00:07:52.55]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Did you like the students there?

[00:07:54.43]

KAREN KARNES: I had some friends.

[00:07:55.63]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:07:56.41]

KAREN KARNES: But I think that the young people going to a travel-away school, it makes social things difficult.

[00:08:03.46]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Because they all live in different places.

[00:08:04.85]

KAREN KARNES: They live so far away, and then their days are so long. We sort of finished, get home by six o'clock. But there wasn't much kind of friendship outside of the school, at least not for me. I think there were groups that were more integrated in that, and sort of had social activities. But I think that's what probably hurt the kind of life, whereas in a local—in a kind of a neighborhood school—

[00:08:28.30]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

[00:08:28.42]

KAREN KARNES: —I think the children had more of a sense of friendship.

[00:08:32.04]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Community, too.

[00:08:33.59]

KAREN KARNES: Though, there were people there who had—because I've met people at Music and Art afterwards—like, the popular kids, and I wasn't one of those. [They laugh.] I mean, every school, there's one little group of people who sort of do things—

[00:08:44.81]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Stars, or something.

[00:08:45.83]

KAREN KARNES: I was not a star. But let me tell you, interjecting, I went back to a class reunion. It was at least 20 years later.



[00:08:57.26]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:08:57.77]

KAREN KARNES: Yes, it must have been the 20th reunion, because I graduated in '42. So it must have been in '62.

[00:09:04.24]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:09:05.06]

KAREN KARNES: '42, yes, '62. And with all—I mean, I had gone through high school thinking that I was really the low man and everybody else was going to be some great person and some great artist. And unfortunately, it turned out that I was the one star of the whole class. [They laugh.] Ooh, nobody's going to read this. [They laugh.] It wasn't a very modest thing to say.

[00:09:29.12]

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's real. It's real. [They laugh.]

[00:09:32.21]

KAREN KARNES: I was so disappointed, though, because I had thought during high school, well, you just don't know. You see all the others are the painters, and this and that, they would be some great painter.

[00:09:40.70]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:09:41.57]

KAREN KARNES: Now, Elias Friedensohn, he's a painter. And he was in my class, and he has exhibited—

[00:09:46.97]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

[00:09:47.96]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah. Do you know him?

[00:09:50.27]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, I have a friend who went to school with him.

[00:09:52.64]

KAREN KARNES: Well, he was in my class, and he has done some painting.

[00:09:56.01]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:09:56.61]

KAREN KARNES: The others didn't end up as painters. That's what I mean. I mean, if they had gone into art—but he and I had been the only people that had gone into art. And then, in music, there was one—I don't remember his name, but somebody who had become a very important showtune writer, like Gershwin—not Gershwin, but that kind of thing.

[00:10:14.50]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:10:15.27]

KAREN KARNES: There didn't seem to be any—at least nobody knew of anybody who'd done serious music. And that looked like not such a hot class if, out of that whole group, there'd be just two of us. It's just an aside. And I wouldn't even have known that if I hadn't happened to have been persuaded to go to that terrible reunion. [They laugh.] Don't ever do that.

[00:10:35.41]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how did you select Brooklyn College, when that came along?

[00:10:39.54]

KAREN KARNES: Just automatic, because I lived in Brooklyn by then. And we were poor people, and Brooklyn College was free, and I could walk to Brooklyn College, and it was the war years.

[00:10:48.30]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Right.

[00:10:48.96]

KAREN KARNES: '42 to '46, you know.

[00:10:51.73]

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it worked.

[00:10:52.08]

KAREN KARNES: I mean, a young—call me—a poor child of working-class parents didn't go anyplace except City College.

[00:10:59.85]

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it was handy.

[00:11:01.56]

KAREN KARNES: Which is handy. [Paul laughs.] And they happened to have an excellent design department. Serge Chermayeff was the head of that, at that time.

[00:11:10.50]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But what did you go there for? I mean, did you have a particular reason or majors?

[00:11:16.06]

KAREN KARNES: Oh, I just think that's what you—well, design. I was going to just take an art course, just keep—

[00:11:20.85]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Continue, yeah.

[00:11:23.26]

KAREN KARNES: And they had a very good department with them.

[00:11:27.15]

PAUL CUMMINGS: But were you interested in, Fine Arts, or Industrial Design, or—?

[00:11:29.79]

KAREN KARNES: Yes, still, well, I would have said at that point it might have been architecture. It was architecture, kind of like this high school teacher. And then Chermayeff also kept steering me into architecture during my schooling.

[00:11:45.42]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Oh, really?

[00:11:47.25]

KAREN KARNES: Well, he liked me very much, very much. If I name important influences, he really was most helpful and influential in my whole, like, 10 years— those early years, the one person who was very encouraging and helpful. And I think that he did sort of groom me towards architecture. But luckily, it didn't turn out too well [Paul laughs] because even in Brooklyn, they had a kind of a Bauhaus kind of course—

[00:12:18.21]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

[00:12:18.90]

KAREN KARNES: —which was very nice. I mean, I think that's the kind of—that should have been mixed into the high school level in with the fine arts.

[00:12:26.76]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Start it earlier.

[00:12:27.75]

KAREN KARNES: It would have been very good. And I imagine that Music and Art has changed now. And I bet that they have something more with materials.

[00:12:34.59]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, did you find the Brooklyn College was a very different aggregation of students than—

[00:12:40.92]

KAREN KARNES: Well, yes, I liked it. But I think probably it's also—I mean, at 17, I suddenly felt like a person. And that's when I went into high school. I mean, I think so much of your experiences are reflections of what you are at your adolescent years.

[00:12:56.79]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, right. Yeah, right.

[00:12:57.36]

KAREN KARNES: And at college, I suddenly felt very good. And college was very good.

[00:13:01.32]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:13:02.82]

KAREN KARNES: And the Brooklyn course was fun, and—

[00:13:06.42]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were there specific instructors that you remember offhand?

[00:13:10.83]

KAREN KARNES: Oh, yes. Kepes was one of our teachers, and Robert Wolfe, photography,

and Shavinsky and Balet, marvelous art historian. And—oh, I see some faces. I don't remember the name.

[00:13:28.90]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:13:29.86]

KAREN KARNES: But it was very good because he really, at that time, was just starting—I mean, I don't think Chermayeff had been there more than about two years. See, from there, he went to the Art Institute—

[00:13:41.17]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Of the Institute of Design—

[00:13:42.34]

KAREN KARNES: The Institute of Design—

[00:13:42.94]

PAUL CUMMINGS: In Chicago, right.

[00:13:43.78]

KAREN KARNES: —from Brooklyn. But those were his years that he was forming his department at Brooklyn.

[00:13:48.76]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, he couldn't have been there much after that, right?

[00:13:52.51]

KAREN KARNES: No, no. It was from '42 to '47, I think. And I graduated in '46. Probably a year after I left, he left, and maybe almost—maybe the next two years. But he had a strong department, very interesting, with all these people, I mean, people like Kepes—

[00:14:10.03]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Wolfe.

[00:14:10.84]

KAREN KARNES: And Wolfe. Just marvelous place. I took photography, and—

[00:14:15.63]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think that all of those things have influenced the way you're working now?

[00:14:19.80]

KAREN KARNES: I'm sure they must. I'm sure they must.

[00:14:20.94]

PAUL CUMMINGS: But no direct lines.

[00:14:22.71]

KAREN KARNES: No, one doesn't know because I still will say the same criticism. I didn't have any clay there.

[00:14:27.87]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:14:27.99]

KAREN KARNES: And I didn't have any weaving, and they still were not working in crafts at all. They really weren't. And they still were working more abstractly with materials, but not all the materials.

[00:14:41.58]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:14:42.03]

KAREN KARNES: Why didn't they also have clay and thread and—and they could have had metal crafts. They didn't think like that. They still were—but I think—well, the Bauhaus had weaving, of course, with Albers.

[00:14:55.89]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

[00:14:56.46]

KAREN KARNES: But I don't think they cared for clay. They didn't really have clay. Well, of course, Wildenhain came from Bauhaus. But I don't know what they did there. But anyway, Brooklyn didn't have any of those materials.

[00:15:07.59]

PAUL CUMMINGS: No. Well, since it was the war years and everything, did you have other outside activities, or were you fairly well involved with—

[00:15:17.56]

KAREN KARNES: Pretty much school.

[00:15:18.35]

PAUL CUMMINGS: —school? Yeah.

[00:15:19.42]

KAREN KARNES: Pretty much in school. Yeah.

[00:15:23.63]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you still—or did you have a sense of what you wanted to do? Did you want to teach or something?

[00:15:28.81]

KAREN KARNES: Not clearly, no, not teach. No, I never wanted to teach.

[00:15:31.34]

PAUL CUMMINGS: No.

[00:15:32.75]

KAREN KARNES: And all during the course, I wasn't sure. But I really was kind of moving towards architecture, kind of. But I think it's because the way Chermayeff did architecture, we worked with colored squares and moved things around.

[00:15:47.80]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:15:49.20]

KAREN KARNES: We weren't drawing so much. [They laugh.] It was like moving materials

around, which could be like Albers' collages. But we didn't do collage, which we should have. We did a little bit, maybe, but not as much as we should.

[00:16:00.44]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:16:02.37]

KAREN KARNES: So I think that I thought of space. I thought architecture was kind of space, and arrangements of things, more like sculpture than architecture really would be, because most young architects become draftsmen, though I didn't mind drafting either. That was fun. I didn't mind drawing with lines. The precision of the craft was all right, too.

[00:16:25.38]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you like that aspect of architecture, the drawing?

[00:16:29.02]

KAREN KARNES: We didn't do much of it, but I didn't mind that. That seemed like fun, too. But it still wasn't clear. And then I almost might have gone to Harvard, because Chermayeff was encouraging that, and gone to architecture school. But I think, just by luck, I didn't. And some of it is chance. Though, these things are not just chance, are they? Because I met David Weinrib at Brooklyn. He started at Brooklyn a year ahead of me when I came in. He was a sophomore. And we were, you know, girlfriend and boyfriend.

And then he left school and went to Alfred University to study clay. And I can remember when he came and told me he was leaving Brooklyn and going to Alfred to study clay. I said, "Clay? [Laughs.] What's that?" [They laugh.] I mean, really, as if you'd said, I'm going—because he was an art person also and had always been interested in painting.

[00:17:28.46]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:17:30.60]

KAREN KARNES: And he really—I don't know that he was interested in clay, because he had never worked with clay. And clay was quite mysterious and unknown at that time. But it was a state school, and it was practically free, and it was away from home. And it just had all these other—

[00:17:48.27]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Facets.

[00:17:49.08]

KAREN KARNES: —elements. And he might have been interested in clay, too. And I certainly wouldn't at this point say that he wasn't.

[00:17:53.58]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:17:55.05]

KAREN KARNES: But he went up there, and went into clay. And then we separated, and sort of didn't really see each other for a few years. Then when we met—after I graduated, a year later, we met again. And he had—I mean, I had sort of kept a little contact with him, but we were no longer together. But I met him again, and he was teaching at the Newark School of Fine Industrial Art.

[00:18:21.30]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:18:22.38]

KAREN KARNES: And he was doing a little bit of pottery teaching. And we met, and began living together, and got married. And he was also working at—I mean, this was about five years later, after graduating from school. This was about—I was about 23, 22, by then, or 21, 22. And he was working in Pennsylvania at Design Techniques.

[00:18:49.97]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's right.

[00:18:50.73]

KAREN KARNES: That's a factory. So the summer I went up there, we lived in a tent, and I began working in clay. And that was really the start.

[00:19:01.56]

PAUL CUMMINGS: What year was that, do you think?

[00:19:04.26]

KAREN KARNES: '49, maybe, something like that, '48, '49, '48, '49.

[00:19:10.35]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:19:12.18]

KAREN KARNES: And the people at the factory let me work in the factory, so that I had a job and did some production spraying. They made lamp bases. And they also let me do a little modeling on the side, and I designed some objects—flower containers with candles. And I began hand—like, making press mold as the first—modeling a form and making a press mold from the form, and pressing it in. And then I designed what turned out later to be a most revolting series of lamp bases. But they bought the designs for \$25 apiece. [They laugh.] Then they turned them into production. They made cast iron bases out of it. They were kind of Arp-like—Arp-like forms that were adapted to lamp bases.

[00:20:04.71]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, what did you do between leaving college and this? How much time—

[00:20:08.14]

KAREN KARNES: Those were sort of funny lost years. I married somebody, and it was a mistake. And I didn't do anything. I just kind of wasted my time.

[00:20:16.84]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Wandered around, too?

[00:20:17.86]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah, just lived. Really a funny time. But that kind of kept me from going to Harvard—marrying this man. But I don't think the impulse was—really, it wasn't clear. It wasn't really clear. I wasn't really sure. I hadn't really found my material. And architecture was—

[00:20:41.67]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was not it.

[00:20:42.46]

KAREN KARNES: —the thing. Even though it was on the edge of being it, it really wasn't. But clay, as soon as I took it, I took that lump up into our tent, and began modeling the first

forms on the tent. It was just it. And I had never—I mean, I think it's extraordinary to have gone through so many years of art school.

[00:21:04.48]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And never—

[00:21:05.17]

KAREN KARNES: And just think. Was that eight years of good art education, and never been given any clay?

[00:21:14.47]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's possible.

[00:21:15.55]

KAREN KARNES: Yes, though I don't think it's possible anymore. But in those days, it was possible. It's changed. I'm sure they must have clay.

[00:21:24.07]

PAUL CUMMINGS: You get into everything now—plastics.

[00:21:26.41]

KAREN KARNES: I'm sure they do.

[00:21:27.40]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:21:28.57]

KAREN KARNES: Well, we had reeds, and plastics we had on paper. We had all kinds of things, but not clay. And clay just happened to really be my material. Then we went to Italy. We only stayed in Pennsylvania.

[00:21:41.53]

PAUL CUMMINGS: For how long?

[00:21:42.88]

KAREN KARNES: Well, it must have been '48 and '49, something like that, because we went to Italy for '49 to '50.

[00:21:52.39]

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did that come about that you went there? What was the idea?

[00:21:58.54]

KAREN KARNES: Well, David wanted to—he really wanted to leave clay, though he did make some very interesting things at this Design Techniques. And he wanted to be a painter. So he wanted to go to Florence and study a kind of a really classical painting course. So that's what we did. And then I thought, well, I could begin learning to study pottery. So we went to Florence on some money that he had saved, and sort of wedding gifts, and things like that. We lived very inexpensively for a year and a half, though. And he studied at the art school. He went in every day to Florence, and we lived in a village outside of Florence, in a pottery village.

[00:22:47.13]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Which one is that?

[00:22:47.88]



KAREN KARNES: Sesto Fiorentino. There's a Ginori factory there. And we had been told this by somebody, a man who'd worked at the factory with us, who had worked in Sesto Fiorentino. Before the war. And that's how we found it. Nobody would even—I mean, we didn't go to Fiesole. But we always went to where nobody else goes. But it was perfect. I mean, it was a perfect choice, because this Ginori factory has a school for training of children in Sesto Fiorentino.

[00:23:19.54]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

[00:23:20.47]

KAREN KARNES: And they train the youngsters. I guess when they must be about 12, or something, maybe even 10, they go into the factory and work into the school, and work there for three or four years and then become apprentices in the factory. So they teach them throwing, and decorating, and everything. And it's just like a trade school. It's a training for the factory. And foreigners could come in and, for nothing, really work there. And there was a man called Ciopola [ph]. He was a small, Southern Italian man who was the throwing master. And I learned a little Italian, but I didn't have very much Italian. But I learned enough throwing just watching him for a while. And then we set up in the—we rented an apartment in town and set up a little shop there—had a big wheel made. And I stayed home.

[00:24:13.97]

After a while, I didn't really go back to the school. I just went for a bit, and learned at the beginning, but then just worked at home, because it was full of children and it was—you know, he couldn't teach me anything about aesthetics. All he could do was show me how—the basic things, and you can pick that up very quickly.

[00:24:31.45]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But that was your first formal introduction.

[00:24:34.21]

KAREN KARNES: First formal, watching him throw on the wheel. But, of course, all those times, David was there. And he had had training. So I mean, it's not as if I learned everything by myself because he was always there with advice—not that he knew that much because I very quickly learned to throw much better than he had ever thrown. So he kind of moved into tile and other ways of working. He was always more interested in decoration, than—at least in those days, before he began doing his slab things. So sometimes, I threw things for him, and he decorated.

[00:25:11.35]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:25:12.56]

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

[00:25:13.09]

KAREN KARNES: But we just took the pots to a local—because David was making pots, too—took it to a local factory. And they fired them for us.

[00:25:21.61]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Was that Ginori or another one?

[00:25:23.26]

KAREN KARNES: No, a little one. I don't know the name of it. But the people were just pleased to have young Americans. And a young American woman, making pots was really—

[00:25:34.84]

PAUL CUMMINGS: No experience.

[00:25:35.11]

KAREN KARNES: —they didn't understand. [Paul laughs.] They loved it. I think it was like an honor for them to have—well, it was a Communist town, but they accepted us completely. And they really liked us, and we had a very nice human experience there. So we'd carry our pots to the factory, and we'd fire them. That was very good.

[00:25:58.72]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have a way of selling things then, or did they just—

[00:26:01.45]

KAREN KARNES: No, we didn't even sell—well, there was one—I think I sold a few things in some shop in Florence. But it was very much still, you know, student work. And selling wasn't the problem, because we'd come with money. So we didn't stay. We stayed a year and a half. We only stayed as long as our money lasted. You know, it wasn't necessary to really earn money. And then we took—we just really brought many of the pots home or gave them away when we came back.

[00:26:34.36]

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you have—Working in Italy, and having David's interest, did you develop a particular— Oh—

[00:26:45.30]

KAREN KARNES: That's my friend [inaudible]— [Recorder stops, restarts.]

[00:26:48.54]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what about, you know, ideas about colors, and shapes, and sizes, and things? Was there—

[00:26:59.64]

KAREN KARNES: I don't know. The Italian things were very peculiar at that period, very Baroque and very—there's one man that was a good one, with a "G." It may come back—because most of those things never came to this country. There was a big Italian show here at that time. There was kind of an Italian interest after the war.

[00:27:27.43]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:27:27.85]

KAREN KARNES: But so many of them were [inaudible], Fontani [ph]—I don't remember their names—but not at all. And I always was much more attracted or moved by Japanese things, and Chinese—

[00:27:43.47]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Than European.

[00:27:44.30]

KAREN KARNES: —or Korean. Yes, not European, and certainly not Italian. No, I think that we lived there quite outside of that aspect of the culture. And I wouldn't choose to go there to study pottery.

[00:27:56.59]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. It just happened that—

[00:27:57.85]

KAREN KARNES: It was a place to go, and it had a craft. And it was a sympathetic people. It was a lovely place to be. It was a very good place to be. But you wouldn't go there because you thought their pottery was very great.

[00:28:12.98]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, was David interested in Oriental pottery or more modern or European things?

[00:28:21.83]

KAREN KARNES: I don't think European. He had a very broad interest in Primitive, and Korean, and Peruvian, and sort of more of that, not European, I don't think.

[00:28:36.48]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why so few people interested in European? You start looking around, you really don't see—

[00:28:43.57]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah, because they're—well, like the European earthenware—well, I mean, English slipware, certain medieval is a strong, interesting thing. Then there's some French saltware that's very moving and very interesting. And then we actually visited Vallauris, where Picasso was working. And those things we liked. We even bought a piece—some of the things—because Picasso was working in clay at that time, and doing kind of bird-like forms that were put together. And those were good. I mean, we liked those, but certainly not 18th- and 19th-century European, and all those styles.

[00:29:28.93]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, decadent.

[00:29:30.43]

KAREN KARNES: Well, that kind of decorative thing. It doesn't have the same force as the more primitive Peruvian—not African clay so much, but just African things.

[00:29:45.19]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, have you studied the history, then, of pottery as you got in into it?

[00:29:49.67]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah, yeah, looked at books, and looked at museums, and been interested in the periods.

[00:29:54.34]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But never any formal?

[00:29:55.99]

KAREN KARNES: No, not formal, no, no. Although I did have a little more formal—can I move on from Italy?

[00:30:02.98]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Sure. [Laughs.]

[00:30:04.63]

KAREN KARNES: Because then we finished, and we were about to come back. We had finished our money. And then, when we came back to the States, it must have been '50. Then Chermayeff came into my life again because—I'd always kept in—well, it wasn't that much past my graduating, but I always sort of kept contact by writing letters, and keeping a human contact.

[00:30:27.49]

And I was kind of—we were looking for what to do next. And just by chance, he, Chermayeff, had seen Harder, Charles Harder, who was the head of the Alfred School, recently. And Harder had offered Chermayeff—Chermayeff was still at the Institute of Design, and he had offered him a fellowship at Alfred for one of his design students, just as an exchange. And when I wrote to Chermayeff about what I had been doing, and I had just gotten into clay, because I'd just been in clay for about a year, then he then offered me—even though I wasn't from the Institute of Design, but he recommended me to a potter. And we then went up to Alfred.

[00:31:11.65]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

[00:31:11.83]

KAREN KARNES: And I had a year of a graduate fellowship there. And David, who had never really completed his senior year—he had left Alfred before his senior year—then he went to school, too, and got his degree. And the fellowship, I think, was about \$1,500. And it was enough for us to live. Two people could live up there for \$1,500.

[00:31:36.67]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:31:36.76]

KAREN KARNES: I don't think you could do it nowadays. Maybe you could—something like that. So that was the—And I wanted to go to school because if you don't go to school, you think that you're missing something. But I guess I took chemistry course, and a glaze calculation course. So I suppose I did actually learn a little something. But it was more having another year, just a period of working, because Harder was very good to me. And I just really—I took these two courses, and then I could do just what I wanted. And I didn't do anything for my fellowship. He could have asked for help. I could have been asked to do lots of work. But I just made pots, and was there.

[00:32:22.58]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were those the only two formal classes you had?

[00:32:26.78]

KAREN KARNES: I think so. Yes, yes, because, otherwise—well, the school, I think, is—I know it's much more structured now. It was much looser then. And the new building was under construction, and we were all—the design department was in a little building. So everything was much looser.

[00:32:43.61]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Friendlier and easier.

[00:32:44.87]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah, it was marvelous. And I didn't study with Rhodes or the other teachers. I really was just under Harder, and I'd have a kiln, and bring him my things. And then he'd say three or four words, and I'd go out and work some more. And I'm sure he knew just what was happening. He just wanted me there working. And that's really all.

[00:33:04.94]

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it was a good private tutelage, almost.

[00:33:07.46]

KAREN KARNES: Marvelous, marvelous, marvelous.

[00:33:09.29]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:33:10.82]

KAREN KARNES: And then, the next thing was we heard—it was a two-year fellowship, and I would have gotten my master's at the end of that. But after our first year there, when the summer began coming around, then one of the graduate students had said, oh, she had heard—she had applied for a summer teaching job at Black Mountain College because they needed somebody for the summer. But she wasn't going to take it because all that it offered was room and board, and work, and then \$100—I think, because the summer tuition, they did pay something, too, either \$100 a month or \$75 a month, or something like that. And she didn't think that was enough money.

And David and I heard that, and we thought, oh, my God, you're going to give us room and board. [They laugh.] We'll go for nothing. So we wrote and applied for that, just a summer job. It was just a two-month job. And, again, Chermayeff helped me because he wrote—oh, I forgot to say, too, that when I graduated from Brooklyn College, I went down for one summer session at Black Mountain College, and worked with Albers.

[00:34:28.47]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

[00:34:29.34]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah, that was in '46. And that also—I mean, Chermayeff had said, oh, you really must go to Black Mountain College. But it was only a summer session, which was a very good course. But then I had been there, and knew that it was someplace that it would be good to go again.

[00:34:47.34]

PAUL CUMMINGS: And what was the summer session like? Were there many students there?

[00:34:50.31]

KAREN KARNES: Yes, summer sessions were always full, though, of course, in '46, it was still a prospering school. It was a good school. And what I did was really just take Albers' course. I mostly worked in the woodshop, built some furniture and things like that. And his course was the course that he gave for years and years, mostly collage and—very good courses, a marvelous teacher. So there, too, I'm sure that Chermayeff helped us get into the summer session at Black Mountain because we were nobody, applying from nothing without really degrees, or anything.

[00:35:31.58]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:35:32.87]

KAREN KARNES: And I'm sure that from his recommendation, they gave us the summer session. And then we went down, really, just for the summer. And we would have come back to Alfred, and finished our year and gotten degrees. We both would have had masters' then. But at the end of the summer, they invited us to stay. And there wasn't a doubt in our minds that we were not going to—I mean, because I hadn't gone to Alfred because I wanted a degree in the first place. I'd only gone there because I thought that [inaudible] there must be something I should be learning that I don't know.

[00:36:08.41]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:36:10.94]

KAREN KARNES: But were called "potters in residence" in Black Mountain. And that was just

a perfect growing time, just perfect.

[00:36:19.62]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But you were there about two and a half—

[00:36:21.18]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah, two years, I guess. Less than that. Two years. But—

[00:36:27.96]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have direct classes with students?

[00:36:30.51]

KAREN KARNES: Hardly, hardly, hardly.

[00:36:32.46]

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you work?

[00:36:35.04]

KAREN KARNES: We had—See, the studio was there. Bob Turner had built it. I guess there hadn't been any potter there, really, since Bob was there. So they wanted us to work in the studio, and run it. And the school was by then very poor. So they had no money. So they were not giving salaries to anybody, though I guess they were giving salaries against credit at some future time. But they gave us a place to live, and they gave us food.

And then we ran the studio, and we had to sell the pots and pay for the expenses of the studio, and then teach whoever wanted to study. And that was sort of, you know, the contribution. But there were just a few students who were there. I think we almost had no really serious students, because most of them were painters or writers, poets, with Olson. So for us during that time, it was such a good period, because you sort of didn't have to be concerned about selling but could start selling—

[00:37:41.81]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right.

[00:37:42.29]

KAREN KARNES: —and start making, and not have to worry about food. And it was very good development period.

[00:37:49.85]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how do you think that affected your work? Did it allow you to investigate lots of ideas?

[00:37:57.17]

KAREN KARNES: I think the main thing is that—Yes, that it sort of permits a young person to start working without being concerned about selling, that immediately.

[00:38:06.08]

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you have continuity and develop your skills and ideas.

[00:38:08.93]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah, without the worry of that kind of pressure.

[00:38:12.01]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:38:13.25]

KAREN KARNES: Though it happened that I have always been a potter, not a sculptor, so that I made pots right from the beginning. And that's what I wanted to make. And I also began selling them right away because in North Carolina, there's a Southern Highland Handicraft Guild that has shops and lots of outlets. And I was almost the first stoneware potter in that area. I wouldn't say I was the first one. I'm sure there must have been some others. But there weren't many.

Now there are many because Penland has many craftsmen around them. And Penland, North Carolina, is a craft school that has lots of craftsmen working there. And people have settled in the area, and they all have stoneware kilns. But in the early '50s, there were almost none. And the shop managers were just sympathetic—I mean, two ladies, and they absolutely loved my pots, and began selling them immediately. So even though I wasn't producing thousands of them, as soon as I began producing it, I was selling there, too.

[00:39:22.08]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Which was good, huh?

[00:39:23.43]

KAREN KARNES: It was very good. [Paul laughs.] It was very good. Well, it's good for the spirit, too.

[00:39:27.85]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Sure.

[00:39:28.71]

KAREN KARNES: But they were nice pots, too. I mean, I see some of the old ones that I made the second year. They were all right—sort of ghosts around in my mother's house, a few old pots.

[00:39:40.80]

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Oh, well, how did—you mentioned there was this craft guild or group. What did they have?

[00:39:48.75]

KAREN KARNES: Southern Highland Handicraft Guild. That's a craft guild in that Southern Mountain region, not just North Carolina, but all the Southern Highland Appalachia, in that area. I think it was formed originally to help Indigenous craftsmen, like the Native craftspeople. And that was weavers, and cornhusk dolls, and quiltmakers, really local mountain—those Southern Mountain people.

[00:40:16.20]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:40:16.65]

KAREN KARNES: And if you live in the area, then you could—if you passed a selection board, you could sell in the shops. And they took maybe a third of the selling. And they had shops. And anyways, it was a real kind of tourist area. They're still in existence, and it's a good thing.

[00:40:31.68]

PAUL CUMMINGS: They have many shops, or is it—

[00:40:33.05]

KAREN KARNES: They have about four. They have one in Asheville, and one in Tennessee, and then a few on the Skyline Drive.

[00:40:39.74]

PAUL CUMMINGS: So a lot of people get to see.

[00:40:41.39]

KAREN KARNES: Yes, people do, and they do sell nicely. And they don't have—now there are quite a lot of young craftsmen in that area. So they do have contemporary things. But they originally were made as traditional crafts.

[00:40:55.49]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Folk.

[00:40:55.88]

KAREN KARNES: For the folk people, for the mountain people.

[00:40:58.46]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:40:58.85]

KAREN KARNES: And there are some traditional potteries there that may not be there anymore, but Jugtown and some of the others. Earthenware pottery is there. So they sold there. And my things were never that strange that they couldn't fit right into that craft. I mean, they could be part of a traditional folk play thing, too, even though they're not folk things.

[00:41:24.27]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did you ever get interested in very far-out things or not?

[00:41:29.24]

KAREN KARNES: No, my far-out is that—

[00:41:31.95]

PAUL CUMMINGS: The fireplace.

[00:41:32.40]

KAREN KARNES: —or this.

[00:41:33.21]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

[00:41:34.46]

KAREN KARNES: Or those chairs that I've made.

[00:41:40.01]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:41:40.19]

KAREN KARNES: My work really has always been connected with some kind of use, whether it's a bird bath, or bird feeder, or fireplace, or a chair.

[00:41:51.47]

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's a real working object rather than—

[00:41:53.48]



KAREN KARNES: It always has been for me.

[00:41:54.66]

PAUL CUMMINGS: —than a lookout object.

[00:41:55.53]

KAREN KARNES: It's not a sculpture as such. It may be a sculptural kind of form. But it's just the way I think. I just don't sit down and think of an image that's just a complete abstraction. It's very much connected. And I have basically been a wheel person, too, except for periods when I've gone off to hand-building for a particular project—a particular thing. But in general, my feeling is the wheel. I always have liked that, and I've done very little—well, almost no slab—other methods, just the coil, like these kind of hand things.

[00:42:34.07]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:42:34.46]

KAREN KARNES: But they also come when I want a particular thing. I wanted a fireplace. So I made it. And the chairs were another—I had a period a few years ago where I spent a nice—like a winter. Now I have some more orders. I have to spend this winter also making fireplaces.

[00:42:53.60]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, that's a complex job, isn't it, to build one?

[00:42:56.24]

KAREN KARNES: Well, and I do more than one, usually.

[00:42:57.95]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

[00:42:58.16]

KAREN KARNES: When I had to do Jack Larsen's, I spent about four months doing fireplaces and hand-building. And I don't move from that to that easily. I sort of center in on that kind of work, and that's all I'll do for a few months.

[00:43:11.45]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how long does it take you to do?

[00:43:13.85]

KAREN KARNES: Well, it may take no more than maybe over a period of two weeks to make one. But I can work on more than one.

[00:43:20.67]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right, right.

[00:43:21.51]

KAREN KARNES: But still, it just takes three or four months. And you just don't go in there—

[00:43:25.71]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Getting into it, doing it, and getting out of it.

[00:43:27.57]

KAREN KARNES: And then drying it, and firing it. It's a big investment.

[00:43:30.77]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Well, I'm curious. Just to go back to Black Mountain again, did you get involved in other local activities there, or just—

[00:43:45.09]

KAREN KARNES: I don't think so. I think—

[00:43:46.08]

PAUL CUMMINGS: —the Guild was the only—

[00:43:47.19]

KAREN KARNES: Yes, because, I mean, Black Mountain was a real little separate community in—I mean, we were in the Southern Mountains, but we didn't have much contact with other people.

[00:44:00.48]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Any other small towns around, or the local people or—

[00:44:03.66]

KAREN KARNES: I didn't. I mean, maybe other people did. But it was a fairly large group. And we were so busy working, too. There was so much continuous work all those early years. So I didn't do much else.

[00:44:18.53]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what was it like being with—Albers was still there?

[00:44:22.79]

KAREN KARNES: No, he wasn't there anymore.

[00:44:24.62]

PAUL CUMMINGS: No. This was now in the '50s; he was gone.

[00:44:26.69]

KAREN KARNES: No. It was the end there, when Charles Olson was there.

[00:44:29.81]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

[00:44:29.90]

KAREN KARNES: It was really the end. And when we left this place was in '54. So we left there in '54 to come here. And by then, the school was almost closed. It really was at the end. And we were all kind of cooking by ourselves, and living separately, and very little schooling was going on—very few students. It was quite a dispersed—

[00:44:56.66]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Any students you remember or—

[00:45:02.17]

KAREN KARNES: None that we had.

[00:45:02.72]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Not particularly.

[00:45:03.08]

KAREN KARNES: I never had any students. No, there are all kinds—I mean, all those Black Mountain poets, Jorge Fick, and Joseph Fiore was a painting teacher there, though he left before we—Stefan Wolpe was the music composer, and he stayed on longer, and then left.

[00:45:21.35]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But did you find it interesting to have this variety of people around?

[00:45:25.34]

KAREN KARNES: Oh, very much.

[00:45:26.65]

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, in a close—

[00:45:27.50]

KAREN KARNES: Yes, it was interesting. It was a marvelous place. But by those last years—

[00:45:34.58]

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was thinning out.

[00:45:35.27]

KAREN KARNES: —it was really not really a school. It was kind of a strange community.

[00:45:42.03]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:45:43.24]

KAREN KARNES: And I think it was feeling as if it was falling apart. I mean, it was ending, and it really was ending, though I think they stayed on maybe two more years. It was finished by then. But it was from that group that we came here because—

[00:46:05.14]

PAUL CUMMINGS: How'd you find this place?

[00:46:06.64]

KAREN KARNES: No, I'm saying that was all chance it was formed there, because when we were there, then M.C. Richards had been a faculty at Black Mountain. And she came down with David Tudor. She was living with him then, and Merce Cunningham, and John Cage, for the summer session. And Paul Williams was a former student there, a man with money. And he wanted to make a community, a housing community. He was an architect, and he wanted to build houses for people to [inaudible].

And he just got John, and M.C., and David. And then we were—because we had met them down there, then we also joined that group. And he just sort of—At that point, he had come down to Black Mountain—Paul Williams had come to Black Mountain as a teacher there for just a few weeks or months or something. He felt that was not the place he wanted to be, that he was ready to make this community, which meant buying land and building houses for people. So they invited us to join, too. And some of it is that M.C. had become interested in pottery and wanted to make a pot shop with us.

[00:47:27.20]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [Recorder stops, restarts.]

[00:47:31.06]

KAREN KARNES: Should I make more?

[00:47:34.21]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Um— [Recorder stops, restarts.] Right.

[00:47:35.14]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah, so that's the nucleus group, was this Paul Williams and his wife, Vera. And they had two small children. And John Cage, and David Tudor and M.C. and David Weinrib, and me. And we were supposed to be—well, we were the nucleus of a—just a community of people. And all of us were very poor. I mean, John isn't poor, and he's very famous now, and he was already kind of famous, but still very poor. And I guess everybody wanted to move out of the city.

[00:48:10.78]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:48:12.18]

KAREN KARNES: So they drew a radius of a certain—and yet they wanted to be near enough because they all kind of used the city for something.

[00:48:21.53]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Near but—

[00:48:22.64]

KAREN KARNES: Near enough but far.

[00:48:23.99]

PAUL CUMMINGS: But far. [Laughs.]

[00:48:24.75]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah. And then they came looking in the county, and bought this property, which was about 114 acres. And then Paul loaned the group a lot of money, and bought the land.

[00:48:44.81]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [Recorder stops, restarts.] So, anyway, the houses were built, and everybody started living here, then, right?

[00:48:50.45]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah, they were built very slowly. The pot shop was the first building built in '54, the summer. And I stayed down there, and David was up here building. And in the autumn, I came up, and we built the kiln and started the shop. And then, the next year, another house was built. And then, the next summer, this house for us was built. And we sort of gradually kept on adding houses in the property. And we lived in that little farmhouse with David Tudor, and M.C., and John Cage, and David and I. For a year and a half, we lived in this little community house—just while houses were being built.

[00:49:27.59]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Lots of people.

[00:49:29.12]

KAREN KARNES: It was a tiny little farmhouse, but we knew it was a limited time, and it was lovely. And there were no children, too. That made a difference. And I think a community of adults works quite differently than a community—

[00:49:42.86]

PAUL CUMMINGS: —than one with children.

[00:49:43.80]

KAREN KARNES: As soon as children come in, then things become quite different because people have different ideas of how children should behave, and how they should be raised.

[00:49:53.49]

PAUL CUMMINGS: What they should do and not do.

[00:49:54.84]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah, and then a group of adults can somehow all relate to each other in easier ways. Soon as there are children around, then you have all that concentration. So then my son, who is 14 and a half—when he was born, then we built—we first had this one room. See, that's why the toilet is squished in there, because this was the whole house was one room. Then, after our son was born, then that bedroom was an addition. Then a few years later, I made that.

[00:50:28.57]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Keep adding on.

[00:50:29.84]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah, that's it. And we were adding, but, I mean, that was the way the house grew.

[00:50:33.28]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:50:34.03]

KAREN KARNES: And the houses here, too, sort of every year—Paul Hultberg used to live here. He lives in the area now, but his was about the—maybe, the third house.

[00:50:47.09]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how many people live here now in this community?

[00:50:50.87]

KAREN KARNES: Oh, probably about 20. But it's a completely different place than it was.

[00:50:56.27]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. They're all art people.

[00:50:57.61]

KAREN KARNES: No, they're not.

[00:50:57.99]

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, they're not?

[00:51:00.14]

KAREN KARNES: Actually, there's a terrible lot of musicians here. [They laugh.] Just—by the way it grows, because LaNoue Davenport, who was from the New York Pro—he used to be—he's a recorder player. He used to play with the New York Pro Musica. And he had about the third or fourth house. So he came, and then he brought friends.

[00:51:23.73]

PAUL CUMMINGS: More and more musicians.

[00:51:24.45]

KAREN KARNES: So lots of musicians here now. But the Williamses have moved away, and M.C. has moved away. Practically—Stanley VanDerBeek used to live here. He doesn't want to live here—the filmmaker. His wife still lives here. But you know all the marriages change, and everybody splits, and everybody moves away. And it's a very different place. I mean—well, LaNoue was one of the first people, too. And David Tudor's still here, but that's just about all. And Sari Dienes lives here. Quite a different—quite a different sort of a whole movement of much younger people. So suddenly there's a real generational—generation gap. [They laugh.]

[00:52:14.00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: You notice differences. [Laughs.]

[00:52:14.80]

KAREN KARNES: I'm one of the old folks. Oh, yes, you really notice it.

[00:52:18.84]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

[00:52:19.54]

KAREN KARNES: Because, I mean, one of the young women even said that to me about a year or two ago to me. She says, "Oh, you old folks." I thought, oh, God. [They laugh.] I made it.

[00:52:30.82]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, goodness.

[00:52:32.29]

KAREN KARNES: Because it's certainly true, yes. There's a whole generation split. I mean, if you're in the '40s or '50s, and the '20s. But I guess one creeps up there without knowing that you're getting there, and then, suddenly, you look back and—

[00:52:45.67]

PAUL CUMMINGS: All of a sudden.

[00:52:46.48]

KAREN KARNES: —they're pushing you, because my child is younger in proportion, because I first had a child when I was 31.

[00:52:53.90]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:52:55.00]

KAREN KARNES: So I have a young child, but I'm old now.

[00:52:57.73]

PAUL CUMMINGS: And you see it both ways sometimes.

[00:53:00.07]

KAREN KARNES: Well, it's funny. It's different, because ordinarily, he could be married and have a child of his own in age group.

[00:53:06.74]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Oh, could you describe that one pot you showed me, the vertical

one?

[00:53:14.16]

KAREN KARNES: David's?

[00:53:14.67]

PAUL CUMMINGS: David's, yeah, because you said it was such a precursor.

[00:53:18.19]

KAREN KARNES: Yes, it was a part of an important clay innovation because he—I suppose what it is is a slab—one of the first slab parts, bent. Those first ones were kind of folded and bent slab. And then the others, like that one I showed you outside, was a construction with slab, but a much more dashing construction than just a plain box. That must have been in the '40s, because it was here. It was sort of in the late—in the late '40s that he began working on slab.

[00:53:51.88]

PAUL CUMMINGS: But does that vertical design have a particular idea? I mean, it's like a wine bottle.

[00:53:57.91]

KAREN KARNES: Tall bottle. Yes, it is a tall wine bottle. I think it's more of the—

[00:54:01.81]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Then it's got the neck set on it as a—

[00:54:03.41]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah, just as a way to put things together. I think he was just combining thrown and slab elements. I guess that's what it is. And I think it's those kind of formed [inaudible]. That particular form was a new one, and he did many, many, and had a show at Bonniers. That was the place that both he and I were selling at, before it changed.

[00:54:28.15]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:54:31.05]

KAREN KARNES: And I think, with the way magazines pick up on people's work in articles, it makes a very strong effect when somebody does a new way of working.

[00:54:43.17]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:54:44.32]

KAREN KARNES: Everybody does it.

[00:54:45.18]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:54:45.60]

KAREN KARNES: But, I mean, that kind of small neck—thrown small neck on a slab thing, there have been so many pots like that since.

[00:54:54.84]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:54:55.53]

KAREN KARNES: But he moved out of that very quickly. He didn't stay there.

[00:54:59.20]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:55:00.59]

KAREN KARNES: Because then he did a whole series of constructed clay slab things, but they were very—with kind of a hard slab. So they almost could have been wood, I think, many of the forms, like the one outside.

[00:55:13.95]

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's like a box.

[00:55:14.64]

KAREN KARNES: A hard-edge box instead of a much kind of freer, more plastic clay that he started doing. That first bottle is more plastic than more hard-edged.

[00:55:27.18]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

[00:55:27.36]

KAREN KARNES: And he got even harder in some of them. And the forms were very interesting. But there's certainly—the movement is much freer in this country for much more plastic clay than that.

[00:55:39.62]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, that doesn't seem to have had much effect on you. I mean, you seem to stay—

[00:55:43.48]

KAREN KARNES: Oh, no.

[00:55:43.97]

PAUL CUMMINGS: —very much—

[00:55:44.90]

KAREN KARNES: Very much in my own way.

[00:55:49.01]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:55:49.19]

KAREN KARNES: Well, it was a good association when we were together, because we were interested in each other's work without really pressing or influencing in any way, and I think very much rooted in the wheel, and in the covered pot. That's been my specialty.

[00:56:08.06]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I notice all the colors and shapes.

[00:56:09.20]

KAREN KARNES: The closed, the closed form, yes, every variation of closed form.

[00:56:13.82]



PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Well, I'm curious about—just to sort of go back to the chronology for a second, you've lived here, but have you taught—didn't you—you went out to Haystack.

[00:56:27.58]

KAREN KARNES: No, just summer—but those are summer sessions.

[00:56:29.26]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

[00:56:29.56]

KAREN KARNES: Oh, yes, I've taught quite a lot in summer sessions.

[00:56:32.32]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Little—

[00:56:33.52]

KAREN KARNES: That's just three weeks.

[00:56:34.81]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

[00:56:35.17]

KAREN KARNES: That's nothing, because I've taught at Haystack and at Penland, which is in North Carolina. That's where I first found salt and was introduced to salt about four years ago, I guess, in the summer session.

[00:56:47.58]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:56:48.83]

KAREN KARNES: But the summer sessions, I mean, that's really the only real teaching, though I did teach here in my studio one night a week for many years, starting that just as a kind of a money thing. And then I kept it up for years because the people liked coming. Finally, I pushed them out, and they've made their own studio. I taught for years. They got to make a place to work. And just sort of—they became friends, actually, and used the studio more than—

[00:57:15.10]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. You haven't had apprentices or people who come to work with you or things like this.

[00:57:19.09]

KAREN KARNES: Not really. There was one period when I had two young Mexican men here for a while. And one of them went back to Mexico and made a studio.

[00:57:27.25]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:57:29.00]

KAREN KARNES: But I've never had it as a regular thing, because I've never had—first of all, I like the working with myself. I don't really care to give anything to anybody else, and I've never had the kind of pots that are adapted for other people's—You see, like in England, there's an apprentice system. And they make a ware that's more standardized so that they actually can take an apprentice in, and let him make that cup, or make that—they're really

working more to measure and more to standardization.

In this country, Byron Temple is a potter who was trained at the Leach Factory in England, and who also makes a standardized line. It's very nice. It's very inexpensive. But it's just basic shapes, a this, a that. He sells through catalogs. He knows that everything's going to be two inches by three inches. There's a difference, much more like an English handmade small factory production. But my things have never been like that. And each piece is really a one-of-a-kind piece. And even if I do two dozen, I never try to make two dozen exactly the same.

[00:58:42.34]

PAUL CUMMINGS: There will be some variations.

[00:58:43.87]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah, so each thing is by itself, [inaudible] is completed, even though they certainly are similar. I mean, every pot in there is not a different pot. That's ridiculous.

[00:58:52.96]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

[00:58:54.28]

KAREN KARNES: The forms change and grow very slowly, one out of another. But still, each piece is individual so that nobody could do my part, never.

[00:59:03.44]

PAUL CUMMINGS: And you're not interested in teaching somebody all kinds of techniques and—

[00:59:08.32]

KAREN KARNES: Well, I do some teaching, as such. But that'd be quite different than having somebody in teaching. And the jobs aren't sufficient, either, to have somebody, like the making clay. And there are certain routine jobs, but the production is limited. So, therefore, there aren't that much—there's not that much more.

[00:59:26.56]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Well, how do you design things? [Coffee pouring.] Do you design them in your head, or on the wheel or—

[00:59:36.40]

KAREN KARNES: More they kind of grow from themselves. Do you take anything in?

[00:59:41.98]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Maybe I'll have some [inaudible].

[00:59:43.62]

KAREN KARNES: This milk [inaudible] sugar?

[00:59:45.07]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, no, I'm all right.

[00:59:48.85]

KAREN KARNES: Sometimes I might make a drawing, you know, just of a feeling. It's more a swelling—yeah, it's like more where—

[01:00:03.70]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Like a sculptor's drawing.

[01:00:04.53]

KAREN KARNES: —where the form would extend itself, and where it would be contracted. It's really much more that kind of feeling, than a literal form. And then I work on the wheel, and work much more for that development of that particular form, of more of what it's doing, or less of what it's doing, or higher or lower or it's like—the variations on that kind of theme. And, I mean, when I teach, I encourage students to investigate like that, to kind of get a sort of rhythmic idea of some kind, and extend it as far as you can go. And the wheel, of course, lends itself to that, because if you get the skill on the wheel, then you can press in and out and investigate quickly and freely if you're going along one path like that.

[01:01:00.33]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you feel that that's a standard way of working for you, or has that developed in more recent—

[01:01:09.71]

KAREN KARNES: I've always worked like that, oh, yeah. I've always developed forms like that. I think that in the last two years, I've changed much more, and gone much further than I ever have. The work goes in these kind of—

[01:01:24.13]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Cycles.

[01:01:24.73]

KAREN KARNES: —cycles, in a way. I think my work the last two years has gone enormous. For many years, I was working quite statically, and with some changes, but very slow changes. But it just seemed like a great leap was taken. And some of it was connected with the new material in the salt field because it was like a new surface. So I wanted a new pot. And then a new pot started a whole new direction, and they feed each other back and forth, because the work always feeds the new, or the old work feeds the new work.

[01:02:08.12]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [Recorder stops, restarts.] Oh, I see. Um—

[01:02:11.95]

KAREN KARNES: Have we finished the tape yet?

[01:02:13.39]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, a couple of minutes on this side, yeah. I'm trying to find out, how do the ideas develop? You said you were interested in Oriental things. But they're not obvious—

[01:02:30.97]

KAREN KARNES: No, they say—

[01:02:31.66]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Cousins or something.

[01:02:32.59]

KAREN KARNES: Well, sometimes, people come in and say they're very Oriental. But I certainly am not consciously making Oriental pots. Oh, I left out a very important thing. My most important influence, my dear, aside from Chermayeff, who was really more a personal guide, as well as a teacher—but that first summer at Black Mountain College, Hamada, we had a marvelous seminar there. And Hamada, and Bernard Leach and Marguerite Wildenhain, and Yanagi were there for two or three weeks. And it couldn't have been the first time. It must have been the second summer, because we were there already. We would kind

of live with people there. They were hosts. And they were coming back from Dartington Hall, where there had been an international conference of potters. And they were brought to Black—were invited to come to Black Mountain College.

So that—because I was very much a beginning potter, and just really watching Hamada working. It was not Oriental pots. It's that kind of spirit of a real person—the beautiful, relaxed way he sits and works. I say that the first teacher, the first person was that man in Italy who was a marvelous technician, but no aesthetic sense. I mean, he just did whatever anybody told him to do.

[01:04:02.97]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

[01:04:04.61]

KAREN KARNES: But then the other person was watching Hamada just sit and work quietly and give off a certain spirit with his work. And that really has been the most important—

[01:04:15.44]

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was the base.

[01:04:16.23]

KAREN KARNES: —person, yeah.

[01:04:17.04]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[01:04:17.93]

KAREN KARNES: And then the next year at Black Mountain, too, we were then invited and made another summer session in which we invited Peter Voukos to come down, and Dan Rhodes and somebody else. I don't remember. But Peter was then famous already, because he'd been winning prizes and everything. But he still was in Montana at Archie Bray Foundation. And he was much more modest than he became later. [Paul laughs.] And he was good to know, and to watch working, just kind of free way he handled great masses of clay. But that didn't influence me directly, but Hamada certainly did—just watching, because that was three weeks. That's a long time to see people. And when I—

[01:05:02.99]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Could we—

[01:05:03.20]

KAREN KARNES: Go on—

[END OF TRACK AAA\_karnes71\_8717\_m]

[00:00:03.35]

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is side two. So well, tell me more about Hamada. Do you keep in touch with him or anything? [Dog barking.] Or are you just—

[00:00:13.70]

KAREN KARNES: No, I have seen him a few times since, when he's come to the States. [Dog barking.] I don't write. Is that going to be on the tape, that dog? Should I chase him? It's all right? [Dog barking.] I had a nice experience with him though, which is which shows what a fine and extraordinary person he is, because he—it must have been at least 10 years after Black Mountain or maybe more. He had—[dog barking] I was selling in Bonniers then. And he had a show there. And there was a reception and everything. And then, afterwards, I came upstairs. And as I walked up to him, I said something like, "I'm sure you don't remember me." But he said, "Oh, yes," he says, "Mrs. Weinrib, I remember you."

[00:01:00.05]

And then—and I thought, what a fantastic man, that he has met thousands of people, that he should have remembered me at least 10 years after Black Mountain. And then, he hadn't realized that the pots that he had seen—because I was talking to him—were Karen Karnes, because he knew me as Mrs. Weinrib. But those were my pots downstairs. And I guess [inaudible] [dog barking] I haven't really kept up with him. But that was nice—that he could have that good a memory and remember an experience of so many years [inaudible]. [Dog barking.]

[00:01:30.66]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Wow. What about—I keep getting the idea that you're very, kind of, cautious in moves and changes, but that it's a constant development.

[00:01:47.88]

KAREN KARNES: Well, I guess I'm not looking for—I guess all those years, I wasn't consciously looking for big innovation and big change. But probably, if anything, I resist all the directions that the country goes in. Because I can say something that I think is interesting. When we first—when we knew we were going to come to New York area from North Carolina—and I'd only been in North Carolina for a while, but my work was selling and [inaudible]. And I remember coming to the city and walking in.

That year, Italy was in, and they had an Italian festival. And everything was Italian. I thought—I suddenly really got scared and I thought, my God. I mean, how can I change my market from a North Carolina—from a mountain market, where you sort of know. You can stay. You don't have to worry about being a new color every year. How can I come to New York City, where every year there's a new color.

[00:02:43.22]

PAUL CUMMINGS: A new fashion. Yeah.

[00:02:43.79]

KAREN KARNES: This year, it's pink. And next year, it's blue. And this is warm, and that's cold. And this country, you have a style like this. And then, you have a style like that. And I remember walking in the city and really feeling as if I'm mad to come and use this city as my marketplace, when understanding what the city demands of the artist, or of the stylist, and the fashion, and everything.

[00:03:09.33]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:03:09.51]

KAREN KARNES: And then I just told myself, that's just ridiculous. I'm not going to do it. I mean, I refuse to take any part in that. I don't care what the world says about color, style, form. I mean, they'll—either I'll sell, or I won't sell, but there's no doubt that I'm not going to come prepared to be influenced by the fashion.

[00:03:32.25]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:03:32.43]

KAREN KARNES: And I somehow was able to really reassure myself. Because, for a moment, I thought, you know, madness, madness. I mean, stay anyplace else but New York City, because you come to the center, to the most competitive place in the world, and expect to use that as your market. And know, you know, but—and people—And I think it's reflected in everything, and in the craft world even more than the art world, or just as much.

[00:03:58.87]

And if you go to the Craft Museum—not for public. [Paul laughs.] No, I mean, I tell them, too—that I don't mean that. But the styles—I mean, this year it's low fire. And then, you will put gold, and everybody puts gold. And then, we'll put pink, and everybody puts pink. And then, it really—everybody follows the styles. There are so few people with any kind of center that are working out of what they're doing, instead of what the world is asking them. [Inaudible.]

[00:04:27.81]

PAUL CUMMINGS: But don't you find that there's—or at least, I've found in doing these few craftsmen I've talked to, that there's an incredible lack of communication amongst craftsmen. They'll meet because there's a fair, or some kind of two- or three-day thing. And the rest of the year, they won't see each other or discuss problems, or—

[00:04:51.46]

KAREN KARNES: Hm. You think it's because they live in far places?

[00:04:53.73]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I don't I don't know.

[00:04:57.09]

KAREN KARNES: I mean, I'm friends with Lenore and with Toshiko [Takaezu]. I used to be friends with Bill Wyman, but I haven't seen him for a number of years. And Cohen—I mean, I do have craftsman friends. But we are physically spread out in distant places. So we don't see each other.

[00:05:15.65]

PAUL CUMMINGS: I wonder if it's too, that none of the ones I've talked to so far have said that they would sit down the way painters will sit down and talk about X's painting exhibition, or their own problems or projects, or something. I get the feeling that craftspeople don't do that. They won't kind of have that technical or trade kind of conversation. They'll talk about business and the market.

[00:05:44.20]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah. I'm listing them. I'm just trying to think. I'm not sure that that's so. But I guess I don't have that many craftsman friends, potter friends.

[00:05:52.15]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:05:52.36]

KAREN KARNES: And I think that I would with the few that I might have.

[00:05:55.54]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:05:56.77]

KAREN KARNES: I mean, I don't see Tashiko enough, but I think we would talk about problems and things. But there aren't many around that I would want to talk to.

[00:06:08.99]

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Paul laughs.] That's what all the other ones say too. You know it's very—[laughs]—there's certain consistencies.

[00:06:14.90]

KAREN KARNES: [Inaudible.] There's just lots of mediocre work being done. And we all think the other's is the mediocre one.

[00:06:19.88]

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Oh.

[00:06:22.40]

KAREN KARNES: But the Craft Museum—I mean, just to pursue for a minute this thing of style and innovation. And they are—I'm sure the Modern does too. They invent shows. Like, they'll say, "Oh, we'll have a show which reflects—" Like, they had a tombstone show or a figure show. Then he'll give out the word that we're having a tombstone show. Then everybody will—

[00:06:47.21]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Runs out to—[cross talk.]

[00:06:48.38]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah. So we'll have a—I mean, they had a little cup show in the museum last summer, I guess. And I'm sure that most of the cups in that show were made because he wanted to have a cup show. And it happened that he has a cup—he has a set of mine in the collection. So mine was the one—mine and Mrs. Webb—two old women. [They laugh.] One, proper, beautifully made cup and saucer. And all the others were just most stylistic, and Baroque, and Pop, and all kinds of things like that. So I think some of the market—that really the people make things to order.

[00:07:34.19]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative.] Well, what about the whole idea of making to order in a better sense, of commissions?

[00:07:40.84]

KAREN KARNES: Oh well, I work on a commission if it's what I like to do, and it's very strictly limited. I mean, if somebody comes and says, "I want you to make this," if it seems good, I'll make it. And if not, I wouldn't dream of it.

[00:07:53.72]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative.] If it's within your range of—

[00:07:55.28]

KAREN KARNES: Yes, if it's the kind of thing I like to make. I mean, the fireplace—I made a fireplace for myself, the first one. And then, Jack saw it he said, "Oh, make me a fireplace." Well great, I've already made myself a fireplace.

[00:08:07.87]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

[00:08:09.35]

KAREN KARNES: Then, I made five or six, and they're all gone. And now, somebody else wants one more, so I'll make some more. And those chairs that I made in the Johnson Wax collection, they own two of my clay stools. And Jack has four of them. And other people have—Noguchi has two of them, I guess. But I wanted to make myself. I mean, this is the first one—a clay table—and I made a clay stool. And I made them, but then if somebody comes and likes them, then that's nice, because then I'll make a dozen more or something.

[00:08:43.53]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Well what about the Jack Larsen thing? Because you did a number of—

[00:08:47.52]

KAREN KARNES: Well, for his house. And those were on commission. Oh, yes. Because, I

mean, I wouldn't—Well, I have a sink here that I made myself. So his was a sculpture sink. His was different. But he's really—I think he's been my only client, in that sense.

[00:09:04.26]

PAUL CUMMINGS: In commission, yeah.

[00:09:05.73]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah. But we have great sympathy for each other. So that's very easy. I mean, he just had to say he wants a sink, and I made him a urinal, too. Because it's the same thing. But there was no problem, because I knew that if I liked it, he would like it. I mean, that's always the problem, isn't it?

[00:09:27.18]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

[00:09:27.33]

KAREN KARNES: —that you need to have just the sympathetic clients, that you make what you want, and then know that he'll like it. And Jack is like—I would only work under those conditions.

[00:09:37.47]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you done projects for other people? Or is he really the only one?

[00:09:40.47]

KAREN KARNES: Actually, not—no, I think he's the only one. No, I've made sinks and—yeah, I've made some tile things and sinks, small things. Yes, and I made somebody a tile wall with pierced openings for heat to come through. But those are very limited. I mean, really only—and I think the real clue in that is that my basic earnings are with the thrown things. So the other things are my fun.

[00:10:08.71]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Extra. Yeah.

[00:10:09.48]

KAREN KARNES: And I think that if you're waiting for commissions, then you can be quite trapped. Because if everything depends on getting a big commission, then if he says, "Well, make it for me in blue," I mean, you make it in blue, if all your income is dependent on blue or pink or something. But I've, fortunately, never been in that position. I've never had to do that, because the pots are sort of this other kind of thing.

[00:10:37.95]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative.] Well, how do you—you know, sitting up here in the country, as they say, how do you sell things? Do people come to you? Do you have outlets, exhibitions?

[00:10:49.84]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah, exhibitions. And for years I sold at Bonniers. And that was really the best store, marvelous store. It was very basic for about 10 years or more. That was half my income. And I had a show there every few years. Whenever I had something new, I'd show it to him. And if he liked it, I had a show.

[00:11:11.86]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who was there then?

[00:11:12.82]

KAREN KARNES: Mr. Holmquist, Goran Holmquist. Just a wonderful man. Another great



influence, because he took my things right when I first started working here, about '55, '56. The whole time—I mean, right from the beginning, all that selling that I was worried about when I came to—well, I sold an America House too at the beginning. But then, Bonniers was so much better, and consistently, just—I mean, if you can just get one shot that takes that much. But then, on the other hand, what happened is then he sold the store. So then I was absolutely terrified. Because here, my income was just so cut.

[00:11:54.66]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:11:54.99]

KAREN KARNES: Because I also have the retail showroom here, which is also very good, because people just kind of trickle through. Not a lot of people, because there's no notice except that little—you didn't even see it.

[00:12:05.79]

PAUL CUMMINGS: The sign out there says "pottery."

[00:12:07.24]

KAREN KARNES: It's just very small.

[00:12:08.76]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:12:09.12]

KAREN KARNES: But since I've been here so long, there are enough local people who come and buy gifts. It's kind of a steady growing. People come from the city. Kind of a steady—

[00:12:19.02]

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about America House? Because that's closed now.

[00:12:21.57]

KAREN KARNES: It's closed now, but I'm saying after Bonniers, then I went to Georg Jensen, because that was the next level of store in the city. And I was with them for one year. Marvelous, sold beautifully. Then they moved and changed their policy completely. So they're a hard-edged store, just like Bonniers is. Bonniers didn't fire me, or anything. They just weren't selling, because the whole quality of the store changed. They were this plastics, hard-edged, contemporary thing. Jensen's moved, and did that just like that, in a year. So then I went to America House. Had one year in America House after that. And then, they closed last year. So now I have no New York store.

[00:13:03.93]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you do well with America House?

[00:13:06.69]

KAREN KARNES: That last year, I did beautifully. I was only there for one year. I did very well. Yes, I think that would have been very nice, good for me if they had continued. But they're going to open a museum shop now, that's going to—

[00:13:18.06]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, they are?

[00:13:19.10]

KAREN KARNES: In America House headquarters. Then they don't have to pay taxes because they'll be a museum shop—non-profit.

[00:13:26.54]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see. In the museum building?

[00:13:27.89]

KAREN KARNES: No, in the America House building.

[00:13:29.24]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

[00:13:30.11]

KAREN KARNES: You see? That's the ACC. It'll be an ACC and a museum shop.

[00:13:33.92]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, rather than a—

[00:13:35.03]

KAREN KARNES: It will be a better operation for them, because they'll be more selective, and they won't have to pay taxes. So I'm sure I'll be carried there. But that's not happening this year. So right now, there's no place in the city that I sell.

[00:13:51.50]

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about exhibitions and things, because you—

[00:13:53.75]

KAREN KARNES: I have lots of exhibitions.

[00:13:55.07]

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know. How do they affect you, or how do they happen? Are they from—

[00:13:59.72]

KAREN KARNES: Invitation. By invitation. I mean, the first years I sent to competition shows, and won some prizes.

[00:14:06.77]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. And then after a while, people know you and—

[00:14:08.99]

KAREN KARNES: Yes, but I haven't sent a competition for, oh, God, 12 years. You know, I mean, I would never send to a competition anymore.

[00:14:17.21]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:14:18.41]

KAREN KARNES: Also, the whole craft world has changed so much now, because—

[00:14:23.42]

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way?

[00:14:24.03]

KAREN KARNES: Way back in—well, say I began studying exhibitions in about '53, '54. That's a long time ago. And there were so many fewer people then, that a show just—I mean, only a few thousand things came in, out of which they picked—maybe 1,000 came in

and they picked 500. I mean, like the numbers were so much fewer. But it somehow felt that things could be understood. But now, everything is so big.

[00:14:56.35]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you served on juries, or things like that?

[00:14:58.28]

KAREN KARNES: I only served on one jury, and I'll never do that again. Because it was a very important show at the Smithsonian.

[00:15:04.19]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? Which one was that?

[00:15:07.22]

KAREN KARNES: It was both a national invitation show. It was put on by the Kiln Club of Washington as their own show. And it was an international invitation show. And John Mason, and me, and John Stephenson were the judges. And it was enormous. And the judging of that convinced me that there should be no national shows. And I will have nothing to do with them.

[00:15:32.19]

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Why?

[00:15:33.93]

KAREN KARNES: Because the mass of things. The things were spread all over, and the looking of things of this scale, next to things of this scale, and the limited time with three—I mean, I was supposed to be the functionalist. And then John Mason, the avant-gardist. And Stephenson is maybe someplace in between. So we're all supposed to—

[00:15:55.56]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have a point of view. Yeah.

[00:15:57.45]

KAREN KARNES: Yes, it's ridiculous. I mean, the going through—we should have taken a week to look at all that stuff. And we were just there for a few hours. We weren't given that much time. And I could see—

[00:16:09.73]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, was it an immense number of things?

[00:16:12.37]

KAREN KARNES: Yes, no more immense than anything else, I don't think. I mean, it was just part of the same. But I could see that in—I mean, everything stands around on the floor. And when you have that much—that many things, you sort of look, things get missed, some things don't. I mean, a different jury would choose a completely different kind of selection.

[00:16:32.74]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Sure.

[00:16:33.04]

KAREN KARNES: Some things would be lost. Some things would look beautiful if you put them up here. And they're sitting there and they look like hell. I mean, it's just the whole—but the size—I think it's the size. I think you can't set up things from all over the country—

[00:16:49.06]

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's just too much.

[00:16:49.39]

KAREN KARNES: —match them all together, and say, this is—and the judging of the best—there is no "the best."

[00:16:55.54]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Like the Whitney Annuals. It's half California one year, or it's New York or it's somewhere else.

[00:17:01.18]

KAREN KARNES: I mean, I think the craft world should have local, small shows, local shows. And then there should be money to send them around. And I think, especially for the young people—I mean, people like me, they have no problem, because once we're established, we're invited all the time. So I'm going to have a show in Philadelphia. And I mean, I have shows all the time, one or two a year. So that's not the problem. People will see my work.

[00:17:26.95]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Are those shows that sell for you, or just—

[00:17:29.59]

KAREN KARNES: Some, they do. Yes. Well, this Philadelphia is in a shop, and should sell. Not enormous amounts, but some things sell. But the young people—I mean, they need shows to have their things looked at.

[00:17:46.46]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. And be discovered and known.

[00:17:47.62]

KAREN KARNES: And be part of everything else. And to have them shown to other parts of the country. I mean, I would tell Paul Smith at the museum, and what they should do, or whoever does it. There's lots of small shows. Which then, they pay for it to show all over the country. It's like, this is the New York something. This is this. And let the things move around. Let people see everybody's work. But you can't set one thing up and say, this is the country, and this is the best.

[00:18:18.34]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:18:19.87]

KAREN KARNES: It's just too many, too many.

[00:18:22.90]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what about—now you said just a few years ago you started using new glazes, right?

[00:18:31.03]

KAREN KARNES: The salt glaze.

[00:18:31.60]

PAUL CUMMINGS: The salt glazes. How did that get started?

[00:18:35.71]

KAREN KARNES: Just really by chance, of going down to Penland, where they had this salt. Do you know anything about what salt is?

[00:18:43.48]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Looked at, yeah—not enough.

[00:18:44.32]

KAREN KARNES: Because it takes a different kind of kiln. It's a different method of glazing. And it looks very different. So you can see. So it was just, I went down to teach for three weeks, and was working, and they had a salt kiln there, and I began working in it. And just found it most exciting, and couldn't make a kiln that same year when I got back. Then, I went down again for a second summer. And when I came back, then I made a kiln. And now, this will be the third winter, but I've had it for two years, just the starting of the third year of working.

[00:19:20.83]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, has that allowed you to make many changes?

[00:19:28.47]

KAREN KARNES: It inspired many changes. I mean, it's more than allowed. I mean somehow, it just—all the—I mean, if you'd see—You don't know my pots well enough, but I mean, there's a fantastic change in them. They're quite different.

[00:19:41.95]

PAUL CUMMINGS: What would you say is—how would you define the difference?

[00:19:45.93]

KAREN KARNES: Much more varied, and much more interesting.

[00:19:48.84]

PAUL CUMMINGS: In shape, and color, and textures?

[00:19:50.97]

KAREN KARNES: Yes. Well, more than the color. I mean, I'm talking about the form, because the color and texture just comes from the surface. It isn't "just," because it takes a development of skill to have all of those, too.

[00:20:01.26]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

[00:20:02.46]

KAREN KARNES: But the form—the forms, because I didn't want to make what I had—I mean, I think that one gets trapped into repeating oneself even with some variations of certain—cause like the casserole, I have a flameproof casserole, which sells marvelously. And all those years that I worked at Bonniers, there were dozens and dozens and dozens—well, if you need to make a living and they order the casseroles, one makes the casseroles.

[00:20:32.49]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

[00:20:32.85]

KAREN KARNES: You can get quite trapped making something. Even though they're all good, and nice pots and everything. But I was—too much sort of moving along a certain path, because of the need of selling.

[00:20:48.57]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative.] Right.

[00:20:49.50]

KAREN KARNES: And you know, but they worked. They were nice. But then, somehow, because this new material, I didn't want to make the old thing anymore. It kind of forced me to take a leap into another place. And then, once the leap was made, then it kept growing.

[00:21:08.10]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative.]

[00:21:08.49]

KAREN KARNES: And then, too, there's some of those big pots in there, that I never had tried to make big pots like that on the wheel, because I think, what do I need them for? And then suddenly, the salt pots—for the first time, I said, well, who cares what I need them for.

[00:21:22.51]

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Just do them.

[00:21:23.32]

KAREN KARNES: They are beautiful.

[00:21:23.64]

PAUL CUMMINGS: They are.

[00:21:24.61]

KAREN KARNES: They just—they're there for their own self, not because you need them. And I think that was a big freeing for me, because I have always been very—too connected, probably, with an immediate need, with a useful need. Whereas, an aesthetic need is a need too. And it's a beautiful thing. And it sits there, even if there's nothing in it.

[00:21:46.63]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Right.

[00:21:47.49]

KAREN KARNES: You know, it has a kind of a legitimacy.

[00:21:49.87]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Well—[pause]. When did that happen, about four years ago, or three years ago?

[00:22:03.36]

KAREN KARNES: Two years ago. This is the third year.

[00:22:04.92]

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is the third year. Are there other instances like that, over the years that have brought changes?

[00:22:14.26]

KAREN KARNES: The only other leap was the hand-building, because that was—well, that must be at least five or six years since we were Jack's—my fireplace and his, and all that hand-building. Because you see—this, you'd be interested in—the potters' year has a certain kind of rhythm. I mean, Christmas, there's a certain—you sort of work very hard now, before Christmas. And if you have shops, I don't happen to have any shops this year, though I have shows this winter. So I am very busy. But normally, for a shop—and I had Bonniers by November. You've practically—by the end of November, you've delivered everything.

[00:23:01.73]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative.]

[00:23:02.18]

KAREN KARNES: And you're pretty much free, December and January. So that's the creative time, December, January, maybe even until February. So that each year, that was the kind of period when I could be really experimental, making new forms or doing the hand-building or doing anything. Then, there's a spring season again. So you start working on orders in, say, March, or delivery to April, April and May. Then, there might be some summer orders, too at the beginning of the summer, because there are summer shows. So like, you have a spring period for spring and summer. And then, you have, again, a quiet period in the middle of summer when you don't have to work for shops until the autumn, and you start again. So it makes a year of kind of demand work, and then free work for the experimentation.

[00:23:53.07]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative.] So you get little breathing spaces in between.

[00:23:54.93]

KAREN KARNES: It's very nice; it's a natural kind of rhythm with the selling, with tune to the sales of pots, and working. So I've always had that winter period, certainly, you know, of not needing to just make the things that the shops have ordered. And I've always taken it, and done some kind of form change. So that really, every winter has been something, whether it's bigger or smaller, with some changes.

[00:24:23.38]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well are they obvious things? I mean, when you have that time, do you sit down—

[00:24:26.56]

KAREN KARNES: Oh, yeah.

[00:24:26.64]

PAUL CUMMINGS: —and say, well, you know, I've been doing a lot of this, and I now want to break—

[00:24:30.87]

KAREN KARNES: Yes, yes, because—yes. Oh, I'm sure. Yeah. Yes, you just sort of think, well, what am I going to make now? I mean, normally, I say those years that I had Bonniers, that I kind of sighed a great heave of relief when I delivered those five dozen casseroles. You know, I certainly wasn't going to sit down and make casseroles in December and January. I had enough. You know, I could make a big bunch of stock, and then it sits there. Well then, you're finished.

[00:24:56.02]

PAUL CUMMINGS: You need some contrast.

[00:24:56.40]

KAREN KARNES: I always like to have full shelves, because then I know I don't have to do those. [They laugh.] I mean, now, my casseroles, unfortunately, are getting empty. But like last winter, I did lots of casseroles. And I had left them. And over the summer, I haven't done any for months now. And as long as I have full shelves, I feel that's fine. You know, I don't have to worry. Now they're getting thin, I really have to do some.

[00:25:18.18]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Get back and fill the shelves.

[00:25:19.32]

KAREN KARNES: I have to fill them up again. And then—

[00:25:21.12]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:25:22.62]

KAREN KARNES: Because I like to work in sort of concentrated—I mean, I wouldn't—I don't sit down and make casseroles today, and then make something else the next day. I mean, I'll stay with a particular problem and finish them, and then go on.

[00:25:38.22]

PAUL CUMMINGS: And you had mentioned the closed forms. And I noticed everything seems to have a top on it.

[00:25:45.45]

KAREN KARNES: Except for the bowls.

[00:25:46.59]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

[00:25:46.98]

KAREN KARNES: I have bowls, and platters, and things. Yes, I just love that closed form. I mean, I never make a small—like Tashiko—I don't know if you know her work —has bottles that come—

[00:25:59.01]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah, they're all—the tiny, thin neck.

[00:26:00.88]

KAREN KARNES: Either nothing, or very small, or little neck vases or something. I mean, I have no interest in that form. But I like a closed—I mean, I like that kind of contained form.

[00:26:12.96]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative.] But still it opens, because you lift the top off.

[00:26:15.06]

KAREN KARNES: Yes, I like to open it. Well, it's just been that kind of feeling of form that I always liked a contained shape. So I just made thousands of them. Thousands and thousands.

[00:26:33.16]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, do you do you think that you've made any—oh, kind of unusual technical discoveries or developments—

[00:26:45.24]

KAREN KARNES: Technical?

[00:26:46.30]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I mean [they laugh], that's one of those questions we have here.

[00:26:52.48]

KAREN KARNES: [Laughs.] I don't think so.

[00:26:53.09]



PAUL CUMMINGS: No, but in using glazes, or colors or things like that.

[00:26:57.52]

KAREN KARNES: No, I don't think I've done any technical innovation.

[00:26:59.95]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:27:00.55]

KAREN KARNES: I'm not interested in technical things. I mean, I developed a flame-proof clay, but other people have, too. But the people, the scientists at the clay company helped me with that.

[00:27:13.51]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

[00:27:13.90]

KAREN KARNES: But it helped make my living, because that flame-proof casserole—I was one of the first. And it made the casserole have an extra dimension, that you could put it on the stove.

[00:27:25.64]

PAUL CUMMINGS: That sure makes it—

[00:27:25.99]

KAREN KARNES: So they sold well. But if it had been flame-proof, and not been a good casserole, it wouldn't have sold.

[00:27:31.45]

PAUL CUMMING: Right, right.

[00:27:32.00]

KAREN KARNES: So I just added something. [They laugh.] But it's not the main thing.

[00:27:35.48]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:27:39.82]

KAREN KARNES: No, I don't think technical. Mm-mm [negative].

[00:27:43.61]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Any of those—[paging through papers]

[00:27:45.89]

KAREN KARNES: What other leading questions do you have there about a potter? There are so many young people interested in clay now. It's like part of that whole movement of looking for something that's really useful, not just clay. I'm interested in all the crafts. Unfortunately, some of them get stuck on macrame, or leather [laughs]. You know, it doesn't go anyplace—or sandal-making. I mean, it's okay.

[00:28:15.95]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Leather belts.

[00:28:17.30]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah. Well, even bags. I mean, there isn't much scope for creativity in doing that. And it's honest work. And it's okay. But it's kind of limited. Or beads. Just thinking the kids were all stringing beads a few years ago. And they were trying to make their living stringing beads. And it's madness. It has no connection beyond a little impulse. But I think that—And so many of them come here. And they ask me, is it possible? And I think it is possible. Or at least, it was until the recession of a year ago. And maybe now, it's different. But always it seemed to me that this country, up until very recently, could easily support clay workers.

[00:29:02.03]

You know, so many people were interested in clay. And there was such a kind of increasing interest in people who liked having handmade things. And if a person wanted to make things that were kind of useful—and I mean, I always said if they want to make clay sculpture, then they'll be like a painter. I mean, either they may be successful or not. But I mean, you can't start life and say, I'm going to be a potter, or I'm going to be a painter or a sculptor, and—

[00:29:26.15]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Get rich. [Laughs.]

[00:29:27.56]

KAREN KARNES: —and I'll feed my family that way. Either you will or you won't.

[00:29:31.01]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:29:32.06]

KAREN KARNES: But I thought if you liked making pots, sort of useful pots that people could really use, that it really was quite possible to do it. And especially, I mean, there's such a kind of a growing interest all over the country, the Southern Highland mountains. I mean, young people are setting up all over. And then, they get their local market. And I think New York City market is a hard one. I wouldn't recommend coming here to a marketplace. Because there isn't even a place—I mean, I'm not even selling any place. There's no places.

[00:30:00.93]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you sell things all across the country?

[00:30:02.86]

KAREN KARNES: No, because I don't like to ship.

[00:30:05.07]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:30:05.64]

KAREN KARNES: No, shipping is terrible. Though actually, many potter friends that I have that seem to make more pots than I do, so that they have to—like the Cohens in New Hampshire. They have to go further distance to distribute them. Then, what they do is they drive. They fill up their car, and they take samples, and drive and deliver and take a three- or four-day driving trip, and come back. And it it's really—I've always thought I'd rather drive and take the time doing that—and the money and everything—rather than pack and ship, because that's such an ugly thing to do. And it takes so much space. And it's so—

[00:30:45.89]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Time and costly.

[00:30:47.45]

KAREN KARNES: It's disgusting. I mean, it takes longer to pack a pot than to make one,

really. I guess that's what they use their apprentices for.

[00:30:54.14]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Often, they do.

[00:30:55.31]

KAREN KARNES: But I don't. I mean, I'll drive things. And I have a shop on Cape Cod. And there's one I guess in Massachusetts someplace. But I don't have many. And I've had different—various times, I've had different shops, one outside of Baltimore. But I would drive down. Better to take a day or two days, and use it—think of it as a work break, as a vacation or something, and drive, and come back, rather—But I think, too, that I probably sell more here than I realize. Because I think, if you stay put someplace long enough—

[00:31:32.21]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, people find out where you are.

[00:31:33.86]

KAREN KARNES: People come. And by reputation, they keep coming. And once they come, they keep coming.

[00:31:38.78]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you have a lot of repeat clients, who come back and back and back?

[00:31:43.34]

KAREN KARNES: People—oh, everybody. I don't think anybody has ever come here once and not come back. I have people who, really, they drive in from North Carolina, from Georgia. If they're in the city, every two or three years, they'll come by and buy something. And the area people, and New York City people. And then I make like a dinnerware set to order. I mean, I'll make things to order if they have what I make. No great amount, but it was kind of a continuous thing. And then, since I make more money when I sell—the showroom prices are a third less than retail. So the person gets a bargain to come here. And I get a bargain, because I sell more.

[00:32:25.43]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. [Laughs.]

[00:32:25.76]

KAREN KARNES: So I wouldn't mind, finally, only selling directly. But I don't know if that could ever happen. Never had that many people. But I'm having a Christmas sale at Jack Larsen's apartment. You must give me your address.

[00:32:38.41]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? [Laughs.]

[00:32:40.58]

KAREN KARNES: He just invited me this morning.

[00:32:42.80]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's terrific.

[00:32:43.94]

KAREN KARNES: He's fixing up his—you can turn it off now.

[00:32:45.89]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. [Recorder stops, restarts.]

[00:32:46.49]

KAREN KARNES: There are so few areas in modern time, in modern life where an individual can do the whole thing from the beginning to the end, and have it just be his whole work. There's nobody else who has any authority over me. And nobody else—there's nothing between me and the realization of the final thing. And how few things—[cross talk] I mean, the artist can do it. But almost nothing—I mean, almost every other area—even in filmmaking or something, I mean, how—

[00:33:19.67]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, there are thousands of people involved in that. [Cross talk.]

[00:33:22.37]

KAREN KARNES: You have a technician, and you have this one, and that one. And there's so few things. And the craftsman is one of those areas left where the whole thing is just you do it. And it's just you, and it's your responsibility. And it's either this or that. It's you who have made it. And that's quite a miracle. Because I mean, when I think sometimes in my life that I work very hard. I used to work even harder. I mean, you do need to put in those years —

[00:33:49.86]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative.] It's a lot of labor, right.

[00:33:51.15]

KAREN KARNES: —those years of plain old, hard, dirty work to get the skill. And even now it's filthy work of making clay, and carrying. I mean, we get a ton of clay. And now, Aaron's here to help carry the ton of clay and ourselves and clean up. And yesterday, cleaning the shelves and climbing the kiln is—but of course, it's a variety of works. You know, it's rich and I don't mind any of it. And the good thing, too, is that there's kind of like fallow work, and creative work. So—

[00:34:26.19]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative.] It's all contrast.

[00:34:27.42]

KAREN KARNES: It's all contrast. And you have to do this to do that. So there's a period of just going in and making clay. Well, I mean if I hated it, it would be too bad. But I don't. I mean, it's a time where I can think, and mechanically do this and that. And then in making pots, too, you have to sort of wedge, just plain work. There's no sitting there and doing less. But there's something going on while you're doing this. And then you go on to the next step.

[00:34:55.59]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative.]

[00:34:55.74]

KAREN KARNES: And the glazing isn't any great activity. But that's all right. And that's kind of a quiet doing of that while I'm thinking of something else. And then, of course, in the clay you have that firing, which is so exciting. It's like a culmination of all of these activities. Then you have firing. And especially, the salting is a very exciting firing, because you sort of throw salt on the kiln. And it's smoke. And you know, it's like a real—

[00:35:19.59]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Pyrotechnics.

[00:35:20.49]

KAREN KARNES: It's a real involvement with flame and fire, and then the excitement of opening the kiln. And every kiln is different. I just think it's really a most rich, rich life. And a

lot of it—that the pots are out of your hands when they're in the kiln, too is that extra excitement, that dimension. Very few activities have that, where it could be spoiled, and it's terrible. You know, because sometimes you open it, and it's exploded if you put it in damp. Even now, I still lose things for stupidity. But then it can be absolutely more beautiful than you ever imagined, just by some chance. So that kind of unknown thing is always part of it.

[00:36:08.10]

And I have another interesting thing to tell you, because people—I mean, I have lots of visitors, and we have lots talk about things and—I guess this was even with Don Wyckoff. We were talking about why aren't there Negroes in and crafts and clay. There's so few Negro potters. I think there's one. We were looking through something, I guess the Johnson Wax collection book. And somebody said, "Oh, yes here's—" This person was looking and she said, "Oh, look here's a Negro." And there's maybe one. And a thought that I had about it is that the work itself—like for a really poor person, somebody who's just coming up, a Puerto Rican person or Negro person, the work with the hands.

I mean, if they would see me working, they wouldn't dream of working that hard. I work harder than any laborer. I mean, there are very few laborers. There are very few jobs, in this country anyway—I'm not in India, places like that. But there are very few people in this country that work as dirty as I do, as the potter does.

[00:37:23.24]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, well you're down there with the mud, and everything, you know.

[00:37:25.67]

KAREN KARNES: And as hard. I mean, physically hard, and mucky. And it's not glamorous. And it's only as part of the structure—

[00:37:32.78]

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's heavy, too.

[00:37:33.05]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah. You really—I mean, it's part of the whole form of it, it has—I mean, I can express it as a very romantic thing. On the other hand, it's really filthy, mucky hard work—building kilns, carrying bricks, carrying cement—all of that. And I come out of a different background, though.

[00:37:54.29]

My parents wanted me to be a schoolteacher or a doctor, or something. And my mother has never accepted really, with pleasure, to see me mucking. But still, I could have professionally been a white-collar type. There's no doubt about it. I went to college. And I could have gotten a doctorate, and practically—you know, I could have been a different kind of person.

[00:38:16.25]

But I think I had a sound enough value to know that this life is really worthwhile. And then, I can dig in the muck, because I have all these other things that means so much. And I think that the really, disadvantaged—that's the word we use nowadays—that person has to kind of move up a little bit in status, and become the white-collar—I mean, get those kind of possibilities, to then see well that's pretty boring. I mean, I'm getting a good salary. And I'm in this clean office building. And by God, I'm bored to death. You know, I better be doing this interesting work, and to sort of walk back into the clouds.

And perhaps, until that—they have to go through that cycle of having the possibility of choice, that they can be the other thing before they might value the hard work of the crafts. Because the jeweler is the same way. I mean, all of the crafts are really—they still have that primitive connection of the early days, when people worked very hard, as well as had art. I mean, it's not just art. It's school as well.

[00:39:22.32]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

[00:39:23.19]

KAREN KARNES: Because somebody was saying about having worked with children—Hi, honey. [Recorder stops, restarts.]

[00:39:28.11]

I was saying about some program where they were working with the school children to try to build a kiln, do something. And this little child just wouldn't, wouldn't. And then, suddenly it came out that this little Negro child—she was told to carry this bucket of clay or something. I mean, that's—you know, that's: "You're my slave. You go carry my clay." Whereas, the middle-class—I hate this label. [Dog barking.]

But the middle-class child—well, that's all part of the fun, they can dig around the muck, and their parents wouldn't—I mean, the Negro parent—you go, "What did you do in school?" "I carried this muck." "Well, what do you mean? Is that what you—" The other parent sees it quite differently. Maybe they have to go through that cycle before they can really get there. And I'd be interested in the life of crafts. I don't know, just the thought going into your archives. We'll see 50 years from now.

[00:40:30.12]

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Okay. I really don't have any more—

[00:40:33.39]

KAREN KARNES: I think we're done.

[00:40:34.23]

PAUL CUMMINGS: —questions. Unless there's something you think I've left out or you would like to talk about.

[00:40:38.85]

KAREN KARNES: I just wanted to give you my last little bit of something. [Dog barking.] Because I'm not even sure. Are the Black kids going into those communes and being farmers and things? I don't think so. They're not, are they? It's the middle-class, white children who come from comfortable homes, who know they don't want that anymore. And now they're going out and—

[00:40:58.92]

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it's an alternative. They can always go back, too.

[00:41:02.64]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, well, we'll have to see in 20 years if they've stayed there or gone back. I mean, that's the question too, isn't it?

[00:41:09.93]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Okay. Well, if that's it now.

[00:41:14.07]

KAREN KARNES: Yeah. Turn it off.

[END OF TRACK AAA\_karnes71\_8718\_m]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

