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Oral history interview with Keith Sonnier, 1972 August 3

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Keith Sonnier on 1972 August 3. The interview took place at Sonnier's studio in New York, New York, and was conducted by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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

Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's on and say it is the third of August, 1972. Paul Cummings talking to Keith Sonnier in his studio on Mulberry Street. Well, you were born in Louisiana, right?

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What—when?

KEITH SONNIER: Forty-one.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What date?

KEITH SONNIER: July 31.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And where is that town, Mamou?

KEITH SONNIER: Mamou—M-A-M-O-U. It's usually spelled wrong.

PAUL CUMMINGS: O-U. Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] M-A-N?

KEITH SONNIER: M-A-M-O-U. It's New Guinea, Africa.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Whereabouts is that?

KEITH SONNIER: It's in Southwest Louisiana. It's about 200 miles west of New Orleans and it's the beginning of the Texas panhandle. And the end of the tropical area.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Is it a small place?

KEITH SONNIER: Small town, yeah. I guess it was incorporated in the—maybe around '25?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, so it's new. Or not that—

KEITH SONNIER: Or maybe it wasn't incorporated. Maybe it was incorporated earlier than that. I'm really not sure on the date. But it really grew in the—I think '30 to '50s is when it grew.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what kind of background do you come from? Do you have brothers and sisters?

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, an older brother and a younger brother. One brother is here in New York and the other brother is out of town.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do they have art interests or?

KEITH SONNIER: Younger brother, yes, was—began as a music student but he's no longer interested in music. He's in Europe, moving around.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What are their names?

KEITH SONNIER: Older brother's name is Charles Sonnier, younger brother, Barry.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of schools did you go to?

KEITH SONNIER: I went to a small, public school in the town. This school was pretty bilingual in the primary grades and then more and more English spoke—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was it French or Cajun, Patois?

KEITH SONNIER: Patois.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

KEITH SONNIER: But pretty, kind of, strong.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you grew up with two languages?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, yeah, in two, the Patois and a little bit of schooling in French and English. But it made French very easy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, because you heard it all the time.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you, you know, start drawing when you were young like so many people do?

KEITH SONNIER: Sure, yeah, made things. I always made things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You made things rather than drawing or did you do that, too?

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, well, you know, one follows the other and one was part of the other. You know, some way visualizing in some way, not—maybe not really drawing because not really—drawing really isn't you know, stressed, or at least it wasn't in school. It was just something that we might do.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

KEITH SONNIER: In our spare time or something. But always making things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of things—

KEITH SONNIER: You know, the kinds of things that kids made.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, okay. [Laughs.] Was there an interest in the arts at home or not?

KEITH SONNIER: Very—you could pursue any interest you really wanted to. I never had really problems—

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it was open.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, it was really open.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

KEITH SONNIER: Just as long as you were pursuing something.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about reading? Were there books around? Were you interested in reading?

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, there were books around, but I never really read that much until I learned to read to get information. I never really read that much for pleasure. I usually read for information just because I was so plugged in there, you know? I grew up with television and radio and a lot of sound around, music. So I didn't really have to read that much.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It kept coming in through the—electronically.

KEITH SONNIER: And so I do—you know, I read for pleasure now but still more for information. I have to get some information out of it too, in order to make it worth the while.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you don't read much fiction, then?

KEITH SONNIER: Rarely.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of things do you read now?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, things the way my interest might be going at the time, you know, could range from anything. Animal or plant life to—hold on a second—the newspaper, current events.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it brings you all over? There's no particular pattern.

KEITH SONNIER: No, if I travel someplace, I usually you know, like am with that place in reading a lot or in you know, thinking about it and maybe picking up information, not necessarily from reading, maybe from other things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You won't read about a place before you go but afterwards?

KEITH SONNIER: No, that's not true. I really made an attempt about reading about India before I went to India but it was nothing like being there. [They laugh.] I mean, I just, you know I learned five times as much just being there one day than reading two books. So if I can—if the experience can be immediate, I'd just sooner have it immediate rather than you know, transposed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: More direct confrontation rather than an interpretive one or an acted one, yeah.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was it like living in that town? Were there—lots of active in school activities or family activities or not?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, the town was very small so you could—there was room to be as eccentric as you wanted to be, in a way. And lots of people in the town were. So—

PAUL CUMMINGS: How so? I think that's interesting because so many other people say small towns are constricting and yet you say that—

KEITH SONNIER: Well, just the nature of the people in the town were very free people, in a way, not—I don't think they think the way most southerners think.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think that's from the French influence?

KEITH SONNIER: I think it has a lot to do with it, probably not only French but all the different, maybe more Latin migrations in that particular area where I was. Other parts of the Deep South didn't really have—or it didn't stick.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You went to a local school till what? Till you went to university? Was there a high school there?

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, I went to the same high school in my home town. It was very easy going there. I went to school in the morning and I came home in the afternoon. It was very easy because I just—I—it was so small in a way that I could get out of going to school.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How'd you do that?

KEITH SONNIER: Just—[laughs]—by not going.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what kind of things were you interested in during the high school years?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I guess the kind of surface things that everyone, you know, is interested in or goes through at that period of time in America in a way and the American high school. But it was never so concentrated being—going to school in such a small place. It was—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you active in sport, anything like that?

KEITH SONNIER: I wasn't really active in school at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You kind of went.

KEITH SONNIER: I just went and I didn't really have that many problems doing it. I didn't really learn that much information, but I learned a lot about people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you good in academic courses?

KEITH SONNIER: If I wanted to, I could. I was never very good in mathematics, just because I think I just didn't have any kind of background; I just didn't really learn it. And what I did learn was a very, kind of intuitive, easy to use, everyday mathematics, which was okay.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were there any instructors that you remember particularly?

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, there were some fantastic characters that I really liked.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of people, or classes or relationships were there?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, there was a fantastic librarian who was a paraplegic, who was just very delightful, a fantastic mind and entertaining. And lots of different other kinds of teachers, and you know, could fill this whole plane.

People like—there was one teacher that was very interested in collecting local dialect in tape and sound. So I heard lots of music, you know, recorded music, and—[inaudible]—vocal music. And that was interesting. He was a bit interested in writing, too, wrote a bit.

Other stuff—I didn't really get much information from them, but just studying their characters—say, for instance, studying with someone for a year—was really very interesting

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the music? Did you get interested in any particular kind of music? Local folk music, or, you know, radio folk music?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, there's a real music tradition that still goes on there, not only in folk, but even in other more commercial aspects, like dancing is not really frowned upon as it might be, say, in the northern part of the state, which is Anglo-Saxon Protestant, maybe, and would not have roadhouses and different kinds of bands and combos, and having young people dancing and being able to drink, and to be in an adult social situation just because of the music.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, for the cultural background.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, I find that interesting because you seem to draw a line across the state at some point. What—what am I trying to get at? How do you see the area you come from as being freer and more open? What do you think that quality is? What are the influences that seem to be apparent to you?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, it's a number of things. There was no industry. It was a kind of forming culture until the '50s, I think. Just small businesses. So people really still related very much to environmental situations. Just living in that climate and not really being plugged in, in some way, air-conditioned and whatever, to just stand it, just made the people, I think, develop in a certain way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was it one of those towns like—of which there are so many in this country—that, you know, where there are maybe 4,000 people and 40 different churches.?

KEITH SONNIER: No, it was pretty—I mean, it was mainly a Catholic town with smaller churches that might be Baptist, Protestant. But the thing—the people were pretty much the same, because before the town's incorporating it was still a prairie, it was just an outpost town. There wasn't even a church there. So anybody who came in to the town could get a flock in a way. [Laughs.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: I get the feeling that, in a way, it's a very new kind of town, almost 20th century, rather than something that started in the 19th century.

KEITH SONNIER: Well, yeah, it is. And it looks very new now. It doesn't look at all like it looked—I mean, it just changed very fast. Just how things can be built very quickly now, and there's a whole style of architecture that's taken over the South now. And the automobile is—people have two now, rather than one. So they're not so isolated; they can move from one place to another.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What's the nearest large metropolitan area? Or large-ish?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, there's several around, like Lafayette is about 50 miles southwest from Mamou. And it has a university there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Which is where you went—

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, the university is still—has a large population that is from this area. And even a South American student body, too. Like there were always students that were from Caracas and Panama and Mexico.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's very interesting, because when Antonio Frasconi came to this country, the place he wanted to start was New Orleans, because that was his first—you know, from South America where he went.

KEITH SONNIER: Well, it's a kind of good introduction to—I mean, especially if you're coming from South America. But that's all changing now, I think, just because, I think, of the automobile, and more and more luxury items. It's really changing the people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think the radio, and television and all that—

KEITH SONNIER: Definitely, but still programs that are still so localized in a way. Information, like off-air information is—for most people—is pretty standardized because maybe you need a better kind of equipment, maybe to get news from New York or the other coast, or even Europe. And most people wouldn't have that, so they would be getting a kind of local, watered-down dose of what might actually be happening.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And later, after the fact.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how'd you decide to go to the university in Lafayette? Was that because it was handy, or —

KEITH SONNIER: It was the easiest place to go. [Laughs.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have a major, some particular thing you wanted to do, or—

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I was interested in history or maybe anthropology, something like that. And I had pretty strong interest about art then, too, which really developed when I was really in high school, I think. I was ill for a year when I was in high school, and that really changed—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Ah, what was that?

KEITH SONNIER: I think—let's see, after freshman year, must have been 15, 16, I had meningitis for say, three months, so I was really out of it for about three months, and was forced not to get information from the outside. I really had to get information on my own, not really from observing people or from the media. So that's when I knew that I really had to—there was only so little information I could get there. I had to go some other place to get it, so then I went 50 miles away.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The nearest—[inaudible]. Well, what happened during your illness that got you involved with art and the ideas of it?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I think just time and self-reflection, probably, rather than being—I think when most people are that age, their life is just so regimented in a way, you know, like you go through motions in a way rather than really observing the motions.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You go to school, and then you come home, and study, go to school and come home.

KEITH SONNIER: Right, right, right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Had you had art classes in high school, then?

KEITH SONNIER: No, never any kind of art class. I just picked up information from—I had never even seen a painting—[inaudible]. Well, I had seen paintings, but I hadn't really seen any contemporary art until—the actual art—until I went to school.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of paintings had you seen before this?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I think, you know, the kind of occasional painting you might run across. Or there was a fantastic billboard painter in the small town.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

KEITH SONNIER: Right, who painted on the side—huge murals on the side of rice dryers and cotton gins.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, wow. What kind of things did he paint?

KEITH SONNIER: Animal scenes, usually. Ducks, geese.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Local animals.

KEITH SONNIER: Right, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Just as decoration.

KEITH SONNIER: Right, yeah. And anything else—I've made no distinctions, really, between was art and what wasn't. I mean, at all. Just if something was made, I mean, it could have even been like going into a bar or

something. If I liked the interior, I mean, I would like that, say, as much as Chardiet Signpayer's [ph] duck scene. So there was no real steady criteria at all. And so, wherever the sensation was the best, in a way—

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was it, yeah. Well, you did go to Lafayette, for what, 4 years, right? You got a B.A. in painting.

KEITH SONNIER: Actually, it was in painting and sculpture.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, and sculpture. What happened when you went there? What did you start with, and what kind of classes and things happened.

KEITH SONNIER: [Inaudible, background noise]—because I had—there was some interesting people going through there all the time, in a way. It seemed like a place where instructors, maybe from the East or from the West might stop off there for one year on their way West or North, in a way. And that was kind of interesting, in a way. Not so much what they had to say, I think, as just where they were from, and where they had been and where they were going, in a way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The transient image.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah. And then there were other instructors there who just had lots of information. In a way, they were like information banks. I mean, you could just plug in—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Throw a quarter in and—

KEITH SONNIER: Right. [Laughs.] And get lots of information.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you start with art classes or did you have preliminary—

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I started with a kind of a general art class. And I was even thinking of doing commercial work, because I really thought that that's really where the focus was, and that's really what I wanted to do. And that was impossible. Going to college was so much more structured that having gone to high school, which was just—I mean, if liked the information, I took it. If not, I found some ingenious way to get out of it.

So I immediately, you know, as soon as something just wasn't right for me—it wasn't a question. I guess I was—I knew then that if it wasn't going to be interesting, I just couldn't stay with it, so I'd have to change to something else.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I can't remember if that university has an art collection or not. Do they?

KEITH SONNIER: This university? Not really. I mean, they have works by local artists who have been through there. So like you have—at least when I was there, you had maybe a kind of third-hand view of maybe what might have been going down maybe from Europe, or maybe from the East.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, did you read art magazines?

KEITH SONNIER: Not really. I never read art magazines until I came to New York, and I still don't read them; I look at the pictures.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right. Well, what kind of art classes did you take there. Were there any provocative instructors?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I had an interesting instructor who became a very good friend, too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who's that?

KEITH SONNIER: His name is Calvin Harlem. He's written a book on teaching, actually. I think it's Prentice Hall. Came out last year. I don't have the book, and I've never read it. And I never liked so much his method of teaching as the amount of information he had in a way. He had traveled a lot, and knew a lot about Japan and a lot about contemporary music. And an understanding, I think—more an understanding of 20th century philosophy, rather than the actual art, in a way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mean in the ideas, rather than the actual images, what they were—

KEITH SONNIER: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What year was he an instructor there?

KEITH SONNIER: About the second year that I was there, the second or third. And then I knew him for the

remainder of the time there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you get involved with student life, student activates, or not?

KEITH SONNIER: Not really. I lived alone the whole time I was there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

KEITH SONNIER: Just about. I did have—when I first went there I stayed in a kind of rooming house. I didn't stay in this college head campus, but I stayed in a rooming house, and then I had a job there, too, and I stayed in a rooming house where some of the same people worked at this job. I was a switchboard operator for the university. So I was actually running the university—[laughs]—mechanically for a couple of hours a day or night. And I kind of liked that. It was during—I was along, working, and it was very pleasant.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Channeling all that activity.

KEITH SONNIER: Right. [Laughs.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, where there any—outside of the academic activities—things that interested you, or not?

KEITH SONNIER: Oh, sure. I had friends, lots of friends. There were always fantastic things to do, in a way. Lots of bars, lots of dancing places and lots of music places. And there are always festivals there, at one time or another.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And kind of—

KEITH SONNIER: Well, everything from Mardi Gras to the 11th—Armistice Day. You know, an excuse for a celebration.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how large a city is Lafayette?

KEITH SONNIER: It's grown so much. Now, it's really become a business area. It's kind of the business center for oil speculation in Gulf now, the Gulf of Mexico, so it's gotten a very different—very business veneer to it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, had you traveled much around there by yourself or with your family before or during college?

KEITH SONNIER: I went with my family to Mexico when I was maybe 10, and a trip to Canada when I was about, maybe 12. And I had taken trips to New Orleans, but never really had been out of the state.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was Mexico like?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I like Mexico. I'm very fond of Mexico. I go back to Mexico whenever I can. I like Southern Mexico—the Yucatan area very much.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What appeals to you in that?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, there's something about a city like Merida. And I think Port-au-Prince, Haiti has it, too. And India has it, too, but of course, India has this huge population to deal with, too. But just the way that people live and act on the street and with themselves. They seem to be so—they're really close to the physical realities, in a way. And they confront you—especially in Haiti more than Mexico—they confront you with their personality, instantly, in a way. It's not so—which can still happen in the South, too, but you have to be cautious.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way? [Laughs.]

KEITH SONNIER: Well, for it to happen, because it just might not happen. There's still that degree, whereas here in the East and in Europe, you have to greet people on a social kind of level first. You have to through maybe several devices in order to get out one thought, in a way, whereas you could release 100 just in a facial expression or a gesture or something, which—that doesn't happen.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it's a different kind of civilization, really, that's involved. When did you go to Haiti?

KEITH SONNIER: I've just come back. I went to Haiti before going to Europe.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was early summer this year.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, it was. And at home for a short while, but it was a very, very pleasant stay there, a really interesting place.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why did you want to go?

KEITH SONNIER: I think I just wanted to really see a Western black culture operate, and that was one of the main interests, aside from getting out of New York. And I had never been to the Caribbean—I've been to a small island off the coast of the Yucatan, which is kind of the beginning of the chain, and I didn't feel like going to a place like—[inaudible]—it's all about tourism, and very expensive.

And I'd heard a lot about Haiti and was interested in the dialect because I can speak the dialect, in a way, because it's very similar to the dialect in Louisiana, and that was a delight. I mean, I liked hearing the sounds and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you find that made communication easier?

KEITH SONNIER: Oh, yeah, much easier. And the music was just fantastic. It was everywhere on the street.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How long were you there?

KEITH SONNIER: Oh, about three weeks.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How was traveling there?

KEITH SONNIER: It's difficult. I mean, you have to make an effort to move, unless you can rent an automobile. But even doing something like that involved a big production, in a way. You have to almost get to know the person you're actually going to business with, in a way. It's still very localized.

But I took a bus, and I flew, and I walked and I took taxis. And walking is difficult, because every part of Haiti is somehow owned, in a way, no matter how small. And so you're always walking through someone's—part of someone's life, in a way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way? I don't—

KEITH SONNIER: Well, even like walking down the street, you're walking through maybe someone's area or space, in a way. And you sense that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Everything's very divided, or is it—

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I mean if you're Haitian, it's all one. But if you're not, it's very different. And Haiti's locally very different, like Port-au-Prince is making this attempt at becoming this future Puerto Rico, in a way, but they just can't do it yet. They just don't have it. Well, they just don't have American money in there yet, or building hotels. But that's happening, I think they're building a Hilton there now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's the beginning, isn't it?

KEITH SONNIER: But still, there's Port-au-Prince and there are just no roads in Haiti. The roads a river beds, so travel is a problem. So if you go across the mountains to a city like Jacmel, which is an 18th century colonial city, I mean, it looks like a city in Southern France.

It's just—it's almost deserted. There was a fire Jacmel, I think in the '20s or something. It was a big port, and now it's just kind of a ghost town, in a way. There are all these big, beautiful buildings that are empty, burned out. And then a much smaller village community and one hotel in a town. And a bit of fishing and lots of agriculture.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So let's get back to Lafayette here.

KEITH SONNIER: Which is not Haiti.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you know, working for your Bachelor's degree, did you have any intent? Were you interested in teaching, or using it in any particular way?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I didn't really know what one did after one did that. I mean, I hadn't really—pretty green about it—I didn't really know that much about college teaching and what one does. That is like a possible out, in a way, for an artist. And so at the end of it, I really couldn't make any decisions, so I just went to—I was fortunate enough to be able to get away. I went to Europe for about a year-and-a-half. And that was a good thing to do because I got some distance on—[inaudible, background noise].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were there are any other people at Lafayette that were interesting besides this one professor, instructors that—

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, there was another teacher that was very interesting, too. His name was William Moreland, and he was a painter. He was Louisiana, Harlem was from Arkansas, a small town in Arkansas. And he was interesting in other ways. I didn't really like—he had a much more mystical approach to life, which was—I always thought him too rational to our—I just couldn't buy that, because I had been through mystical situations before. I mean, going through a kind of Catholicism and having some distance. I mean, I just couldn't relate that to an art situation anymore at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way couldn't you?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, to think of art as having that place, in a way, or servicing some kind of pseudo-mystical, quasi-religious place, which is not the place it really—I felt it could have. I don't think I knew this then. I'm thinking back on this line.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm curious why, how you'd say that you had experienced it. Then when it came up in this other form through this man, you rejected it.

KEITH SONNIER: Well, it wasn't really a rejection, but I think I felt as if it was a kind of—it was exhausted in a way. I couldn't—I'd exhausted that way of thinking, in a way, which, now, I don't think so at all. I mean, now, it was a quite rich experience, in a way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now, which experience, because—

KEITH SONNIER: I mean, going through a kind of mystical, religious period. You know, when I was a younger child, I mean, going, the whole idea of attending mass—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Simply through school; primary school and high school—

KEITH SONNIER: Right, yeah, and then viewing—you know, then trying to give the religion—because the religion—I mean, the kind of Catholicism that I experienced was, I think, not the type of Catholicism that you usually experience in America, because it was much freer, in a way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Took a lot with—

[Cross talk.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: —and the Irish.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, but still, you know, it was happening in America and there are those American values which, in a sense, helped me make the change in a way to—or gave me, you know, some insight into what was actually going down.

And as soon as the Church ceased, I think, to like, perform a kind of social function, as soon as it made demands—that I didn't want to make, in a way—[laughs]—I just couldn't deal with it anymore.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So what happened, you dropped it? Or suspended it?

KEITH SONNIER: Just suspended it, in a way, which was difficult to do because, you know, coming from this small town, and really very connected, and a very connected family, you know, into the Church—having that slice out of life. But I managed it. [Laughs.] So it wasn't that difficult.

But going back to him, he was a very intelligent person. That was just only one—that was maybe his approach or his insight to it. And I felt that it was just a little bit too—I mean, you just can't make art about that kind of situation even if it's abstract art; no matter if you're thinking in those terms and you're abstracting your thoughts in those terms, it's still not really art; it's something else. Maybe it's knitting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So the whole idea of a fabulous painting of the Madonna just—

[Cross talk.]

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, and it doesn't necessarily have to be—I'm not even talking about, you know, a literal painting of a Madonna or, you know, anything. It could be anything, but it—just if it has even that kind of suggestion, in a way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it can't be art in the service of.

KEITH SONNIER: Right, in a way, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Does that mean it's art for art's sake, then, or not.

KEITH SONNIER: No, it's more art for your sake, I think. Not for art's sake. [Laughs.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Okay. How did you decide to go to France after finishing university?

KEITH SONNIER: Oh, it was an easy move to make, in a way. You know, not too much of a language problem; a good place to go for a while to find out what maybe Europe was about.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, was France kind of an image in the culture that you came from?

KEITH SONNIER: In a very romantic way. Not really that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I mean, say, in the sense that certain parts of the country, when there's a place to look to, or Germany as a place—

KEITH SONNIER: Right, yeah, of course. Yeah, there was that kind of a form of nationalism, maybe, in a way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what did you do in France for the year?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, first of all, I lived in Normandy. I mean, I still couldn't go to the big city, yet! I lived in Normandy for about three months, and then I went to Paris.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you paint or work or do anything?

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, I went to several of the art schools around, you know, and looked at what they were doing. It looked very much like the same thing I had been doing. I mean, it didn't seem that much different.

And I didn't really have that much understanding of what was really going on in New York at the time. I really began to see contemporary art coming out of New York that maybe that was shown in Paris. So I saw some contemporary American art there, and that was more interesting than the, you know, the art being made in Paris.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what kind of painting and sculpture did you do while you were at university?

KEITH SONNIER: In a way, the kind of art that people taught me to do. I mean, anything that someone did, I looked at and did it, in a way—kind of blindly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have figure drawing, still life painting, standards?

KEITH SONNIER: All, yeah, you know, the kind of standard drawings; drawing kind of art school.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How kind of tuned in were they on modern art?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, there is a kind of, you know, there is a kind of understanding of art in all art schools—you know, most of them today, especially today. But sometimes, it can be—you end up dealing with, like, a person's personality; what he's injecting about the art and never really about the experience. So it's, in a way, it's not you experiencing it, so it's really—you're really not getting it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Too much interpretation.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah. And, I mean, it's possible for people to develop that way and be quite content with that, but that's just not—it's nothing about really making art, in a way. It's about studying about it, maybe, or trying to understand how it was made. But the thing is not so much to understand how it's made as what it's really about.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And the fact that yesterday's solutions aren't necessarily today's, yeah. Well, what happened when you got to Paris? You said you started seeing American paintings there?

KEITH SONNIER: Saw American painting and all of the kind of traditional French, you know, all the painting that is in the museums there. And going to the museums, you know, were no different, say, than going to a church, in a way. It was all kind of similar.

I mean, it wasn't that much fun, maybe, to go to the Louvre or something because it would just be, like, walking through this huge attic or something, and just being able to recognize things that you might have seen in books or something, like, postage stamps or something. It wasn't really—I still wasn't really experiencing the art. I really think it's impossible to understand really what something is about.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what sense?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I'm talking about it in a, I guess—well, like, if you see a movie, you're confronted with, like, the narrative structure. But you're allowed to build whatever kind of plot, story, drama you want to inject into it, you can.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So your own possibilities of identification.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, and it was—I mean, like, seeing something in the Louvre, maybe the people looking at it are as interesting as fact that they are there [ph].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you paint in Paris? Did you have a studio?

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, I had a studio for a while there. And I studied—I went to all the kind of local academies that most other artists went to in Paris.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mean, the drawing and—

[Cross talk.]

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, right. And really just kind of looked at them, in a way, and tried to draw. I did end up going to one more than the other.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Which was that?

KEITH SONNIER: I went to the Loutre Académie, which is no longer Loutre Académie. But it was run by this Russian artist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who's that?

KEITH SONNIER: Whose name was Poliakoff, but not Serge Poliakoff. I think his name was Nicolas Poliakoff. And he just made paintings that were copies of Loutre's paintings. But it was a nice—it wasn't a very crowded studio. There were maybe only five people there. And lots of models—Tahitians, Haitians—and I liked looking at them. [Laughs.]

And the people that were there were kind of interesting; I kind of liked them. And it was a kind of entertaining place to go. And I did draw a bit and I did kind of learn how to draw.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you get criticisms from him?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, in a way, but I never really listened to them because everything I did was never really correct as far as, you know, any kind of instruction. It was all about doing something like—you know, following a certain kind of diagram.

It was never about, you know, like, doing whatever you wanted to do there. He would get very upset. He was a real kind of traditional instructor; you know, like, of an old European art master, in a way.

[Cross talk.]

KEITH SONNIER: It was hilarious, I mean, I think it was like a kind of comedy going there. And he liked to yell and make speeches about how impossible it would be.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what kind of—I can't really visualize what you were doing. How would you describe—because you weren't doing the kind of academic rendering of a figure, were you?

KEITH SONNIER: No, not really. I was kind of drawing, I think, in a kind of cubist, sectional—like, this is how you draw this—and volume, you know, learning how to draw in volume, because I'd never really learned how to draw when I was in art school, in undergraduate school, because to try to draw anything realistically, in a way, was just impossible. I never could do it. It was too much work.

So I never really did that kind of drawing. And it was the first time I had really attempted to, like, draw an actually volumetric situation that wasn't an object but a person. And in that way, it was kind of interesting to do it there because that's what he knew how to do.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you became a part of that tradition.

KEITH SONNIER: Right. And it was easy to do after a while. And then I got—I really only went there maybe for about a month.

And then I started doing other things. I designed fabric, I think it was. I had another friend—or, several friends—

and we would just design abstract prints that would be used for fabric design or something. You would get $25 a study, if they bought them. And did that for two nights. And so all of them—and then left. [Laughs.] And traveled a bit; went to Rome, went to London, and came back to Paris.

I had friends there. I met some artists there. I didn't really meet that many Americans there. Plus, I had another job there, too, in a cabaret. Like, doing the sets, the lights. And that was entertaining.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How'd you get into that?

KEITH SONNIER: Met someone who was working there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were there any French artists that I would recognize or know?

KEITH SONNIER: No. None of them I've ever heard of again.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really. They disappeared—

KEITH SONNIER: Or maybe they're still there doing the same thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you never kept up with them in any correspondence.

KEITH SONNIER: I didn't really establish that—I was really, like, a kind of tourist, in a way. I had friends but it's like, you know, I can change very easily, it seems.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what brought you back to this continent?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I had to make some kind of decision because I didn't have money to stay there any longer and I was really tired with Europe. And I knew I didn't want to go back to Louisiana. So I was very lucky and I got an assistantship at Rutgers, a teaching assistantship.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did it come to be Rutgers? Did you meet somebody again?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, actually, the person that I knew in Louisiana—a good friend of mine—was a teacher—knew someone teaching there, or knew the head of the department and wrote to him. And so I had a letter of introduction.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was—who was it then?

KEITH SONNIER: That was Calvin Harlan who wrote the letter and the head of the department's Reggie Neal, Reginald Neal. And I got an assistantship there for the 2 years that I was there. And I taught while I was there. And, you know, lots of interesting people went through the school.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, that was the mid-'60s, right? Who was there? You know, what were you teaching?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I was teaching the introductory courses. The first courses there. And studying at the same time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who were you studying with?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, there were several people. I really came back studying sculpture, in a way. I took mainly sculpture courses and art history courses. And I studied—the sculpture teachers were Robert Watts one year; and Robert Morris came for one year. So I studied with him and got to know him and became friends. Segal was there because he lived near there; Gary Kean [ph], who was another—was a very good friend of Segal's, and I got to meet Segal.

And did a lot of work there, in a way. It was a good time to be there, in a way, because it wasn't a very big school yet. And I made lots of work. I really hadn't made that much in Europe; I really hadn't done anything but just look for a year and a half. So I was quite enthusiastic about doing things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how'd you like teaching?

KEITH SONNIER: Teaching was okay. I guess I did okay at it but I really learned to dislike it more and more. And after I got out of Rutgers, I taught for a year. And it was very difficult. And I ended up teaching more art history than studio courses.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where did you teach the other year?

KEITH SONNIER: I taught the other year at another school in Newark. I got a job there and taught there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What rubbed you the wrong way about teaching?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, the main thing about teaching was, I think, just having to deal with the university system and the whole art department structure, which is not really about having a working artist there at all. It's about having some prize pig that you expect to jiggle and get something out of. And that was the worst part.

But I liked the student contact. But it wasn't the right kind. It should have been—I mean, I had objection to the kind of space. I mean, I can't teach if I'm not comfortable in the space. And I felt as if the students weren't either. I mean, it just wasn't the kind of space to be in.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what kind of space were you given? Was it a regular classroom or a studio?

KEITH SONNIER: Right, a classroom with some tools and no place to sit down. [Laughs.] Really, in a way. And you ended up having to do so much, like, maybe to offer some information just to get the information together was such a job because the university just was a new school. It didn't have any facility, really, so you had to end up being the facility. And that was really too demanding, in a way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How were the students? Were there any that have gone on to do things that you remember?

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, I've actually heard from some of the students. And they've done a variety of things. Some of them actually didn't go into art, which I think is probably wise. Because the thing about art school is that there are just so many people that just in no way, I mean, there's no possible way that—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I think a lot of—

KEITH SONNIER: Forcing them to be teachers and that kind of thing is just wrong. But that's wrong with our whole educational system. It doesn't only happen in the arts; it happens in everything.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I think there are a lot of people who try the art in their college years as an alternate way of looking at things, or maybe a new experience, that really don't have any desire to become painters, sculptors, even art teachers, or anything.

KEITH SONNIER: Right, but the worst thing about American education is that the amount of money that you spend for it, you could travel around the world maybe three times or something; and get five times as much information. So it just seems totally absurd—[audio break].

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PAUL CUMMINGS: Anyway, this is side 2. Well, what kind of work were you doing when you moved to Rutgers and started teaching? I get the feeling you were still feeling around and testing.

KEITH SONNIER: Pretty much, yeah. I wasn't really making—I think I made things kind of blindly, not really assessing the match they were made, in a way, just—

PAUL CUMMINGS: The experience of making them.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, right, and not really—

PAUL CUMMINGS: But were these real objects?

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, real objects.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean in the sense of after something, or abstract things...

KEITH SONNIER: Well, it was a kind of natural progression from—and which is the kind of progression that's kind of forced on you in any kind of art school education, where you have a real situation and a supposedly abstracted situation. And one is obviously taught that to seek abstraction, to avoid reality, which I think was really—that's a terrible misfocusing of our historical situation, in a way. We tend to think of it as a separate thing. And I think it's because of the—the photograph has kind of brought us to our senses, in a way, that we no longer think of reality in that way, and abstraction in that way.

So that aspect of making art was very clear when I got to Rutgers. And it was just maybe working that out and trying to find out what the art was to mean rather than what the art actually is, physically.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But how did you find working with Bob Watts or Bob Mars because they're quite different in their aesthetics and ideas. So did you find it useful to play against, or did you get involved—

KEITH SONNIER: It was interesting to observe the variety, because it was diverse, but there's still—I mean in Mars and Watts—there's a kind of subversive, maybe dada element in the work, which might be the only way you could relate them, because in the end the works of—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mars is more classical.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, right. But the interesting thing is in the way their minds worked, I think. They just worked in different ways.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, did you start coming to New York galleries and seeing the museums and things. Did you get involved in the art scene in New York, or not so much?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, in a way. Viewing it as an outsider, I think I still do. [Laughs.] But being very much a part of it, living it, in a way. It's very vital, it can be very vital.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Do you find there's a difference? Because that was in '64 or '66, roughly. Do you feel there's a great difference between that time and now?

KEITH SONNIER: Oh, yeah. I think that—that's water [ph]. There comes a time when you feel as if you're no longer a student yet you're always looking. I mean, you're no longer—you can, maybe, assess other people's work and other people's thought, but it doesn't really alter your direction, in a way. You become very fixed. You're growing in that direction

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you've discovered your own center.

KEITH SONNIER: In a way, yes, and it's not a question of—which is a big mistake, I think—is that people think that an artist and a style and then one establishes a style, then that's kind of the end of a person's career, which has only narrowly begun to be cleared up. But this is New York, and I guess America puts everything in such a historical context.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, they want instant recognition and explanation, like oh yeah, that's a red four. And that's what everyone's supposed to agree with.

KEITH SONNIER: And I think when an artist, or when any person—it doesn't even have to be an artist—when just any thinking person realizes that, it's the first step in his development as a creative and a vital person.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you had an exhibition at Douglass College in '66. What was that?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I did a series of pieces that were plywood constructions. They were geometric. And they were a combination of wood and vinyl—clear plastic. And they had air currents in them. And the air was fed in with some kind of machine, like an air pump or something.

So they were inflated but they kept a kind of rigid form, some of them. Some of them had a kind of timed sequence where their structure altered. But they were physical objects—wall-to-floor or floor relationships.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They were large.

KEITH SONNIER: Large, yeah. Like human scale. Some of them were larger than humans. And some of them incorporated extruded objects, maybe like pipes and things to funnel the air in. Other plastic was constructed in a similar shape as the other objects.

So just kind dressing up a simplistic idea and putting it in a kind of modern, contemporary context, which was the first time I had ever really begun to do that; to assess it in its historical, modern idiom—like, if you make this, what is this as opposed to that? Does it have the same kind of meaning that that has even if it's very similar?

And then the work really began to change after really building those physical objects and not really working from objects and abstracting, or trying to—like, just to put down some kind of sensation without really being able to assess where it came from.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were these directly related to things that you were aware of? Or were they all—

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, they were forms that I had seen, in a way, from probably—I mean, I knew about the air systems because I had seen them as a child, like at a hardware store and they were around. And I had seen that kind of construction done. So it was like some method I had some understanding of. It was the first time I really applied a work/job situation to making art. And that was very important, in a way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you mean that?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, just like having some kind of skill; like, maybe you can—

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mean carpentry or—

KEITH SONNIER: Right. And using that skill to make art. And it not necessarily being an artist skill. And that really was very relevant because it just opened up a whole new approach, which I'm still really working on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Now, you were in a show that Willoughby Sharp organized about that same time—kinetic art.

KEITH SONNIER: Right. And I—

[Cross talk.]

KEITH SONNIER: —one of those air pieces.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the eccentric abstraction that Lucy Leppard did in '66?

KEITH SONNIER: And that was, again, one of those pieces from that series.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see. Were there many pieces in that?

KEITH SONNIER: There were about maybe 10, which are all destroyed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They are? Why?

KEITH SONNIER: At that point, I really destroyed whole series of works. And I still do.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh really, for what reason?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, there's no need to really have them around after they've been done. And if I can't really use it—because I really can't live with the works, I mean, after they're done because they just take up space if I may feel like doing something else.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But are these things that you could rebuild, say, or—

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, they could be rebuilt. But someone else would have to build them; I was really never intending to build them again.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So what is it, the experience that you were interested in and the activity or the—

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I really didn't perceive getting rid of them. I mean, they were building them with—they existed but then after they were built and seen, there was not really much need for them to be around, in a way. You know, unless someone wanted to take care of any.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Nobody wanted to take care of them. Well, after Rutgers, you went to a school in Newark, right, for what, a year?

KEITH SONNIER: Teaching there a year and I was living in New York.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did you move to New York?

KEITH SONNIER: After I finished, I stayed one more year in New York because I got married to a girl who was there and had one more year—Jackie Winsor. So I stayed there, and she finished one more year, then we both moved into New York the next year. That must have been '67 or '66 or something.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you were at Rutgers from '64 to '66.

KEITH SONNIER: So it was '67.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it was '67. She was a student?

KEITH SONNIER: She was a graduate student. And then we both came to New York and got a studio together. Well, actually, this place was another—[inaudible]—in the other side. And then a few years later, she got another studio just a few blocks away. And she's teaching at—[inaudible].

PAUL CUMMINGS: This year or next year?

KEITH SONNIER: This coming year. She's a sculptor.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You still married?

KEITH SONNIER: Sure. But it's kind of difficult, you know, to have studios in the same building, same place.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, you can't work in the same workspace. Well, you got involved with Leo Castelli somewhere along the line quite soon after you came to New York, right?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, the first year I was with Richard Bellamy, who came to see my work when I was at Rutgers. When I came to New York, I had some newer pieces that I made that weren't sound pieces at all. They were just, like, single unit objects; a repetitional object [*sic*].

PAUL CUMMINGS: For example? I don't—

KEITH SONNIER: Well, maybe it was—well, one piece—[inaudible]—was a 2-by-4 covered with foam rubber. But the foam rubber was in lumps. And it was then covered with material that's about 10 feet in length. And other pieces out of screening—window screening—that were in sections and they'd be all fastened together; some similar, maybe some not. And they were wall or floor pieces. But having some of the same kind of linear structure that the air pieces had.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Wasn't there one of those in that—[inaudible]—Castelli show, or had I seen one of those at Bellamy's?

KEITH SONNIER: Maybe you saw one of those at Bellamy's because the pieces that I showed at Castelli were latex wall pieces and—[inaudible]—which was a series that came, really, after those pieces. Because those were still built in Jersey; when I came to New York I started building pieces right into the wall, like the latex pieces.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm very interested because you seemed to—once you'd built those initial forms, the air forms, you've gotten into a great variety of material. How did that development go? Was it the material to the idea or the idea through the material or is it parallel?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, especially now, using video and using film and using sound is just—as before using the light—it's accessible material that's around that's easy to work with. It limits—I mean, you can do work quicker. You can present, maybe, the same idea in another format and save time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it's not really a rejection of more traditional material.

KEITH SONNIER: No, not really. But, I mean, in a way, they're going to become like your tape recorders: It's a fixture; it's—

[Cross talk.]

KEITH SONNIER: —a washing machine and a blender. So it's just—I would like to see some limit of what's happening; it seems like the only way to do it is to work with it to somehow—

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of limit?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I think that we're just overextending ourselves. I'm all for being plugged in if we are capable of taking the load. But if we're not—and I don't necessarily mean that physically not having power—I just don't know if we're really equipped to do it. And I guess that's a reason for really trying to make art out of it because it offers some kind of understanding.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm very interested in the use of the word "information," which you've used many, many times in a variety of ways. Now, what actually does that mean to you now? How do you use it in all these instances? It's obviously more than just facts, you know, a catalog of facts.

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I think it has to do with at what state you're in to be informed; how can you be informed rather than just going and picking up information. It's actually just being able to direct; having some say as to what you're going to hear, what you're going to listen to, what you're going to respond to.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it's sort of knowledge, then, as opposed to fact.

KEITH SONNIER: In a way, yeah. I mean, the fact might exist somewhere out of you. And it, maybe, becomes—when you become informed, it becomes part of your dialogue. But it could be—it doesn't even have to be that specialized. I mean, it could be anything from drinking a Coca-Cola to taking a new and exciting drug to riding in a helicopter to eating beans and rice.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, do you think, then—I'm curious about this—and then it's a little à propos a bunch of other recent interviews, actually. The fact that you made a series of objects that you've destroyed and subsequently you've made other objects which you've destroyed, what is your attitude, then, towards, quote, "the work of art?"

KEITH SONNIER: Well, it has to have a place. If there's no place for it, then there's no need having it. So after it's made, if there's no place for it, then there's no need for it. So it's pointless to kind of keep it as a kind of bartering tool or something.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you don't see it as an object to be traded back and forth amongst people.

KEITH SONNIER: To be used, yeah, I like—I mean, it should be using and traded. I just don't know if trading it in a commercial way is really going to fulfill any needs because the nature of the work now is maybe more public in response. So maybe you even need a group of people to experience it rather than one person or one-to-one relationship to an object.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, it's interesting because some of the exhibitions you've been involved with or put in through the anti-form exhibition and Lucy Leppard soft sculpture; you see modern art movement that's new media. What do you feel about being included in the concept shows by various critics? Are they meaningful to you?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, they get to be less and less, especially like a show on a huge scale where the work situation is so difficult, like a large exhibition-like document. It's not about work or even experiencing work. There are just too many people and too much to look at and too much to see. And you can't really treat art like you would treat a General Motors show or something. You just can't experience it the same way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it's interesting because I've—you know, the general kind of comment I've gotten about this documentary show—

[Cross talk.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: —so much and so confusing that people can't absorb it.

KEITH SONNIER: And the museums have a problem now, too, because they're in a way like the universities; have built these huge castles which do nothing but house art, in a way. And they have a very difficult time housing new art just because it might fuck up the system in some way. Like, if you have a certain kind of piece that's a modern, it might ruin the floor—[laughs]—or may cause the air conditioning system to go out of whack. So it's too limited in its—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what do you feel about that whole business of gallery/museum/artist relationship, which seems to be quite the big deal these days?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, the gallery, in a way, has replaced the patron. And when it works at its best—I'm speaking economically—it's very good for the artist to be able to have some kind of income to be able to work and not be forced to do something else. Although, it's possible, I mean, it's possible to do a variety of things. And it just makes it easier for some people than it does for others.

Unfortunately, the gallery situation has difficulties dealing with the art because it's kind of like a smaller museum, in a way. Things move faster but it's still involved with some of the same kind of economic and political problems that a museum has, like, how do you do something and it costs a certain amount of money and you can't really sell it. It's not really attainable enough, although I think there's just no need for it now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: For what?

KEITH SONNIER: For the art because it's maybe—

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mean, art as objects?

KEITH SONNIER: Or anything because it doesn't really fulfill—it does fulfill a need but the need is not really getting to the right people, in a way. I think that now we can really have larger art audiences than we've had before, and we don't really have them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mean, through video and film?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, that's an immediate way, yeah. But I think just maybe through that, it could become a more communal experience.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, but, in what way? I mean, the museums have difficulty exhibiting things and documented—[inaudible]—art spread all over its cities when it's available by going to see it or arbitrarily walking by it.

KEITH SONNIER: No, it would have to be some other way entirely. Well, I think it has to be—to experience it, maybe the groups have to be smaller and a variety of different groups. And then have changed through the groups of people basically [ph].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see. Instead of—

[Cross talk.]

KEITH SONNIER: Right. And in a way, it would be a new way of educating, too. And a new way of experiencing the art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think that group experience like that is viable? I mean, the theater, which is a fairly organized group experience, is having a difficult time, yet certain athletics, which are, again, "group," are very successful. Where do you see the artist and his activities coming into this?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I guess it's somewhere in between those two, in a way, today. It seems to kind of sit somewhere in between.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean, are you—like, some artists, they're interested in using the television because thousands of people can see something—yet they're seeing it individually rather than collectively.

KEITH SONNIER: Right, but the thing is the only way that would really work is if people can see it but then also see space around it. You know, like not only get this volume of information here, but also be able to take the information around this centralized eye.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Come back to that word information again. [Laughs.]

KEITH SONNIER: Right. Maybe I'm using it too much. It's an easy word to use.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, but why do you find it so easy? I mean, it obviously covers a concept which is—

KEITH SONNIER: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Well, I guess because the information, maybe, is a key to the sensation. If you can read some of the—if you can pick up a few cues from an object or a situation, you are somehow—you have some—you come to it with some information. You're not really left to—[inaudible].

That's what's so—you know, people are always kind of bowled over by the new style of art, in a way, and it's not so much that, maybe, the art is so different; it's that maybe they just don't understand the periphery information again—you know, the exterior of the object or the situation or the place or the time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, one thing that interests me is that a fair number of your work was in Schengen, Germany. What do you think of that? I mean, is it the expression—

KEITH SONNIER: Well, an artist always goes where there's a place to work, in a way, because his job is to make works, in a way—to make art. And Germany has offered a place—[inaudible]—a need, which is—you know, it's probably a combination of economical and artistic. The artist has a place in Europe, in a way—like, an assured place—where the artists doesn't have an assured place in America, which is probably to his benefit.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? You mean that he's as competitive as everybody else?

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, right, he's, you know, like a man on the street, too, in a way. He's never really been—he might be a superstar or—but that's very momentary. It's not—you know, you don't take that kind of—they just, they don't assume the same kind of types that they get from American artists for the European artists, just because the whole tradition of art is just so different in America.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, do you find that more stimulating?

KEITH SONNIER: Much more. You're allowed—I mean, you're still allowed the possibility of a place, and so you—and you know, you're not restricted, really. You can choose wherever.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Inaudible.] How about the things you've done in Germany? You talked there that there were certain preset problems that were—

KEITH SONNIER: Well, the earlier piece—I mean, I've been going to Germany now for 3 years—so the earlier

pieces there, to make them, it was very exciting because I was doing a series of light pieces here which were very difficult to do just because I could never really go to any—[inaudible]—factory, and it would cost a phenomenal amount of money to have something that was.

I went to Germany and I went to the largest factory there and spent two days and made five pieces in two days—just made a big garage right on the floor and they made them the next day.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, why was it so much easier there than here, do you think?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I think because the artist has a kind of crack [ph] someplace in Europe, whereas the artist in America doesn't have that. An artist isn't, maybe, supposed to have that kind of knowledge.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But have you gone to anybody here and found it wouldn't work, or—

KEITH SONNIER: It's possible to do it here; it's just that, that particular, you know, supplied the need that wasn't there. Whereas here, it's been possible to get a video studio—a commercial video studio to work in, whereas I was able to go to California—San Diego—in May to take—in a medical school, which was fantastic, because it was a working situation which I probably couldn't find in Europe, but I could find in America.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What's the problem with commercial studio availability?

KEITH SONNIER: They're just so busy with making commercials and making money that there's really, you know, no place—no room for the artist. Because he doesn't have the kind of economic status, and in the end, he doesn't really want to have that same kind of status because it—you know, different ends.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what got you into video?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, when I was doing a series of light pieces at the Lieve [ph], I tried to make a film. And film—I just really didn't like making the film because I couldn't really see the activity when he was recording and see it when it was happening. In video, I couldn't, like, read what was happening when it was happening so I could control it more.

So then, I started using video in '69 and I made a series of light pieces and other props—[inaudible, background noise]. There was a variety of things, I guess, just to use in front of the video camera. And I didn't only use a camera, but I used a projection camera. So things were projected at the same scale that they were actually happening in. So you had a real situation recorded and live at the same time.

So you could retrace or see anything—you know, anything that was actually happening. So in a sense, I guess that was a real change in the work because it got to more—I guess more involved—and it doesn't really have to be physically—with one's place and one's ego's place—you know, I, my, mine and yours really become very pronounced when you have it spelled out that way. And probably, I didn't know it at the time, but that was a real appeal. You know, to be able to use a machine in that way was very interesting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what—I'm trying to rephrase another idea—and I think that—I get the feeling that you're not interested in the kind of traditional attitudes towards works of art as being, you know, monumental or being precious objects. I guess it's the attitude you will do something and either arbitrarily destroy it yourself or something happens to it.

[Cross talk.]

KEITH SONNIER: Well, let's say I did—the last video piece I did at Castelli. I mean, in order to traditionalize the piece, the piece had to be momentary, because it was just too expensive to purchase the equipment and what do you do with it after your purchase it? I mean, who's going to buy all this equipment? There's no place for it, in a way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, but don't you think that, you know, in 5 years more people will have video equipment at home?

KEITH SONNIER: But what's the point of purchasing it and having it and not using it? It's like, you know, putting some—and it's not so much the objects that are used as the idea that is projected. So if there's a need for it, it can just be redone and reinstalled.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, does that indicate, then, that the ideas are of greater importance than the actual objects of the—

KEITH SONNIER: Oh, I love to have the objects there; I mean, I love to experience them. But there's no way to actually be able to visualize it and sustain it. So you end up making objects that, in a way, are difficult—they see

—difficult to obtain, even if, like, you know, you might have to go somewhere to see something—to see a sight—or you might have to go through some engineering apparatus to construct the thing again. So—and if there's no way to lay it down—to have it in a static form—then you have to have it in something fluid, and there's no reason why you can't, you know, keep fluidity.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, are you interested in what so many people are doing—kind of, oh, like Michael Heizer or Grosvenor or various people who do objects which are—in a given place, can be moved? Do ideas of that kind interest you?

KEITH SONNIER: Sure, yeah. And I mean, I'm interested in the work, but that's just not—I mean, that's just not the way I work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right. But do you feel—you know, the one driving at in a very roundabout way, I guess, is there a group of contemporary artists that you identify with in any given way?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, there are artists who have made works that I like.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who would they be, in—[inaudible]?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, you mentioned Heizer. I like Heizer. Heizer has made some interesting pieces. They have—they leave open lots of implications and I like that about the work. And there are others who made the particular pieces that I liked or sort of, maybe, have said things that I like more than I like their work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? Like who—or what kind of—

KEITH SONNIER: Well, lots of things. I'm more interested in what Smithson has to say than what he does. And I'm, maybe, more interested in what Andre does than what he says. But it's just—that's just a personal—whereas they both made things that said things that are important and entertaining.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I'm sort of jumping around here, but everything leads to something else. What about going back to video and film, which you did make at one point, right? Does that indicate that you're interested in kind of participatory art, or something where the audience or the viewer—or, you know, the non-artist or viewer or collector or whatever you want to call him—is required to make the artwork work, or not?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, in a way, since the works become so momentary, in a way—they may only exist for a month, or maybe it might just be one evening, one night, because it could be a live performance—if that's the only way to create that kind of reality, then there's no reason why it can't be momentary. I think a lot of the art that is around is around just because it hasn't melted or blown away. [Laughs.] And that's, you know, no reason to—how should I put it—to adore it more.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What—are there any critics who interest you particularly, or aestheticians or people writing about art that you find provocative or accurate?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, most of it I find really surface and dealing with on, you know, how, when, where and stylistic overtones and undertones, which don't really deal with the—I'll use the word implications, again—that the works set up. And so you're left with a kind of milked-down artwork in a way. The art becomes—[inaudible]—since most people don't see them, in a way, that's how we—our interpretations are really based on people not seeing works and reading about works, which is a mistake, I think.

And so it's rare that you get some kind of criticism that offers some kind of insight into the works. If you're actually not seeing the work, I would rather them than talk about even their feelings, rather than, maybe, what mode it's in or something. I mean, it doesn't really even have to be some form of dissection of the work, but give me some take on their experience of the work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Some reaction.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And not necessarily just the descriptive or emotional.

KEITH SONNIER: Right, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about people like Duchamp? Is he of interest to you, or not?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, of interest in that, just, I've never really, like, worked out of Duchamp, in a way, or thought through Duchamp to make works, although ideas—Duchampian ideas and statements are in the nature of lots of the different work. And you could almost, like, see that rather than actually the work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about your trip to India? Why did you want to go there?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, actually, there was a reason to go—there was a reason to go there and make works. I mean, I went there for an exhibition, which was—just the whole idea of going to India, to me—I don't know, I was interested in that—to go there and see if I could make a work there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What happened?

KEITH SONNIER: I made a work. [Laughs.] But I mean, the place just affected me much more than any work I could have ever made.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, to go to India and to experience, I mean, just even a part of the Indian life situation is—and especially a westerner, especially an American. It's just—I mean, everything is so different—the time. I mean, really, in a truly abstract sense, it's different. It's not—I mean, go to Europe and you can relate to certain kinds of sociopolitical differences, but in India, you don't have any of that.

And it's the East and you're the West and you have to confront it in that way, because there's no possible way that you can be in that situation, I think even if you're there for years. But you can attain that kind of place, I think, through—if you've had the will and the need, I think, to spend time in India.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When were you there?

KEITH SONNIER: In January of last year. I was there for a month.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Seventy-one.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And what—why—where was the project done and how did it—

KEITH SONNIER: It was called the Triennale and it was in Delhi and it was done through the Museum of Modern Art. And seven artists were in it. And four artists went—Alan Sarit—who's still in India, I believe.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, he stayed.

KEITH SONNIER: Carl Andre and a Washington artist named Sam Gilliam. And Richard Serra was in the show but he didn't go—he didn't participate. And a couple of other people—I think Brian [ph] was in the show—[inaudible].

PAUL CUMMINGS: But how did you find making a piece in such an unusual, alien culture?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I felt that anything I would do there, no matter if you would do the most traditional, Western work there, it still would, you know, have no meaning and no comprehension there at all. So the only thing you could do was to try to do something that might be your relation to India, which is almost an impossible thing to do in such a short period of time.

So I made a sound piece in the courtyard of the museum, and it was just the speaker—two conical speakers, which they have all over and they use for parades and which fed back, one to the other. One microphone was live, so when people would go by, dialogue would go through it, and the other one was feeding back—there was a constant sound feeding back.

And I mean, I know you might think the piece was really—it's hard to even say it was successful or it was the right thing to do there—but it was the only thing I could do there, because to actually—to deal with something—to deal with a physical situation in the space there would have been terrifying. I mean, I couldn't have done it because of what was happening, I mean, on the street, was so much more vital than what was actually happening in that particular museum because it was just art from all over the world, and mostly Western art, and how absurd to see Western art in India trying to give India some direction, which is absurd.

The Indian art that was there was Indian art that was Western art. So it was like going to a culture that had not contemporary art identity but it had a life identity that was stronger than any art that could ever be made there. [Inaudible.] So in a sense, maybe, there's no need for the art because the life takes care of it, whereas in Germany, there's a need for the art because the life doesn't take care of it. There's probably a need for it here, but you replace it with an automobile or an air conditioner or a radio.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's the thing—so a lot of objects in this country like the automobile will have lost a vast amount of prestige in the last few years and people don't necessarily dash out to get the newest models and the

brightest colors anymore.

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I would like to think that, but I doubt it. [Laughs.] I would, you know, really like to think that, but I doubt it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You're so trained, now, after all these decades.

KEITH SONNIER: And, well, it's just so easy to do, and it's almost expected, in a way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What else about India affected you, because it seems that it made very strong impact?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I went to Japan, too, the year before. And I didn't really like Japan as much, I think, because it had embraced the West too much, whereas India—it was impossible for me in India. I mean, the English Triennale we did was just kind of limping, in a way, not—[inaudible]. I mean, you talk about having to do a lot of stupid paperwork.

And Japan just seemed so able to cope with it. And so in the end, I—I mean, I liked certain—you know, I liked the landscape and it was easier to travel in Japan. But somehow, it was all very decided in Japan, in contemporary, 20th-century terms, you know—how it's going to go and what's going to happen there. What was going to happen to Tokyo in 20 years? Probably the same thing that's going to happen in 20 years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But they had decided it by committee already.

KEITH SONNIER: Right, whereas in India, there's just no way. And that's probably why I've gone to Haiti, too; there's no way for them to do it, yet, in a way. And South America, too—there are some South American countries that are maybe looking to the East in a much more intelligent way where they're not really getting completely plugged into the 20th-century world. They're really, like, developing themselves—you know, being clear about their identity before absorbing new information. Whereas we're just—we just take it in all the time. It's just like—

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's like a new automobile.

KEITH SONNIER: Right, which is—I mean, it's a very rich state to be in, in a way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why did you go to Japan? Was that again for that reason?

KEITH SONNIER: Again, I only travel for a reason. [Laughs.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you seem to do a lot of traveling.

KEITH SONNIER: Well, only in this last two, three years, I've been traveling. And it's been very good; it's been very informative. I'm actually going to China—[inaudible].

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's a little more difficult. It may happen, it may happen. Now, I'm curious, going back even earlier, you talked about the gallery replacing the patron. I'm looking at that in the light of the fact that many of the things that you make are difficult to buy, own, move, catalog—whatever. What do you think of the collector? Does he fit into your ideas anywhere along the line, or is that the dealer's problem?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, hopefully, that would be a new kind of collector—[inaudible, background noise]—and a new kind of museum and a new kind of gallery that might all be one and the same person, or one and the same people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way? What would they—

KEITH SONNIER: I have to use a toilet—[audio break]. Well, I mean, someone like Leo Castelli has really been a very innovative dealer, in a way. And I don't know if it's so much an understanding of the art as more, maybe, an understanding of how to deal with people and how to get along with the artist. But he's given the artist—given someone an income to be able to make work, you know, with no questions asked, which is the way it should be, in a way.

So there's not any of that kind of pressure that one would probably get to produce work. So you don't—in a way, you're a very free state, in a way. I mean, you could do just about anything you want to do. And that's a very healthy place to be in, at some time in his life—an artist—just, I mean, especially if it's a time when he's doing a lot of work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you know, one other thing is Dick Bellamy, with whom you've had some association—how did you find Richard?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, Dick has been testing high, in a way. I mean, he comes to the work first—[inaudible]—personally. And it's very interesting for an artist to meet someone like that, who can understand his work on an aesthetic level and then also see some possible way to help the artist get rid of it in some way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Extend the value of the work.

KEITH SONNIER: Right. And that's very good to encounter.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Has he worked with you subsequently, or just—

KEITH SONNIER: Oh, we're still very good friends. We have some contact, but not really, you know, any kind of dealing in any art. I only sold him, like, very few pieces—maybe five, maybe four—very early pieces for very little money. So it was a very early kind of exchange.

And he's still doing the same thing. I think that's one of the remarkable things about Dick, is that he has not been looking at new work and younger work and then still seeing—I mean, he sees bodies in people's work. So he has a lot of insight into the direction a person might be taking.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you found your conversations with him were full of insight and he really could, you know—

KEITH SONNIER: No, not really conversations because it's very difficult to talk. It's not really about that; it's on another level. It really is; at least it was with me, because I don't really talk that much, usually.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, he doesn't talk that much either, really.

KEITH SONNIER: No, so it was really more on a kind of intuitive level. My contact with Dick, he has been, you know, just like anybody else. You relate to people at different points. The thing that I liked about him was that, when he first looked at work, he wanted to see things that had happened before, which I thought was flattering, in a way. And I liked that, and I thought that was—rather than someone coming in assessing an item, in a way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He was interested in the whole history and progression.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, is there anything that you think we should talk about or you'd like to say that we haven't touched on? We could do a few minutes, if—

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I think I still didn't offer any answer to what's going to happen to the art; where is it going to be seen and who's going to see it and how will it be seen. And I think it's difficult to talk about that because those are the changes that half of the art world are going through now. And the only thing the artist can do is—it's not his job, you know, to find the place. So until the place is made—

PAUL CUMMINGS: It appears, then—

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah—it's going to be that way, I think. It may be difficult. But there's nothing wrong with art being difficult to see or difficult to get to because everything is so difficult, you know, if nobody's buying it. There's no reason why it shouldn't be just as difficult.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Like the rest of life. Okay, well, that—

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