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Oral history interview with Keith Sonnier,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Keith Sonnier on 2009 September 22 – 2010 January 19. The interview took place at Sonnier's studio in New York, NY and was conducted by Avis Berman for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's U.S. General Services Administration, Design Excellence and the Arts oral history project.

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

Interview

AVIS BERMAN: This is Avis Berman interviewing Keith Sonnier for the Archives of American Art, GSA Oral History Project on September 22, 2009, in his studio in New York City.

And I start the same way with everyone. Would you please state your full name and date of birth?

KEITH SONNIER: My name is Keith Sonnier. Actually born James Keith Sonnier. Born in 1941, 31st of July.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. When did you stop using your first name?

KEITH SONNIER: I always used my middle name. I don't know why, but I just always did.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

KEITH SONNIER: I have two other brothers and we all have middle names and first names. And we all decided that we were going to use the middle names because we didn't like the first names probably because they were all saints' names.

AVIS BERMAN: So I assume you are a collapsed Catholic?

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, exactly. I grew up in a very small little English-French community in South Louisiana that was 95 percent Catholic.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, as I said before off the tape, ordinarily I would be going into that, but because of our agreement and your earlier interviews, we are going to for this project to concentrate on the public work, although we will obviously be dipping into other objects and environmental pieces that you have made because of the connections.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: But it seems to me that the first—and let me just ask you. I am going to ask you about some specific commissions and then after we get warmed up, some more global questions about public art as you have seen it in your own work and in general evolve. And the first one, as I understand it from your chronology, was an indoor installation in 1981 in the Seagram Building?

KEITH SONNIER: That is correct.

AVIS BERMAN: And what was that? And how did that come about?

KEITH SONNIER: It came about mainly through, I think, the curator who was very interested in the work, her name was Carla Ash, I think, who was the curator there for many years. They had wanted a work there. It was very difficult to place. It was the worker's cafeteria. The furniture was very overpowering. But mainly Carla made this work happen, I think, because she convinced the people in charge that it would be necessary to have a work, a permanent artwork there.

And it worked incredibly well for the condition of the place and for the city because it was based on a [New York City] skyline and it was a light work. And it was very simple and it sort of divided all the walls in the cafeteria in a kind of middle range, which suggested a kind of skyline. And being sitted [ph] in a sort of like skyline environment was the original intention. And it did work.

AVIS BERMAN: And is it still there?

KEITH SONNIER: No, it is no longer there as of only five years [ago]. When Carla left, they did get rid of a lot of

the art in the place. They changed curators. They never had much permanent work there, I think, or they always did temporary works in the front of the building. And I think the building was actually sold. And I think they moved—but they were very responsible in moving the work. I got the work back.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, so you have it now?

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Because you were saying getting rid of it.

KEITH SONNIER: Right. No, no, this was quite amazing. It was returned to me.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And had there been other—before your piece, was the art in there only for, shall we say, executives?

KEITH SONNIER: I would think so. They never had any art in the worker's cafeteria. There was none. They had hanging paintings in the corporate offices, I am sure.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, absolutely. And in terms of that, where did that work fit with your overall body of work at the time?

KEITH SONNIER: This work was done in the '80s, you said?

AVIS BERMAN: Eighty-one.

KEITH SONNIER: This was at a time where I was still traveling quite a lot in the '80s, going to many different cultures, going to many different cities. It was the first time I had seen a lot of Eastern cities at night, you know, Shanghai, Singapore, and Japan. And I think probably some of the influence for that particular piece came from nighttime cityscapes.

The work in the studio was very different because I was beginning to work on location in the early '80s, like actually making work in India, making work in Japan. And there I was pursuing more ethnic materials.

AVIS BERMAN: It would seem to me your increasing emphasis on context would suit you very well for doing public art.

KEITH SONNIER: Well, the thing is it was the beginning of that that began to adapt me in a funny way to the context of public work. And it—this early piece, in fact, did prepare me for that because as you had mentioned before, when we thought of public work, it was really—the artist was really a distraction to the architect and they tried to keep the artist not to have too much contact with the architect. And art was at its best just plopped in a corner somewhere. But this completely changed that concept for me and I came to it on my own terms. And luckily, I had the freedom to do that in this particular piece.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, because she was sympathetic—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. And she had that understanding, which was even better. And the other thing was that—so when pieces did come up in the public sector, I was able to inject some of these ideas.

AVIS BERMAN: Am I wrong, but, I mean, while it was up and you thought it was permanent—I mean, it certainly had a good run. Was that the first piece of yours that was ever really up for a long time as opposed to being up for a little while and then stored?

KEITH SONNIER: As opposed to pieces, environmental pieces that became part of museum collections, yes. Because at that time, I was doing a lot of environmental work based on architectural principles, floral wall principles of construction that some of them became part of museum collections. And that—dealing with storing these works, reinstalling these works, maintaining these works, most important, maintenance, which began to be an issue that could be addressed to the public work because when you are not making bronze sculpture, when you are making art that is fixed architecture, in my case, that particular type of work was, it brings about issues that really you have to work with the architect.

And it forced a collaboration, sometimes not successful, sometimes fabulously successful. And both of us enjoying it and learning so much. And what it did for me was really a real interest in architecture and beginning for myself personally to address architecture in other ways than I had addressed it before.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, and also, do you think the fact that you wanted to work with light, electricity, non-art, you know, industrial—

KEITH SONNIER: Extruded material.

AVIS BERMAN: —may have made it more attractive to architects?

KEITH SONNIER: Absolutely. And when the architects went past this thing—I am working with an artist—and seeing that the work really had all of these architectural origins, it became a much easier collaboration. And the fact that I could cost a job in a second and I could do all these things because I had developed these contractor skills as a younger artist. And plus my dad was a contractor. So I had that sort of facility in a way.

AVIS BERMAN: Plus, I mean, the light makes the architecture looks so good.

KEITH SONNIER: Absolutely. And it addresses—and, of course, costs. I mean, if these things are designed at the time that buildings are being made, there is a tremendous amount of saving.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you say that, but in a lot of—well, I mean, I guess this is more government, it is percent for art anyway, so there is going to be a budget.

KEITH SONNIER: Right. But, you know, what happened early on with some of these percent for arts is that all of a sudden, the art budget was being eaten by the architecture budget. And when an artist can address architecture as well and says well, you know, you are building this curtain wall out of stainless steel and that is my space. That is going to eat up all my budget. And I suggested well, why don't we make it out of light and it is going to cost one-third the amount and I get to build a piece three times bigger and I cover the entire facade of the architecture. So things like that could happen.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, well, let's go on. Now, I am a little confused here because I think—let's see, I guess, the next one would be the New Jersey Department of Transportation or—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, could be.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Well, it is just that, in other words, I see here the—

KEITH SONNIER: What is the date on that? I think that might even be in here.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, well that one is—okay, I see that is—

KEITH SONNIER: What is it called?

AVIS BERMAN: It just says New Jersey Department of Transportation, Trenton, indoor installation—

KEITH SONNIER: Oh, yes, *Route 1* [1990].

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. And how did you get that?

KEITH SONNIER: That was a public competition. And I think it was one of my first competitions that I got. I mean, I was in for some and I never received them. And it began a relationship with Tom Moran who was in charge of that section of New Jersey. I think he is still there. And we did other projects together later on. But this particular piece was a piece in an atrium space. It was actually one of the first public works I did where we actually built it in the studio. It was a large hanging piece that was patterned on the highway trestle systems that go along the Jersey Turnpike.

And since it was for the highway department, I wanted to have that vestige of connection to the building, the highway department. And it also had that as a superstructure. There were weather and traffic reports as well with little radios that were attached in the atrium space. And it was successful. The client liked the piece very well and it functioned and was really a green piece. It used very little electricity. It was the first real green work that was done.

AVIS BERMAN: And is that still extant?

KEITH SONNIER: It is still operable.

AVIS BERMAN: And it is still—everything is still working?

KEITH SONNIER: Everything is still working from what Tom says.

AVIS BERMAN: And what were the problems or challenges of that piece?

KEITH SONNIER: Because the architecture was made, mounting, you know, like to make sure that we had a secure ceiling mount to hang the piece and to arrange scaffolding. You know, in those days, we had to provide

our own insurance. We had to do all those kinds of things, which have changed somewhat. And, of course, Europe is very different. You don't work as a contractor in Europe. In America, you are still a contractor when you make public work.

AVIS BERMAN: At best.

KEITH SONNIER: At best, yes, right.

AVIS BERMAN: As opposed to someone coming in with your ear cut off.

KEITH SONNIER: Right, exactly, exactly, yes, it is very different. But I think it was a good beginning for me because I addressed scale and it was sculpture in the round, so to speak. It offered the possibility of works that I came to much later because they were not floor-to-ceiling bound as a lot of my studio work was. So—

AVIS BERMAN: And also, you built it in the studio. But how are you now beginning to approach these pieces that is different from the way you are approaching a studio piece?

KEITH SONNIER: Okay. This piece—I like to divide the work pre-computer. This was done before the computer. I even did the Munich airport, which was a kilometer long, pre-computer. We hand drew everything and we triple drew, did all this stuff. As soon as we began to employ the computer in the studio and work directly from architectural plans and pop the assays, the studies right into the architecture, it became a fascinating and very interesting way to work in public work and led to—well, the Munich airport led to my largest commissions because of the scale.

AVIS BERMAN: The Munich airport, that is stunning.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. And then, I had to—another important issue came up because this was all hand drawn. I was actually conceiving of a work that I could not see the end or the beginning of. And so I had to think of designing in a very different way as working in the studio. And I began to think of designing, even pre-computer, in musical terms that things would have a beginning, a middle, an end, and a buildup. And as soon as I thought of the work in those terms where you can't—as in music, you can see the score; I had to think of my plans as a score. So right for the computer.

So a good friend of mine said, "You had better get the computer. You know, you are ready for it." And as soon as that happened, it began to really change how I addressed working in public work.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I think the Macs were probably ready, you know—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, they were. It is funny that I began my career right when video started and I had the first video cameras. And I had somehow—that I had gotten in Japan. And just as computers were starting to happen more with artists and the Mac, it was key that that became a major studio tool.

AVIS BERMAN: I imagine that an artist like Frank Gehry would maybe not be possible to the nth degree that he has taken without the computer.

KEITH SONNIER: Right, absolutely not, no.

AVIS BERMAN: Because of all that drawing.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, right.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, I think he must have done all those Bilbao drawings on the computer and probably before that.

KEITH SONNIER: I think most architects now. It is interesting still when you think of architects and how they run studios, I know—because I have worked with a variety of them like Tom Moran on the—not Tom Moran, I am sorry—Tom—I am thinking of the piece in California, which is one of the later pieces that I made with Thom Mayne.

AVIS BERMAN: That is Caltrans? [*Motordome Neon Art*. Los Angeles. Permanent outdoor neon installation for the new Caltrans headquarters, designed by the architectural group Morphosis, 2004.]

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. Thom Mayne had 45 people working for him in the studio. I worked with a European architect. He had three people and he built fabulous buildings. You know, it is different ways of working and different, you know, different modes and stuff. But I think whether you are three or 40, you might still be using the computer, going back to the computer.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, before we get to Munich, I should also ask you about this piece that you did for New Orleans, which was a streetcar stop. [City of New Orleans, Louisiana, NOPSI streetcar stop, outdoor installation, 1991.]

KEITH SONNIER: Oh, yes. New Orleans had—well, it has always had the streetcars, of course. And they began to develop the Riverwalk and they built the aquarium. And so they added a streetcar that went along the river. And it was difficult to get through because my first choice for the signage—because I had never used signage before in a work—was not what it actually says now. The first thing was—I think how it ended up, the text, I will have to readdress—was *Pro-Eco* is how it ended up, *Pro-Eco*. Pro on one side and Eco on the other and the aquarium you see through it.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, mm-hmm.

KEITH SONNIER: But the original sign said "No KKK." [Laughs.] And it didn't go through.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, gee.

KEITH SONNIER: One side was "No KKK" and the other side was "Free Choice." That did not go through. [Laughs.]

AVIS BERMAN: Well, other than that purposely provocative signage, was there any other—

KEITH SONNIER: And actually it wasn't free choice; it was "*Ta choix*" on one side and "No KKK" on the other.

AVIS BERMAN: Would you spell that? T-A

KEITH SONNIER: T-A-C-H-O-I-X. "Your choice" in French, which I thought made perfect sense.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, yes

KEITH SONNIER: But it was a no go. And so in a funny way, I knew it, but at the same time, it was interesting to try it.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, you wanted to see if you could force the issue.

KEITH SONNIER: Right, exactly. And it forced me to design works outdoors that were pretty hurricane resistant. And that was a good exercise for me because the piece is open, but it is in this channel. And it does remain pretty safely installed the way that it is installed. I had to go back to old signage ideas of what actual—how signage was constructed to maintain light in a high-wind situation.

AVIS BERMAN: And did it survive Katrina?

KEITH SONNIER: It did not survive Katrina only because it was down before the last hurricane. And New Orleans has a way of never maintaining things unfortunately. There were just a very few tubes broken and they were mainly caused by vandalism. And at this point, I don't know if it has been restored or not.

AVIS BERMAN: They didn't call you or—I mean, is the maintenance difficult?

KEITH SONNIER: No, and it is very inexpensive. I don't even know who is in charge of the piece, whereas my larger pieces in public works in America and in Europe have contracts that come with—maintenance contracts. And this piece has a maintenance contract, but I have never been called.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, in other words—

KEITH SONNIER: I know it is not operable because I go to New Orleans all the time.

AVIS BERMAN: In other words, do they—do the commissioners include the maintenance contract, so that you—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, absolutely.

AVIS BERMAN: You must be glad of that.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. Well, no, that is how—in order to deal with these issues, especially when you are dealing with—well, I think when you are dealing with any kind of public sculpture, light generated or not, you have to have maintenance contracts, I mean, because they can get damaged in many different kinds of ways like architecture can. So now pretty much every public commission has a maintenance contract.

AVIS BERMAN: And was this New Orleans piece a little bit out of the ordinary or different from what you normally

did? Or did you—

KEITH SONNIER: It was different in that I had not worked with signage before. Now, of course, I was dealing with architecture. And they—and it was preexisting. But I got them to do the second story, so that the piece could be above the actual pedestrian area.

AVIS BERMAN: And was it—

KEITH SONNIER: And it was successful. I mean, people liked it and it worked well. And it was the gateway to the riverfront, so it worked very well. And there were other artists who did beautiful pieces lining the aquarium. It was a big first push for New Orleans. And it would be great to see it functioning. I don't even know if the pieces along the aquarium have been damaged from Katrina, but they probably were.

But the interesting thing about the quarter and that area, the French Quarter, those areas were not damaged quite so much because they were on higher ground. But the wind would be something else.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, the wind would be something, but it was the levy breaking that made it—that really —

KEITH SONNIER: That destroyed so many things, exactly.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you have relatives there?

KEITH SONNIER: I didn't have relatives in New Orleans. I had relatives in Lafayette. And Lafayette doubled in size after Katrina. I had many friends in New Orleans who survived, some of them having left, some of them not leaving. I have actually just finished two books on Katrina that have just come out that are interesting sort of after-Katrina issues that have been dealt with now. One called—I think *Zeitoun*, which is a family name [by Dave Eggers]. It is about an Arab actually in New Orleans who rescued a lot of people and in the end was arrested as a terrorist.

AVIS BERMAN: I remember reading about him.

KEITH SONNIER: And this is an excellent little book. There is another one called *A Year After* by Siblet is his name. And this is very interesting. And it is about the music world in New Orleans and the political situation in New Orleans.

AVIS BERMAN: And are you publishing these books through your foundation?

KEITH SONNIER: No, no, these are books I have just read.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, okay, sorry.

KEITH SONNIER: They are just—you know, I like to keep up on New Orleans in that way, as well as the food. [Laughs]. But these were just two recent books. And they are taking a different stance on dealing with Katrina, which I think is interesting because, you know, we dealt with some of the other issues. We know the issues of why it didn't work, reconstruction after Katrina. I mean, I think, again, we would have needed an organization like the GSA to get in there and rebuild the ninth ward with groups of young architects for 20,000 a house, which is what a trailer costs, we could have rebuilt the ninth ward for what it cost for the trailers that no one got to use.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, and which are hazardous.

KEITH SONNIER: Which are hazardous, made with hazardous like waste and whatever, horrible plywood.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, there was that young woman architect who came in and made that award-winning shotgun cottage. Did she ever get to build more than a few?

KEITH SONNIER: Who knows? Brad Pitt built a few. But if they had had a program like this or if we would begin to think of reconstruction through the, through our, you know, our art system, which is, you know, like Europe can do that. For some reason, here we can't.

AVIS BERMAN: You are absolutely right because the GSA is art in architecture. And people would love to do something like that.

KEITH SONNIER: It would have been a great way to put the government to work like an almost WPA project.

AVIS BERMAN: Because, I mean, I know friends who have gone down. They said like sometimes church groups would—you know, individual groups go down. That is the only way anyone—

KEITH SONNIER: That is the only way that it can happen.

AVIS BERMAN: You know, piecemeal. They try, but it is very—

KEITH SONNIER: That is true.

AVIS BERMAN: So we were—anyway—talking about—was that—I had asked you, I think, if this was a competition, this New Orleans—

KEITH SONNIER: New Orleans, I think, was a competition, too.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, I guess I might ask you to comment on the pros and cons of going into these competitions and if you enter them anymore.

KEITH SONNIER: If it is worthwhile. If it is a decent budget and if it is a piece I am interested in doing, yes. But if not or if the budget is too small and it is a competition, I choose not to do it. I would rather not waste my time because I have so many projects that I have designed that have never been built. They do take away time from the studio. And now I am back to studio work. In fact, an artist, you know, you have got to maintain a running studio because that is where you get your ideas. That is how you don't repeat yourself. That is how you stay like a musician in tune. You have got to continue to work.

And so I chose not to make a career out of being a public artist. It is too demanding. I like to be able to call the shots. But I have learned that collaboration with great architecture can mean you make a great piece. And that has been very interesting and great you acknowledged it.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, how does, let's say, continuing to be a public artist or doing a lot and not returning to the studio. I mean, you are thinking about ideas. How does that denature you as an artist?

KEITH SONNIER: You mean—well, the thing is if you are only doing that and you are only thinking of it in—like if you become well, I only do—for a while, I was only doing sterile corridors in architecture meaning that is what the architectural term for a corridor that connects one bit of architecture to another. For a while, I had to come up with new inventions for sterile corridors, you know, because they would just—I had spent what I could do with that particular kind of environment. And so it is interesting when there are—and then you do get to be pigeonholed sometime that oh, he does light. We can do this, you know, like let's—you know.

And sometimes it might be—like I have tried—I wanted to do things with gardens and light. And I am very interested in gardening. It takes up a lot of my time, a lot of my reading. But there was never that possibility because that was reserved for someone else to work in. And so it can be limiting sometimes.

AVIS BERMAN: Because, I mean, we will get to the Munich airport in a minute, but that is what you had done, that walkway, which was so beautiful that everybody probably wanted—it's just a walkway or a corridor.

KEITH SONNIER: Right, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: The other thing that was interesting that has kind of come to me, this was just about, I guess, the Trenton piece, but it happens also elsewhere is these architects built these enormous atriums and then all of a sudden, they always need to be filled.

KEITH SONNIER: Right, right.

AVIS BERMAN: You know, afterwards. It is almost—I am not saying one shouldn't build them, but it seems to be an architectural feature that inherently spawns a problem.

KEITH SONNIER: That has happened in museum construction, too. So much architecture is about entrance that you wonder what the building is really going to be about because it is all about the entrance. And now in terms of contemporary architecture, you know, we changed its function so much. It is not like the church and the museum and the temple, whatever. It is different now.

And we might not have to focus on the entrance or the fact that the atrium spaces become these vast unusable spaces or maybe that they could be spaces that become much more multifunctional.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, they are kind of like airborne caverns.

KEITH SONNIER: Very much. I know working with the Reagan Building [*Route Zenith*, The Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center, Washington DC, 1998], it was difficult because it was a huge atrium space. It was—I always wish, god, I wish I could do a piece outdoors. I am not having to deal with, you know, this huge cavernous space. But I was very lucky, once again, with working with an architect who had a vision

knowing the body of my work what could actually work in the atrium space. And it worked. They are very happy with it.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, I have seen it. It is good because—

KEITH SONNIER: And it becomes a backdrop. It really functions.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, let's go to this Munich airport because that really was astonishing. [*Lichtweg*, Munich International Airport, Germany, 1990-2]

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And also, it took you three years to do. Obviously, it must have really changed your thinking about a lot of—

KEITH SONNIER: Very much. Well, I think it came about because of the architect.

AVIS BERMAN: Was that Van Busen?

KEITH SONNIER: [Hans-]Busso von Busse who was a very interesting character or person. He was an older gentleman then. And he was a professor of architecture in Munich. He had seen a show of mine at the Hirshhorn. And he contacted me and that began the work on the Munich Airport. And he spoke—well, I wasn't really working with him and my architectural liaison only spoke French, no English. So all my faxes were all in French. [Laughs.]

AVIS BERMAN: Who would have—I mean, yes. Well, that was one of your—[inaudible]—speak it.

KEITH SONNIER: And she is a fabulous woman architect who—she was like a liaison for me for this project. Luckily I had her. Extremely practical. It was great having an architect as your liaison, which I have requested since this job because it has made—especially working, you know, directly on an architectural building. I was never off deadline. I was always right on. And it was because of this early experience. The job was done way ahead of time. And this we hand drew. I mean, this was before the computer.

AVIS BERMAN: Where were all those drawings?

KEITH SONNIER: There were so many that I got rid of a lot of them. I just have very few drawings left from the actual, you know, thing. I remember the big issue to convince the client at the time because they were not at all convinced what the color would look like on the architecture because they hadn't seen that much—that kind of color on architecture and that much use of light woven into the actual architecture.

So I built a 10-foot simulation. And that is what really made the piece happen. It was a simulation that made the work happen.

AVIS BERMAN: So that is something you do now—

KEITH SONNIER: Now I sometimes request it. For the Caltrans, I did the simulation there, too.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, also again with the computer or you can make a CD. Things are a lot easier.

KEITH SONNIER: A lot easier. And then now with the computer we can do a simulation here where you can really know what it is going to look like. But before I had to fake all this and hand draw all the light reflection and all of this stuff. And I ended up using Xeroxes of parts of pieces, blowing them up and collaging them into the architecture. It was the only way that I could get the idea across.

AVIS BERMAN: Sort of like the human Photoshop.

KEITH SONNIER: Absolutely, exactly, exactly. And now all this is done electronically. But it was great working with Professor von Busse. He was very practical and really had a vision for the piece.

AVIS BERMAN: And this was being built, I guess, was it city or federal funding?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, airports are half state and half privately owned, I think. They vary in different countries.

AVIS BERMAN: I just wondered if there was any problem. You were not a German artist. You were not a European artist. Did that ever enter into it?

KEITH SONNIER: I don't know. But you have to realize I began my career in Germany. I had been working in Germany since I was a young artist. I actually showed in Germany before I showed in New York.

AVIS BERMAN: So you would have been familiar—

KEITH SONNIER: I had a long history of being an artist who had shown in Germany.

AVIS BERMAN: Actually you have a long history of—you know, you have—had at that time also a very substantial European career.

KEITH SONNIER: Exactly.

AVIS BERMAN: And I just wondered if you had any hypotheses why the Europeans, you know, their response was so much more sophisticated than here, shall we say.

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I think that, you know, some were and some weren't. But I think that the bulk of the artists, especially of my generation, at the particular time of the late '60s, it was cheaper to ship the artists than the work. A lot of us made work on site, made work on location, worked in Germany factories, began to work with German artists, Dutch artists. We began really an exchange on an artist level of many artists coming to live in New York and American artists going to live in different European cities, not only Germany, but Dutch, the Italians. The French never traveled too well, not enough good coffee and croissant, but them, too. They came, too, I think.

Then later on, you know, the Eastern European bloc.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, did you make a lot of—are there German artists that you have remained friendly with?

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, and dealers and people in the art world and certain museums I love visiting over and over again. And some—you know, a lot of them are dead now [Laughs]. But it did sort of, I think, prepare me for or opened up the possibility of an art world being an—the contemporary art world being an international art world.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I think from what I have read is that you also really have always been very sensitive to that and really pushed not to be confined by New York or by space anyway.

KEITH SONNIER: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: It seemed to me that you were not just open to it, but very purposeful about it.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. And I think traveling to non-Western cultures is the thing that really opened up in a much more world sense. And my early interest in the media and television and these things all fed into this premise in a way.

AVIS BERMAN: And in terms of the Munich piece, did that impact your studio work?

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, very much so. For one thing, too, you have to realize that when I made the Munich airport, I had peaked as a New York artist pretty much. I mean, he has done his work, let's move on now, find someone else to be interested [in]. And it was a very different place, the art world in New York. I mean, it was—you know, the beginning of Expressionism. And, you know, I am still a young artist. I still have a lot of things I haven't even done yet.

And somehow reinventing myself in an attempt to do the commission work was the best thing I could have possibly done. It expanded my vision of what I was doing as an artist. It changed my approach to studio work. It changed my approach to scale. All of a sudden, I was making work way bigger than a gallery could deal with. And all of those things became very positive elements to the form language of the career.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, did you begin to make studio pieces that were a lot bigger, too?

KEITH SONNIER: Sometimes. There was always the issue of space. I never liked to buy a lot of equipment, too, like, you know, like well, I need this special tool. And then you end up having to make everything out of this tool. I did have a lot of things fabricated out of the studio. Like I think I am going to need to work this—even in my television work. In the end, I stopped buying television and bought studio time instead and would just take the props and everything to the television studio to make the tapes. And then I could use much more sophisticated equipment.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And you didn't have to clutter all the studio—

KEITH SONNIER: - Right, exactly. And the big problem at the studio was that I never liked to have it—it is filled with work when I am working on a new show. But then I like—I have it completely empty again to start a new work. So granted there is always a storage problem. And the interesting thing about commission is that you don't have that problem. [Laughs.]

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, exactly. You know, and also, I think that just this Munich piece almost was a culmination because, you know, you were so interested in having the idea of moving through space. And here you are moving people along through light. You are drawing them.

KEITH SONNIER: This was what really was the culmination of all of this floor-to-wall light work I had done. I had worked for 10 years in the Ba-O-Ba series, the glass and light series, which based on the golden section, which is architectural base to begin with [begun 1969]. This put those ideas in a physical context and on such a scale that it allowed me to really see how it could operate. It opened up a lot of possibilities to work in other architectural pieces.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you have any sense that people in the airport—I mean, mostly they are hurried to get to their destination or they are jetlagged, but do people visit it, you know, as a piece? Do you have any sense of that at all?

KEITH SONNIER: I think that sometimes people can because there are long—the interesting thing with Munich is that there are these periods where you are basically just moving along the moving sidewalk. You are trapped. And that was what I tried to do was to use those areas to create—to create a calm actually, too, to sort of set you on your pace for travel. There was just an occasional monitor with your flight information. And only when you came to another section were there kiosks and that kind of thing. But while you were moving—and the interesting thing, it is in a straight line. It's, you know, you are not going around ramps or whatever.

It allowed you to sort of—I had a captive audience. And before in the architectural pieces than the actual installations, it was the pedestrian who moved through the piece or the pedestrian who stood in front of the piece and saw himself in the piece. This, you were literally—it was like space age. You were literally moving time travel. And that is what opened up a lot of possibilities, which I had in the early work like in the Ba-O-Ba and the *Mirror Act* [1969] pieces where you have a mirror in front of you and a mirror behind you. They created infinity capsules. And these pieces were what opened up that architectural way of thinking about the work.

AVIS BERMAN: Because I find it so fascinating that the materials you were using and these ideas seem to lend themselves so perfectly to public art, even though they seem ephemeral—

KEITH SONNIER: Right, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: —all of these things—

KEITH SONNIER: And it is all of a sudden the color, which after Munich, I began to think of color as volume, which I never had before on those big architectural terms. And as soon as that happened, you move through a volume of color, it began to really alter the concept of how I thought one could work in architectural pieces.

AVIS BERMAN: And it is also so different and so lush. I mean, very different from the way one—you know, the minimalist, the original, that proscription of color, the austerity.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, right.

AVIS BERMAN: How to learn to, as you say, to use it with—

KEITH SONNIER: And I think that way of thinking, a lot of artists benefit by this in many different ways, you know, working, you know, not only with color, but with line, with shape and thinking in these terms expanded a lot of artists' work from Andre [p] to LeWitt to Smithson and Heizer and the landscape. It opened up a lot of possibilities for many artists.

AVIS BERMAN: At that moment, were there other artists making public works with light, Americans?

KEITH SONNIER: Flavin hadn't done that much in light.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, his—

KEITH SONNIER: I mean, he had done installations in galleries.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

KEITH SONNIER: At that point, he had maybe made one or two. I am not well enough aware—

AVIS BERMAN: His seemed more encapsulated than yours, you know, more contained.

KEITH SONNIER: They later were—they were at the beginning, but later on, there are some beauties. I mean, he has got some great architectural pieces. And—

AVIS BERMAN: Was Stephen Antonakos, too?

KEITH SONNIER: Stephen Antonakos, too. I found them very facadal, more than environmental and dealt less with the translucency of the architecture. They remained facadal more like the French artists to—mainly works in white light, but I can't remember. But they remain like painting, I thought. And I tended to be more interested in the architectural works, in the artworks that forced a dialogue with the architecture more directly.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I am going to ask you now that, you know, with Munich behind you and all of this is that you must have—I don't know when you really began to have a full sense of what really makes a work of art public. I mean, is it access? Is it location? Is it the patron? I mean, is it a certain essence [ph]—[inaudible]?

KEITH SONNIER: I think it is all of those things really. I think that—and I think what is key is maintenance because if you—when you see a work like Munich—and it is beautifully maintained. If it is not maintained, it breaks the flow. You know, like you—it is like—sort of like you go past a building and the windows are broken or something. So I think that it—I forgot entirely what the question was.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I just was wondering if, you know, what sorts of elements or components, you know, what makes a work of art public?

KEITH SONNIER: I think many different things can make a work public because there are some public works that are very intimate and that you have to go and discover in a way. There are some works that demand your kind of participation. What I became interested in from doing these public works is that I began to think of public works as having a function, which I never had before and that I wanted to have the works somehow be used in a way—not in a funfair kind of way, but be used—and curiously enough, the idea came for that not from the West, but from the East. Going to East Indian temples and seeing how they used the art to death. It didn't have this iconographic distance that we have in the temple or the church or the museum where the pedestrian is here and the art is there.

And that is what I wanted in the public works, that they became meshed and the person moved through them. And in the East, that would happen in a way, in a more graphic, literal sense of where they feed the gods and they have everything going on in the temple, the life, the daily life is going on around the art. And in the end, like situations like airports and stuff have become our new kind of—people spend more time there than they do in a museum.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

KEITH SONNIER: And we began to think of being in these kinds of spaces as, you know, safe havens and fantasy havens and all of these kinds of things. So it definitely did change my concept of what I thought the role of public work could be.

But then I began to make in the studio works like—and I made a series of works in Japan that had working telephones attached that pulled these high-tech works down to a pedestrian level, bank machines attached to the works, so that they could become used in a way or you felt familiar enough with them because they were out of these extruded materials and rather than be pulled away from them, they were so normal that you would go and, you know, it has a telephone, I can use it. It has a water fountain, I can drink from it. So that was what changed and how it began to integrate with the actual works in the studio that I was beginning to do at the time.

AVIS BERMAN: And did museum people find this work of interest?

KEITH SONNIER: Not very much. Later. I mean, I did this show and Bregenz did a beautifully architected museum, but 20 years after I had made the work because then, I mean, the museums were interested in showing expressionistic painting and this was the beginning of the new American Expressionism. They were not very interested.

AVIS BERMAN: The Expressionism, you know, all of that, was also more salable objects.

KEITH SONNIER: It was actually—yes, that all of a sudden, it was real art and more personal in a way. Not thinking that this was not personal, but—

AVIS BERMAN: Well, it was strangely more traditional.

KEITH SONNIER: And it was more traditional and using traditional materials.

AVIS BERMAN: You could put a frame around it.

KEITH SONNIER: You could put a frame around it. You could trade it, which becomes very important because I think all of a sudden in this period, which is important for all of us, I mean, and we think about it that

contemporary art began to have an economic value. When that van Gogh sold for 32 million or 37 million many years ago—

AVIS BERMAN: Are you talking about *Iris*? Fifty-three million.

KEITH SONNIER: Whatever. It was the first real big sale.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

KEITH SONNIER: It completely changed, you know, the concept of contemporary art. All of a sudden it is competing with movie budgets and all—you know, bigger budgets within the arts—with architecture, you know. So then I think everybody begins to think of art in being—you know, before like people used to think of the role of the artist as sort of like as a trickster, as a jokester. And whereas they still refer to it this way in our news coverage in America. It is very different in Europe. But here—I mean, they still make jokes about the art.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, art as a frill.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah. And it is a sort of—but now that it has—equal value [ph]—then it sort of has been taken more seriously. It has had to be because there is money involved now.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, look at the museums selling their stuff. That is the worst.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: —in their so-called permanent collections. The things they just shouldn't be doing.

KEITH SONNIER: The museums can't do shows without, you know, raising money through the corporate community to even do a show promotion.

AVIS BERMAN: And I guess, again—I would think also that in Europe not that these weren't happening, but that was probably another mainstay.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: That was less egregious there for you.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, right, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Actually—and what we should talk about is that you actually then did two pieces in France in Paris.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: You did a facade—[inaudible]. [façade treatment, City of Paris, France, Lycée Dorian, 1993].

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And did that come about through—

KEITH SONNIER: That came about through a kind of architectural tagging almost. They were interested—the architects were interested in the work. And I think there was a—there was a competition. I had done one other piece in Paris. I had done a piece in a subway in Lyon, I think. And it was a—so I was beginning to be known in France. France is always more difficult. It was always more difficult, much more difficult for me than Germany. Even speaking French, it was still more difficult.

And I still remember that we did this work. It was on budget, on time, looks beautiful in the space. And it is a building that is open 24 hours. And it is a building that actually makes neon and all different kinds of light.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, really because it says here it is lights—

KEITH SONNIER: It is a school.

AVIS BERMAN: Yeah, a school.

KEITH SONNIER: It is a school, but they teach these technical things here. But it was very funny. I asked the architect. I said, "Well, why isn't—why it is not working." He says, "Oh, the concierge forgets to turn it on or she thinks it costs too much money." And the truth is it costs less money to operate than their actual incandescent bulbs. But it is how something like that can happen. If it is not—if the occupants of the building are not taught

how to use a piece, then it doesn't get run properly in a way.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, in other words, the architect who either built the building or renovated the building was your champion.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And when he exited, you had no more champions.

KEITH SONNIER: No more champion. Yeah, because it was—because it was a somewhat private building, whereas the subway stop still operates perfectly in Lyon. And it is a big favorite. People like it.

I did do some other works in other materials in France, too. I did a big stone work. But I think those come later.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, there is also in Rouen. There was a station, also an installation. [Station Joffre-Mutualité, 1994]

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. And then there was in [Domaine de] Kerguéhennec [Centre d'art contemporain/Center for Contemporary Art], in Brittany, there was a stone work. But it is not in these things either. And it was considered a sculpture, but it was an outdoor commission really.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, right. And then you have another airport, which was Miami. [1996]

KEITH SONNIER: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: And who were the—

KEITH SONNIER: It took forever that piece to make.

AVIS BERMAN: What was the problem there?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, it changed many times of what, you know—I had won the commission. Then there was a competition. Then they were constantly altering the spaces. I think at one point it was in one space. Then it switched to another space. In the end, it was finally set. It was for the heliport. And then they didn't use the heliport very much. Only Burt and Loni landed at the heliport [Berman laughs]. And then there was a big parking lot underneath the heliport. And then they changed it into a garden. And the piece did function and the piece looked great on the skyline in Miami.

And I was very lucky in that I had a champion in the public arts program. She is no longer in that department. Vivian Rodriguez was her name. And she was fabulous and was responsible for building a lot of large works in Miami.

AVIS BERMAN: Yeah, Miami has a lot.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, yeah, they have a great tradition. It is appreciated, I think, a lot. There is a real need for it in Florida. And the piece was successful in—it was the first time that I used pre-purchased extruded sections rather than having it fabricated specifically. And it was how we were able to go very large in scale very cheaply. And it taught me things that I could apply to later pieces. I always try to do something in a piece that I hadn't done before, so that I could translate it later on in another way.

AVIS BERMAN: And what was it? What was the piece?

KEITH SONNIER: It was a kind of trestling, like almost highway trestling, like the piece I had manufactured in the studio for the—

AVIS BERMAN: New Jersey.

KEITH SONNIER: New Jersey. But this was based on a triangular sort of modular pattern. And a series of these modular patterns were attached to the underneath body of the heliport, so that when the helicopter landed, the light was all around it, but not blinding because it was down lighting. So it was using the downward facade of the—the downward floor of the heliport to illuminate the grounds. And from above, you had the illuminated heliport and the colored light all around it.

AVIS BERMAN: And what were the colors?

KEITH SONNIER: It was red, yellow, blue.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

KEITH SONNIER: I was still working pretty much red, yellow, blue until as the public works got larger and I wanted to make greener pieces that I just started to use the natural gas of the neon, which is red, and argon, which is blue. And then I made the pieces just in red and blue. Less appealing to some clients, but in the end, I knew it could be maintained easier, it could be built cheaper, it could operate much better.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, red, yellow—I mean, I guess I thought red, yellow, blue because they were the primaries. I didn't—

KEITH SONNIER: Right, of course. And there was that. And then I did some secondary, orange, green, violet. And then in the end when I started making the really big ones, I tried to just do them in the natural gas colors.

AVIS BERMAN: And did the clients up to this point, did they have any input in selecting color?

KEITH SONNIER: They would always try. And a lot of architects early on didn't want to have color. And that was a real no-no. But once they realized how the color could become a volume and gas color—that is why I never went to digital, like to LED and stuff so much is because gas color is very atmospheric and it changes with the weather and it becomes much more mysterious looking. It is gas. It is like—it has a much different feel. And it softens the architecture, even if it is only white because now I am doing a lot of pieces only in different colors of white light because there are many different levels of it.

AVIS BERMAN: Also, certainly, with something like neon or argon, even if you shut it off, isn't it still going to be a red or—

KEITH SONNIER: There is that, yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, it will—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, you can if you have a tinted tube, whereas when I was using just the gas color, it was just clear glass. And when it was off, it just melted right into the architecture. And that was another way of convincing the architects that, you know, this piece can have dual functions. It can become—it makes the architecture become something totally different at night than it does during the day, although I did have some pieces that were 24-hour run. And it ran very cheaper, cheaper than incandescent. So that was a positive thing, too.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, is that a difficulty in convincing people that the idea of electricity—

KEITH SONNIER: Now it is more, I think, because before we didn't care about anything and now we have to, you know. We are not addressing it enough, but we have to. And I know the last big one in Caltrans, we got the prize because it is a green building, the Pulitzer. You know, we got it based on the fact that it is a green building.

AVIS BERMAN: Pritzker.

KEITH SONNIER: Pritzker. And that was one of the big things. Oh, it is a green building. Pritzker.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Who were the architects for the airport?

KEITH SONNIER: For which airport now?

AVIS BERMAN: Miami.

KEITH SONNIER: Miami. I don't remember. You know, I never dealt with the architects.

AVIS BERMAN: So this was already—

KEITH SONNIER: It was built. You know, the heliport was built. It was a big cavernous space underneath it on high cement pillars. It looked like a space station. And as soon as I saw it, I said well, this is a space station. It just has to look, you know, look more like one. And Vivian said, well, here are the plans. It had been built—it was even scheduled to be torn down. Then they decided to keep it and they decided to have a parking lot underneath and a garden. And it looked even better when it became a garden because then it looked like this pavilion was floating.

AVIS BERMAN: And is it still there?

KEITH SONNIER: It is still there and I still think it is still an emergency helicopter landing place.

AVIS BERMAN: So now it is not so much for millionaires.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, right, exactly. And it is the central hub of the airport, which is based on a horseshoe.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, I have been in that airport. But, of course, you know, you have no sense when you are in it.

KEITH SONNIER: And now there are so many.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Well, now, as you said, there were other—did you interact with any of the other artists?

KEITH SONNIER: They were in different sections. There was—I think Carpenter did a piece in one section. Years, I think, he worked on it. And someone else, years. You know, they were like five-year projects, all of these projects because they just took so long. Then they changed the space. There were lots of problems.

AVIS BERMAN: Was it Jackie Ferrara who maybe had a piece there. Maybe I am wrong.

KEITH SONNIER: Jackie might have. I know that there is a beautiful Judy Pinto piece. But it is not—I don't think it is in Miami. I think it is in Fort Lauderdale. Wonderful piece. I did a piece in Fort Lauderdale, too, in the baggage area.

AVIS BERMAN: Is that on here? Let's see. Oh, yeah, the Fort Lauderdale—

KEITH SONNIER: Fort Lauderdale.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, right. Yeah, you did it in 2001. Did you run into 9/11 things with that?

KEITH SONNIER: Not really.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, I should say in terms of working on these things, has 9/11 impinged on how you, you know, in terms of making public pieces?

KEITH SONNIER: Quite frankly, I haven't done that many since 9/11. So—

AVIS BERMAN: Well, things that wouldn't quite matter like a church.

KEITH SONNIER: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

KEITH SONNIER: And then I did do Kansas City, but it is away from the airport. There were some issues at Kansas City. But because my piece was well away from the airport, it was sort of on the drive to the airport and not attached to architecture.

AVIS BERMAN: And what were the issues?

KEITH SONNIER: The issues were safety, 9/11 issues.

AVIS BERMAN: I guess with Florida, again, it was that classic, you suddenly had to make up for what was missing in the environment.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: That is why it probably was so difficult.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, right, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: —because, I mean, you know, in other words, clearly, it is nice to be called in before it is built.

KEITH SONNIER: Always.

AVIS BERMAN: I don't know how you arrange that or not.

KEITH SONNIER: I have designed some and I have won competitions and the pieces never got built. This happens quite a lot.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. What were some of the ones that you really wished that would have gotten built?

KEITH SONNIER: I did a football stadium and I wish we could have built the football stadium in Switzerland. It won first prize. And like many architects like 9/11 got—. And I wish that we could have built the piece because it was a really great design for the football stadium. And I think they just didn't have the money in the end. The

clients didn't want to spend the money to do it.

AVIS BERMAN: Or to do it right—I mean—

KEITH SONNIER: No, just to do it.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, okay.

KEITH SONNIER: In the end, they didn't do it.

AVIS BERMAN: Boy, that is a big thing to go that far on and then pull out on.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. And, you know, they did one—they paid the design phase, the contracting and then backed out. And it was a competition. So I won the competition. Then it was going to go into contract and then we never—it never went into contract.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, when something like that happens, do you get paid for a design?

KEITH SONNIER: It depends. If it is only a design phase, then there is a design fee. And if it is a competition, you get paid for that. But in Europe, they tend to pay more for design fees than they do in America.

AVIS BERMAN: I am not surprised. Now, on any of these pieces, these—for example, is there anything in Miami, is there anything you would change about that?

KEITH SONNIER: I would change more of the system of how to deal with public work and its maintenance and stuff. I think that there should be—I don't know who should be in charge of it. And, you know, airports, as I said before, it is not just government. They are half and half. So it is very hard to sort of have any kind of guidelines. It is cultural more than anything else if something is going to function or not.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]. We are about to get to the first GSA commission, which I will in a minute. But I just want to ask because I thought—I have here that there were two, the Census building in Maryland [outdoor installation, Bureau of the Census, Bowie, Maryland, 1997] and the Reagan Building.

KEITH SONNIER: Correct.

AVIS BERMAN: Was there a third because I thought Leslie [ph] said there might have been three.

KEITH SONNIER: I don't think there are.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. I haven't seen any either because—not that you wouldn't get it, but there—

KEITH SONNIER: No, no. I know that we definitely worked on—those were the two, the two biggest ones.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, okay, because I just wanted to check and see if there were other ones because I want to make sure I get all of those.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, because in here is—yes, I think those are the two.

AVIS BERMAN: All right. Well, let's begin with the GSA, which was—I have here that the first one was the Bureau of the Census.

KEITH SONNIER: No, actually I think—I might be wrong. I think the Reagan Building was first.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. I mean, it only says on your chronology—well, it doesn't matter which one we discuss first because it just said the Census was '97 and this was '98. But it could have been installation versus conception.

KEITH SONNIER: Oh, that is true, too.

AVIS BERMAN: But let's do the one that you—let's see, I have all of these—

KEITH SONNIER: Well, they are very different in that I worked much closer with the architects on the Reagan Building than I did with the—I don't even remember the architect for the Census Bureau because that had been built, too. And the Reagan was not built.

AVIS BERMAN: Let me see. Oh, well, this would be very interesting—well, it would be very interesting for you to discuss. Was it James Ingo Freed?

KEITH SONNIER: That is for the Reagan.

AVIS BERMAN: Reagan Building, yes. You know—

KEITH SONNIER: And we spent a lot of time together. And I knew him.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And did you work with I.M. Pei or was it just—

KEITH SONNIER: A little bit initially with the first meeting and stuff. But then by then, Jim was the designer of the building.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

KEITH SONNIER: I mean, maybe they both planned it. It was the initial—

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

KEITH SONNIER: And I was working with him and he was beginning to be ill, which was quite interesting actually.

AVIS BERMAN: Can you elaborate?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, he had a unique way of working, for one thing, whether he—you know, because he had some motor dysfunction. And he just ignored it and he just completely did and said what he had to do. And I know he was in a lot of physical pain. He had to have been. He had a great staff of people and a great architectural liaison. And I had an architect permanently attached to me for this project and I did everything through him. And it went to Jim, you know, for final approval.

AVIS BERMAN: And were there two liaisons? In other words—

KEITH SONNIER: I basically had one main person.

AVIS BERMAN: And who was that?

KEITH SONNIER: I am trying to remember his name. He was at the site. And my meetings would be sometimes in the city with Jim here at I.M. Pei offices. And then my meetings on site were with—I had one onsite visit with Jim. But the bulk of them were with—I want to say Tim, but I can't remember. It has been a while. He would probably be listed in this. He was a partner. I can't remember, but I can find out.

AVIS BERMAN: Let me also ask you—you know, obviously by now, you are an eminent artist, but how did you, you know, swim into the ken of GSA? I mean, were you on the—did you register, you know, on their registry or anything? What happened?

KEITH SONNIER: I think I must have tried for some other pieces before. I can't remember what they are now. But I know that I was asked to make it because I was beginning to know architects and then people were aware of some of the pieces that were done in Europe. So I must have applied for other things, so I was in their slide registry. And then lots of times when things would come up, I would get notification. And then sometimes, you know, since I had just done two projects, to be fair, they did a lot of other people as well, too.

And I worked with Susan Harrison from GSA and a woman then who moved to Seattle. I worked with her. Susan Harrison, I worked on for the Reagan Building. And for Maryland, Bowie, I worked with—I can't remember her name now. I would have to look that up, too. She is now in Seattle, but she is still with GSA, I think.

AVIS BERMAN: So in other words, you were just—

KEITH SONNIER: Oh, and I also did a bit of work with Dale Lanzone.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, right.

KEITH SONNIER: And Dale was aware of the work. So he was the boss then, I think. So he was aware of this. And then I later on went to Marlborough and he was director of Marlborough.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, right, right.

KEITH SONNIER: Curiously, we never did a commission together.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, because it was '97 and '98.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, right.

AVIS BERMAN: So they just—someone called you or wrote—

KEITH SONNIER: I had to submit a proposal and then sent the information. Yeah. That is how the Reagan Building began.

AVIS BERMAN: In other words, there was no competition. You were just asked.

KEITH SONNIER: No, no, there was a competition.

AVIS BERMAN: For the Reagan Building?

KEITH SONNIER: I think—no, there was a preliminary—no, there was a selection committee. There was a group of artists. And they selected a group of artists to work in different areas of the building.

AVIS BERMAN: Correct because yeah, you and Martin Puryear—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, yes. And I remember how it in the end became—and then this was the committee problem, members of the panel. Well, Judith Zilczer, I dealt with for my show at the Hirshhorn when I did the—after that, the architect saw it for the Munich Airport. So in a funny way, it was all sort of beginning there, I guess, in Washington. And James and I.M. Pei—there were three partners, right? James, I.M. Pei—

AVIS BERMAN: Henry Cobb.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, they were aware of other pieces. And James, of course, I knew his wife very well, too, from the art world, you know, because I was making tapes. And I remember one thing in particular that James was very insistent on was that the piece in the atrium would soften the atrium space. And he liked the fact that the cable showed and all this stuff. And he wanted this draping effect to happen in the piece. And I was amazed that he did. And in the end, he was absolutely right because it worked, whereas it would have never worked, the lighting system for the Census Bureau, because it was a much more rigid, smaller piece of architecture. And it was, you know, a straight line.

AVIS BERMAN: So this also—so the users of this building, I mean, I guess, it is various government offices.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And so they weren't in it—

KEITH SONNIER: And there was a combination of government—and this was an interesting thing. It was government and commercial, which usually in the GSA, they were not.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

KEITH SONNIER: You know, like the Census Bureau is the Census Bureau. This had commercial clients.

AVIS BERMAN: I guess they could—I guess it is very—it is funny, very Reagan, I guess, to have that—

KEITH SONNIER: [Laughs] That is true, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: against government, he expanded it. But also, I guess it would pay the rent.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, absolutely. And probably yeah, they could get certain clients. It was a trade, you know, bureau, too, I think. The trade bureau was in there or something.

AVIS BERMAN: Yeah, that is very unusual to have them both—I mean, sometimes a government can buy a building in which there are commercial—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. So in a funny way, it is like an airport to where there was that.

AVIS BERMAN: So none of the users—the reason I ask you this is that did any of the users have impact or input or—

KEITH SONNIER: Not really.

AVIS BERMAN: Because—

KEITH SONNIER: I mean, there might have been behind the scenes because I remember certain questions came up about certain things. But somehow I was very lucky that I had Pei Cobb Freed. And they just said well, this is what, you know—

AVIS BERMAN: So this was an example of a successful collaboration.

KEITH SONNIER: Very successful, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Because what happened sometimes on these GSA projects—for example, if you were doing a courthouse, the judges have incredible influence. And they would get to say I don't want red, yellow and blue and all of that.

KEITH SONNIER: Oh, yeah. I think that I would have definitely had some problems. And I have had other problems with pieces that did not get built because of those things.

AVIS BERMAN: Because—

KEITH SONNIER: Because they wanted a specific thing and I said, well, you know, I don't do whatever.

AVIS BERMAN: I don't make judges—justices—robes.

KEITH SONNIER: Right, or whatever, that kind of thing, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: So these were—you know, the users weren't in the building yet, which probably made life easier.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, that was the big plus. And they had to get the building finished. It was a question of, you know, really they were behind on production, very behind.

AVIS BERMAN: Even though this is public and private, this was your first federal—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. And there were big security issues to deal with, with the piece because it was out there. And it is live electricity, you know, in the center—there were a lot of security issues that had to be dealt with, which I learned a lot from, too, to construct the piece.

AVIS BERMAN: So far you had had private, public, corporate, city—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. But I had, you see, in Munich Airport, which was great, I was not the contractor. You know, here I had to function as a contractor, too, and it was difficult. And luckily, I used a neon person who was more flexible as a contractor. It was harder for them, but it was more flexible.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, what changes would you—you know, looking back, what changes would you recommend as an artist in terms of doing that commission? How might the process be improved?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I think it is very difficult to improve what has already been established there because it is a government building and there are certain things like if a piece gets broken or whatever, like it has to go through this whole chain of command to get repaired and whatever because sometimes maintenance people are no longer the same maintenance people who are in charge. There are many of those kinds of issues. I think that if there would be—and there might be—a person who is just in charge of the art in public buildings. Maybe GSA does have a person who only does that—I don't know—who makes sure that the art in the public buildings, that they organize are maintained. And I would think they do.

AVIS BERMAN: What would be the conservation issues on the Reagan commission?

KEITH SONNIER: The conservation issues I think were dealt with very well with how GSA organized it because it was a government building and it was in Washington. I think it was very well-organized. Where I have worked in other situations where it is not at all done. I have never had—that level of professionalism was excellent.

AVIS BERMAN: So it is still working—

KEITH SONNIER: Oh, yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: —and in good shape—

KEITH SONNIER: I mean, I will get a call from someone every two years or something. I have it set up that the piece has to be checked by someone once a year, like a maintenance thing. And I assume they are still doing that.

AVIS BERMAN: The reason I am asking you that is that for a lot of commissions early on, they didn't ask artists about what the artist wanted.

KEITH SONNIER: Absolutely not. And they didn't—they didn't even have maintenance contracts.

AVIS BERMAN: So that is why I am asking in case you have—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, right.

AVIS BERMAN: And also, I talked to one artist in which they—again, this was a courthouse—the judge decided he didn't like the patina and essentially had them change it—essentially make it chocolate brown.

KEITH SONNIER: Right, yeah. That, I have never had those kinds of issues to deal with. I think—I didn't in this case because I was dealing with this team of architects. And the Reagan building is a very high-end building, you know. They spent a lot of money making that building.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, and it is high profile.

KEITH SONNIER: And it is high profile.

AVIS BERMAN: You know, in other words, in terms of this, was there a theme or an overwhelming idea that, you know, that you were trying to get across?

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. Since this was going to be the center for world trade, that backdrop began as a kind of globe and they had even had this kind of concept. And then it became a curtain wall. And as soon as the kind of global thing left and just the half of a globe retained and it became a curtain wall, then it sort of became the end to the atrium space. And it was a lot easier to deal with. And I think it was gradual through design and redesign that this happened because the early drawings for that was very different. I don't think there are any in this. But I know in my studies, there were—

AVIS BERMAN: Let's see what I have here.

KEITH SONNIER: And the models were—you see like how this is—

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

KEITH SONNIER: At one point, it went—it encompassed much higher up.

AVIS BERMAN: Are these all taken at night, these pictures?

KEITH SONNIER: They must be.

AVIS BERMAN: How does it function—you know, how is it different in the day versus—I mean, how purposeful are you when you are doing something like this about day and night?

KEITH SONNIER: With these pieces, you see, because the color is in the tube, too, as well, you really notice it day or night, but it becomes more intense at night. But these structures were actually more cylindrical almost. They were less facadal. At one point, it was completely enclosed. And then this became like a backdrop for activity that took place there. And you can see some of the designs were very different. This is when it was still at a global state after I designed—kept some of these old ideas. And then I went to these ideas after because they are not even in here.

Here you can sense the sort of—this was much more circular and there was another whole section that they took out.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, right. Just for the tape, we are looking at drawings, preliminary drawings and how they evolved. And are you happier with the solution than the original design?

KEITH SONNIER: In the end, it became a much more functional piece, which before I thought it was quite decorative. And then because it became a—into the architecture, a place where activities could actually happen in front of it, it became a more functional part of the architecture. And I was quite happy with that, you know, because it is great. And it was within my concept that the works have to be used and one has to participate within the architectural arena. I was happy with that.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, I guess that is the question is just how does one avoid the decoration and the—in the pejorative sense?

KEITH SONNIER: I think that with lots of artists, too, I think when you work on a collaborative basis, you have to learn—you have to learn how to do that. And some people just can't. You know, well, I want to use this and I am not going to let go of whatever. I never go into a project that way. And I think it is what sort of saved me in a way is that I—I don't like to—I don't want to jeopardize my integrity, but at the same time, I want things to work. I want it to work. I want to get a piece built. I don't want to get it not get built.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, and somehow it does—I mean, it seems you are accepting that somehow it has to blend

with the architecture. I mean, that is just—

KEITH SONNIER: I have become an integral part of the architecture that functions and is maintainable and that you are not sacrificing the art to become like a decorative sort of embellishment, which is a real pitfall for a lot of public work, unfortunately.

AVIS BERMAN: A part of that sometimes does come because you have to save some awful building and so it does become—

KEITH SONNIER: And, you see, what I like about these works, working in light, is that it can change function. When the lights are off, it can have a much calmer identity. It has a few songs in its heart, so to speak.

AVIS BERMAN: Really, yes, exactly. If something is a very structural kind of sculpture that you—

KEITH SONNIER: Right. It has a different breath.

AVIS BERMAN: You can see that gateway function very much.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, right.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, well, I think we will quit for today. So thank you very much.

KEITH SONNIER: Good. We covered quite a lot.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

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AVIS BERMAN: This is Avis Berman interviewing Keith Sonnier for the Archives of American Art, GSA Oral History Project on October 20, 2009, in his studio in New York City.

And I am going to pick up with a couple of questions I had left from last time when I listened to the first tape. And one of them was when you talked about the Munich Airport, you said you didn't know what it was going to look like. Does that mean what you meant was how the light was going to reflect? Or is it something else?

KEITH SONNIER: It was something else. It was really about—doing studio work before or working on small projects, you could somehow envision what the entire work looked like. But a kilometer, you can't envision beginning to end. It is very difficult. So I had to think of designing in a different way. And it was this thinking of designing in a different way, dealing with this much distance and volume, that began to change how I worked. I had to begin to think of it almost like a music score. I had to script, in fact, what the variations and the changes were going to be.

And it is this new way of designing. And the interesting thing about the Munich Airport, it was designed before I had a computer. But everything we did led up to later on having to use a computer because the lead draw [ph] was phenomenal.

AVIS BERMAN: Even though you had the computer later on, this was literally a different way of composing. Did you remain with this way of composing?

KEITH SONNIER: Very much so. And visually, it also introduced a very different way of thinking. It was the first time that I really had to begin to think because I had always been known as a colorist in a way. I had to begin to think of color as volume and the solidification of the color. And I think that was a very interesting approach to later works and to the body of my works.

AVIS BERMAN: And you had also mentioned that two very successful collaborations with architects were one, the Munich Airport, and two, the Reagan Building.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. And I should also mention a third one, of course, is the Thom Mayne building, Caltrans, in California.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, yes, I was going to ask you if there was another one. But since that is a little bit later on, we will get to that a bit later because I think that is an important commission that we should discuss.

KEITH SONNIER: And there was also another one in Europe, which was very important because it was a real true collaboration with the architects. And that was the project for the *Münchener Rück* passageway. And it is called—

AVIS BERMAN: Is that a tunnel?

KEITH SONNIER: It is a tunnel.

AVIS BERMAN: Is it called *Munich Re* [2002]?

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, yes. And I forget. It does have a title. I just can't quite remember. I will have to check my—I can tell you in a second. I have to get my catalog. And I should bring that as a reference because it is very handy—I'll be right back. It is curious. Tomorrow I am on a seminar with artists and architects and we will be discussing some of these very things.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, where?

KEITH SONNIER: At the Architectural Institute at LaGuardia Place. I can give you the information. It is tomorrow from six to eight.

AVIS BERMAN: That might be very interesting. I think I might enjoy that.

KEITH SONNIER: There is a new book out. I will put your name at the door

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, yeah. So the Architectural—

KEITH SONNIER: I will give you the—what is the address of that, Leslie [ph]? It is on your computer. It is at the—the lecture tomorrow.

MS.: 536 LaGuardia

KEITH SONNIER: 536 LaGuardia. It is near Bleecker and Third.

AVIS BERMAN: [Affirmative.]

KEITH SONNIER: It is the name of the architect—what is it called?

MS.: Architectural Institute

KEITH SONNIER: Architectural Institute.

AVIS BERMAN: If I can do that—I mean, it is exactly what I am doing at the moment, so I would find it very enlightening.

KEITH SONNIER: And I do a 10-minute PowerPoint before starting. And then there is a panel. And the piece that I was referring to from *Münchener Rück* is also reproduced in this book that has just come out.

AVIS BERMAN: You were very kind to give me a copy. I left it at home probably because I was afraid—I didn't want to lose it. Well, that was the—why don't you discuss the collaboration on that?

KEITH SONNIER: Okay. I grabbed the wrong—there is a whole book on this project. There is a book on the *Münchener Rück* project and a Catholic church. So there is a corporate and a religious sort of commission. And they are both in the same book. And they were both very good collaborations with architects.

For the *Münchener Rück*, we did—the piece went through many variations. And the architects were extremely helpful. And we had a great time designing the piece. It was a true collaboration, as well as with the Catholic church, *Tears for St. Francis* in Linz [2001]. We worked very well together with this architectural team. It is a husband-and-wife architectural team, Riepl and Riepl. And these were very thought-out pieces and they really were well-placed for the client in a way, that they got the maximum kind of use and benefit from the pieces, I think.

AVIS BERMAN: What do you mean by use?

KEITH SONNIER: I tend to think a public work has to, in fact, be a public work, that it has to have some kind of function other than just decoration for the building. It has to perform some kind of function as well, too. And the *Münchener Rück*, it was a directional tunnel, where the piece was designed in such a way that the pedestrian flow moved in the direction that they were directed to the design of the piece, not only in its breadth, its width, but its height.

And so you sense the compression of the architecture in several different ways as you walk through it. And this, the architects got what I wanted to do right away and they were very helpful in making sure those things happened like—they would say, "Well, the ceiling, we can go up here. And this other part, we can't touch the ceiling, but we can touch the floor." So there was a true collaboration.

AVIS BERMAN: And so you were brought in very early on?

KEITH SONNIER: I was brought in early. The tunnel existed, but they had built a new building and they had to reroute the tunnel. So it was early enough to where we could really implement a lot of these changes. In the Catholic church in Austria, there were other issues. There were issues of a congregation who were not steeped in the modernist tradition. So of course—and like *Münchener Rück* had an art collection, you know. They had been collecting art since the 1850s even. It is a very old insurance company.

But this church luckily was somehow associated with a Jesuit priest who was more liberal. He liked the architect's plan because the piece was designed to be in the cupola in the bell tower. And they, of course, wanted a bell. And the architects really wanted it to be more like a beacon tower. And they had seen my work and thought of the possibility of having a light work in the tower.

And in the end, it worked extremely well because I did the tower and then also did the baptism area, which was near a reflecting pool. And the light reflected in the water. And the nice thing about the cupola is that it was all glass. It did become a beacon for the church because you could see it from very far away, just as the bell did in ancient times. It was used to call the parishioners in. The light was functioning the same way.

But when they were finally convinced about the light, then, of course, well, they wanted crucifixes hanging in the—well, so I had to do a lot of talking to make sure that it was not going to be that. And I did convince them in a very funny way of telling them that, you know, this symbol—because it was a series of loops. I said, "You know, this symbol is a very ancient symbol. It is the symbol of a fish in Christianity." And this was a secret symbol for Christians to get into their meetings. They would draw this fish symbol in the sand.

I remembered my *Quo Vadis* movie from the teenager years. And it is what really worked. It convinced them that they could somehow read a symbolism into the gesture of the work. And it is what really helped get the work done. And they were in the end very happy with it.

AVIS BERMAN: And they liked the beacon?

KEITH SONNIER: They loved the beacon. And it was an area—it was a town that didn't have a lot of tall architecture, so you could really see it from a big distance. And it was in a new area of the city. It was in a small, working-class area outside of Linz. So it was perfect for the neighborhood.

AVIS BERMAN: And when we left off, we were in the middle of a discussion of the Reagan Building, that particular GSA commission.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And the title of it is *Route Zenith*. And was that your title or was it—

KEITH SONNIER: It was my title. When the first ideas began to be discussed for the piece, this building was supposed to have many government and many private functions, all to do with the trade industry. And there were supposed to be many different kinds of trade unions that had offices there. And it was to be a global view of world trade was the focus of what was going to happen in this building. It later all changed and even the design changed to facilitate that in a way.

In the end, the place where the work actually had to happen did not change, but the focus in the work was less—because at first, they wanted a globe that somehow you had a kind of like World's Fair sort of idea of a global network, but an illustration of it. And I was not interested in reproducing a globe. But luckily, James Freed was very open to—well, he felt—we had to address what the issues of the space were. It was, in fact, an exposed proscenium environment. This was where speeches were going to happen. This was a big—the large atrium in the space. It is the central, like the nave of a church in a way. It had all these symbolic references to old architecture.

Of course, it is all made in this grand style of extruded materials and beautiful flying buttresses in metal. And to the back was a grid work that was going to be a globe, but then became a kind of half circle, a grid system. And in this grid system is where the work actually went. And I had designed a series of straight colored tubes to interlock in with this—with glass inside, so that it refracted it and would shoot the images out in different directions into the architecture.

And at first, it had a tighter look. And I remember discussing this with Jim. He says, "Well, in your pieces, you show all the electricity and everything. Why don't you do this in this piece, too? We don't have to hide the electrical." And as soon as we opened that section of it up, too, it gave the piece a lot more of a kind of—a more freer kind of drawn look. And it made the piece less tight and much more open and more theatrical in a way because the space was very sort of rigid and beautiful. The materials are incredibly beautiful, like a wonderful

marble and a wonderful steel buttressing and everything. And you really focus on these architectural details.

And this piece refracted on the architectural detail and made you even more aware of it. So it was well-situated for the space. And it became a real atrium situation, where they use it a lot for functions. Whether it is turned on or not, it still has this presence.

AVIS BERMAN: So you would judge it to be a successful—

KEITH SONNIER: I would suggest it and I think Jim felt it was successful, too. He liked the piece.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, you know, one thing that is very important in your studio pieces, whether you can or can't touch it, I mean, I get a sense of tactility from looking at—

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I think you are absolutely right. And the early pieces were all about touch.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And I wondered, is that something that you can incorporate in any of these works?

KEITH SONNIER: I think that where it would be appropriate, I would love to do it. I like the fact that you can actually feel architecture as you move through it. I have never had a piece or I have never done a piece where the tactility elements are part of the work because the architectural situations I was asked to design didn't have those kind of elements. They weren't that accessible. They were higher up or lower. It was about the lighting conditions that changed those.

But in the beginning of my career, I made a series of very early works. And they were pretty much based on the five senses. How something felt and looked and smelled. And so these tactile sort of interests were very early on. Curiously, the first piece that I made from this series, it was a two-by-four and it was covered with foam rubber and then covered with satin. So it was very smooth. And you could almost feel—you could feel the bumps. It was kind of sequential. And the piece was bought by Philip Johnson. And it is the first—one of the first artworks I ever sold. And it is in the Modern now [Museum of Modern Art, New York City]. But it was based on touch.

AVIS BERMAN: Actually this leads me back to one of the—something that you said last week is that one thing that really had interested you literally for doing another piece you had not ever been given a chance to create a garden as a work of art.

KEITH SONNIER: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: Has that happened yet or—

KEITH SONNIER: It hasn't happened yet. I just thought of one other thing that there was some touch pieces.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, okay.

KEITH SONNIER: I will go back. First, let me answer that because it did come up. Then I will answer the garden piece because that is actually coming up. I had done a series of pieces in foam rubber like the pink satin piece. That was foam underneath. Later on, I did a series of pieces that were large units of foam that you had to walk through and touch to get through them. And they were covered with fluorescent powder. So you really were in this very tactile environment. And these pieces led to the commissioned pieces because I made these large environmental pieces before I worked in architecture. So the fluorescent room and display were two early pieces that were about that.

It is curious that you mentioned the nature now is that I am very interested in—well, for one thing, I am very interested in gardening now, which I never was that interested in, I think, because I had to cut the lawn so much in Louisiana. The grass grew too quickly. But I am very interested in landscape now and gardening and landscape architecture. And I am going home actually at the end of this month with a very good friend, a landscape architect, to look at some properties I inherited in Louisiana because I wanted to do an artist in residence in my little town that I was from because I inherited some properties.

And I am going with this landscape architect who just wrote a book on Marie Antoinette's gardens in Versailles and about the greenhouses and about the whole structuring of the gardens. And I must say I became fascinated by the complexity of landscape architecture in this very early and very accomplished phase. And it has branched out my reading into a lot of different areas. So I think if it would come up, I would address now working in landscape with light in a very different way and water.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Because certainly now with a lot of these public—these GSA commissions, the later ones that I am seeing, I mean, the artist really gets a chance to make not just a piece, but make a place.

KEITH SONNIER: It is happening more now, which is actually a much more interesting direction to go, I think. And this book that just came out has quite a few examples of this, of artists and architects working together to do pieces. And there are quite a few. Like Irwin has done several pieces, Robert Irwin.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

KEITH SONNIER: There are quite a lot in Europe, too. And it becomes a very interesting—don't let me forget. I want to show you this book because I have a copy of the book here. And this person is organizing the panel tomorrow who did the book.

AVIS BERMAN: Because I guess your task, I guess, is to get people to think of you more in conjunction with this, if you want to do it. Is that a crude way of stating it? Probably.

KEITH SONNIER: No, I think it is—you know, when you work with an architect who is, well, for one thing, not threatened by the fact that you are an artist and you are making—you want to make art; you don't want to decorate the architecture. You want it to be a statement, too. And you don't want it to overpower the architecture. Then you have a work—already a working environment and it is totally possible to do all kinds of things.

I think that sometimes artists say well, okay, you can do this, but we are going to hire a landscape architect for this. So they tend to like to break up things in lots of different ways. And sometimes it can work very well, where the three or however many it takes can work together and collaborate. Sometimes it becomes very competitive. I have never had that experience, but I know certain artists who have. And it has caused pieces not to happen. It has caused pieces to fail.

So it is almost better if you have more of a freer range with you to the architect to be able to do this sort of thing or the client.

AVIS BERMAN: And I want to just get a check here on the Reagan commission, were there any particular obstacles or challenges on that?

KEITH SONNIER: One of the remarkable things about it, which was very much like the Munich Airport, I had a great architect liaison. And this makes all the difference. You need to have the architect who is on site to work with because it just means that when you go there and you are physically in the building stage, you can answer and take care of issues and questions very quickly. And what was nice about Washington is I had a great architect to collaborate with on that. And it was close. I could go there, you know, very easily. So it worked very well.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Now, did the Reagan Building commission interface with your studio work at the time?

KEITH SONNIER: I was doing work very much—I don't have—well, I will tell you the date and then I will remember work I was doing.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, it says here that it was installed in 1998. So it was—

KEITH SONNIER: Okay, so obviously, it was works I had—by then, in the '80s, late '80s, I was making works out of extruded architectural material, aluminum, glass, light. And these materials led very well, meshed very well with the type of material that was being used for the Reagan Building. And, you know, it is in architecture, even if it is Washington and it is supposed to look massive in the limestone in gray [ph]. They still have to make it like a skin now these days because we can't afford to make mass architecture.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Did the controversy over *Tilted Arc* [Richard Serra, 1981] have any effect on your commissions?

KEITH SONNIER: You mean *Tilted Arc* here?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, the dismantling of—

KEITH SONNIER: The *Tilted Arc*. I always thought the problem with the piece was that it was not psychologically placed. There were problems because it was not work—the community wasn't ready for it. And it could have easily been handled. I think there were mistakes in that way. I don't know who the architect was.

AVIS BERMAN: How could it—

KEITH SONNIER: I know the artist very well.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, right.

KEITH SONNIER: And I think that it was shoved down their throat and it could have been handled very differently.

AVIS BERMAN: How could it have been handled differently?

KEITH SONNIER: I think there had to be some sort of understanding of how it was going to really work in the environment. Quite frankly, it is a lot better than what they have got now. But it wasn't meshed to the site enough. There had to be some way to make it cohesive to the environment. The piece was fine. But it is that its setting became an aggression to the park and to the architecture and to everything. And there were ways where other pieces have been very successful. But they have been better meshed. And there was—I don't know how this happened. I don't know who the architect was and I don't know all the—

AVIS BERMAN: Right, because, you know, certain artists in the wake of that had—the community was suspicious of them, even though they had nothing to do with it. The commission—the contracts changed. So there was definitely a boomerang or a backlash.

KEITH SONNIER: And you know what happens in these things, too, is that they go on for so long, the conditions change and situations change. And that kind of had—that could have had a major effect on it. But I think that someone else was paid for it, so there was a private concern issued as well, too. That might have created issues, too, because I don't know if this was a public work or if it was a public work, there was none public money involved.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, it was a GSA commission.

KEITH SONNIER: It was? Totally?

AVIS BERMAN: Well, that is an interesting question.

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I heard there was other money in it.

AVIS BERMAN: [Inaudible.] Certainly?

KEITH SONNIER: I never realized that. But, of course, yes, it was an early GSA project now that I remember. And I must say the piece they have now doesn't work any better—worse, I think, in a way because it looks—it is not maintained. The problem is the maintenance in public works, too, is a big issue, especially in America. They don't seem to have that together. It tends to work better in Europe.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, let's disregard the case of *Tilted Arc*. But, you know, you have certainly seen a proliferation of public art over the last—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: I just was wondering what you thought maybe what was good and what was bad.

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I don't want to say that—I love—I think Richard Serra is a great artist. He has had great public works. I don't think this was successful because I don't think it was meshed well to the site, to the public. But he has come over that with many other pieces. And New York is not an easy place to place work. I have no work in New York City, so I know it is very difficult for that to happen.

I have seen public works in very unusual situations that I think work very well. Jody Pinto has a fabulous work in Florida that no one even knows about. I think it is in a kind of parking lot area in Florida [*Light Cylinders*, 1996-2002]. And it is a fabulous work. And I think it is a— it is a commissioned work. I think that now there are so many great public works that it is—you know, there are beautiful Sol LeWitt pieces. There are amazing Olafur [Eliasson] works. I am very interested in his work. I think that they are wonderful.

AVIS BERMAN: Whose work?

KEITH SONNIER: Olafur.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, yes, right.

KEITH SONNIER: I think that there are—there is a wonderful one in this book, which I just got yesterday. There is a wonderful one. It is a German piece where the work is reflected in a pool. And it is a film projected in a pool. And it works very well as a public site. I think that pushing the borders of the conditions and the public spaces work the best when it is a good artist. When it is not, they end up not working so well.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, do you feel in her public works, not the early ones with the inscriptions and messages, do you feel that you have influenced Jenny Holzer?

KEITH SONNIER: I think that my work—I would have never thought that my work would have influenced Jenny Holzer quite frankly. You mean the light works?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, the projections.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah. I think that how light is somehow absorbed in an architectural setting, yes, in that respect, but not content, not any of that. But I saw the show at the Whitney and these configurations and stuff are architectural, artistic considerations that I would consider being certain kinds of public works if I was fixing works, but not only myself. There are many other artists like Flavin and Judd and, you know, many others.

AVIS BERMAN: [Inaudible.]

KEITH SONNIER: But I think that—I just saw the Barbara Kruger work at Lever House [*Between Being Born and Dying*, 2009]. And to me, this is one of the best text works that has been done in years. And it is up now at Park Avenue and I think it is an exceptional work. There is no light involved. It is just text. Sometimes in Jenny's work, I find it very, you know, it is very didactic and it is very, you know, okay, I have got it. Okay, and I know and with me one more time. But other times, you see the works and—because we show in lots of different situations. We both had pieces at *Münchener Rück*.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

KEITH SONNIER: And she has a very beautiful piece there. And I love when the text and everything melts into the floor, which I think is genuinely her. And when she did the piece at the beautiful museum in Berlin, the ceiling work—

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

KEITH SONNIER: —which I did a work there, too, was a beautiful work. And how it worked with the architecture. I think now her work with architecture is some of the best. And it is very thoughtful.

AVIS BERMAN: I didn't mean to say she was trying to copy you. But I just wondered—

KEITH SONNIER: No, but the thing is I am a little older, but not that much.

AVIS BERMAN: But you are also a pioneer in this.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, right, yes. But she would be one of my favorite artists now in dealing with that, absolutely.

AVIS BERMAN: And also, she has a kind of—she uses a pulsation, almost a—[inaudible] throbbing? Throbbing?.

KEITH SONNIER: And I was never so interested in the movement of the light. I could have gone "blinky blinky" at one point. But with neon and not text, it has a lot of connotations. And it is also a very hot loaded material. So I tended to play it down. And what interested me were more the physical properties of the light, that it was gas light, that it absorbed light in a different way, that it went out into light atmosphere in a very different way. It created color volume in a very unique way, whereas digitized light doesn't do that or text light doesn't. But this kind of light does. It does create these volumes of color in architecture that I like working with very much.

And I think that even architects now who are always not happy with color in architecture now enjoy having it in different architectural situations.

AVIS BERMAN: It enhances the—[inaudible].

KEITH SONNIER: It does and it creates different mood changes. And it is nice when a work—and this is what I have always liked about even the studio work is that they take on different characters through the day. And then, of course, at night, they become something else, too, which it is nice for art to have these different sort of levels or section.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, or atmosphere.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, and this is one of the great things about public work, I think, is that people are moving through works and it takes the museum experience one step further is that you are no longer just the pedestrian to the icon as in the church or in the museum. You are the pedestrian within the architectural space and you are moving through the artwork. And it is a very different perception of participating.

AVIS BERMAN: I think we should now discuss the other GSA commission, which was for the Bureau of the Census in Bowie, Maryland. And I cannot find even in the material that they gave me who the architects were.

KEITH SONNIER: I don't know if they are even listed in this book. This was a building that was built. It was very difficult. They had a very small budget and they needed to have a work that could function 24 hours because it is a 24-hour facility. And I do not—it doesn't list the architect.

AVIS BERMAN: No. Why is the Census Bureau open 24 hours a day?

KEITH SONNIER: This is a computerized facility. And I think they have to run these counting machines day and night.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

KEITH SONNIER: But it is a 24-hour facility and that is what it was built as.

AVIS BERMAN: And did you—since it was built and up and running and there must have been people somewhere, did you have discussions with any officials in the building about content or what the building needed?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, curiously enough, why I called it *Cenozoic Codex* [1997] was that it takes its meaning from the term, "Cenozoic," meaning the present era or the epoch pertains to the development of the human race. And the term, "codex," refers to a book, so like a census book. The title implies a systematic numeric recording of evolution. So that was the reason for it because there are all these machines recording all of these —

AVIS BERMAN: And how is that reflected in the work itself?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I think it creates this kind of continuum thing where you—it is a facadal work. It is one facade basically. There is nothing inside the building. It is all about the facade. And the central area of the facade, the color shifts because it indicates the entrance. And it is, again, a kind of beacon situation where it—because this is in a flat open parking lot and you see the pieces. You drive up and because it is a 24-hour facility, you can very—it is a directional thing and you see how to get to it.

And also, you know, the type of architecture that it was, it is extreme skin architecture and it is a lot of glass. So the architecture became the housing for the light design. And it extended it. It is how we were able to make with a very little budget the piece seems so much bigger than it really is. But it is because—and it is when I first began to really understand this idea of color volume because it just pulled the light over the surface of the architecture because it was translucent architecture.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, if this was a building already built and which there was no—

KEITH SONNIER: There was no real collaboration with the architect.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And the budget was small.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: What drew you to this? What made you decide to take this commission?

KEITH SONNIER: I wanted to try out these principles because we had begun them in the Washington commission, but it was not outdoors. The nice thing about this it was outdoors. It was an outdoor facade. And I didn't want to just have these pieces indoors. So it was the outdoors, the fact that it was—you could see it.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And what did you kind of learn or take away from doing it?

KEITH SONNIER: I learned a lot about how to fix the light to preexisting architectural structures and make it function. That was the more difficult thing. But it worked. It worked fine because the architecture was so open and so serialized. Like if you made one, you could make 20.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And how about your GSA project managers? Who was involved?

KEITH SONNIER: She was wonderful and I am trying to remember her name.

AVIS BERMAN: Was it Trudy Wang?

KEITH SONNIER: First, I worked with Susan Harrison.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

KEITH SONNIER: And that was on the Washington piece. Then—

AVIS BERMAN: Jennifer Gibson?

KEITH SONNIER: Nope. She moved to the West Coast and—was it Brown?

AVIS BERMAN: Oh—

KEITH SONNIER: Cynthia Brown?

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, it could be.

KEITH SONNIER: I can't remember her name now. I know that she moved right after this piece was finished in San Francisco. I cannot—you know—

AVIS BERMAN: You know, with this, because I guess because this was preexisting, how much latitude here was there for making something?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, the range was slim. You know, the range was—and because the budget was, too, it was either this or not. And they—I think they went for it only because it was so practical in the end.

AVIS BERMAN: But you were—in other words, you were either selected or were you—they said you are one of five artists; would you like to submit a piece? Or did they just come to you and say we would like you to do this?

KEITH SONNIER: I can't remember in this case.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

KEITH SONNIER: They might have had a preliminary—they probably had gotten it down to three.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

KEITH SONNIER: And then I think it was a question of—there was a presentation, I do know that.

AVIS BERMAN: And what do you consider the critical function for this piece?

KEITH SONNIER: I think its function was that it worked very well with the architecture, which—it became an integral part of the architecture. What the architect would say, I have no idea. But for me, it really did. I mean, look, here is the light, but it is going right through the building.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, exactly.

KEITH SONNIER: So it gives you a sense of the volume of the architecture, the sense of the interior space, as well as the exterior space.

AVIS BERMAN: And did you feel that this was a facade that had to be rescued?

KEITH SONNIER: I think it was a very—you know, it was brand new and shiny and it would have probably been fine without it. You know, they had a few spotlights on it. It all of a sudden with the colored light became a lot more enhanced. And basically, it is mainly all yellow light, which is—they used to use halogen light all the time, which is yellow. I think that is probably one of the reasons why they went for it, too, is because it didn't break the mold too much of architectural lighting except when you got to the central opening and then it became the kind of nerve center entrance to the opening and there was a lot more light and a lot more color.

AVIS BERMAN: And is this on 24 hours a day?

KEITH SONNIER: I have no idea if it is even maintained. I know that the Reagan Building is. But I don't know. I since hear that they have made another Census Bureau in Maryland and there is another big piece there as well, too. And it might be in this book that has just been published on art and architecture.

AVIS BERMAN: And is there anything here you would change or do differently?

KEITH SONNIER: Not a thing in this piece, no.

AVIS BERMAN: And now, abstracting—excuse me, not abstracting—extrapolating from your experience on the two GSA projects, are there special considerations for an artist when the government is your client?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I think there are in a way. I mean, you can't—this has never happened with me with the GSA project. It has happened with me with other public works that I had issues with the political side of certain things, curiously enough, in my own state, but not with any GSA project. And I think by the time they come to an artist of my direction and persuasion, they know pretty much what they are going to get. I mean, they know the body of work and they know the kind of treatment that I would be interested in working with with the architecture.

I mean, that I am not going to—I am not going to destroy the architecture. So I think that having worked a lot with European commissioning agents as opposed to the GSA, it is a very different way of working. You still have to realize that in America, artist is treated as contractor. In Europe, you are hired as an artist.

AVIS BERMAN: And when you mean that, do you mean that in a literal way that you have to go out and get all the subs?

KEITH SONNIER: You need to get your insurance. You need to do all this stuff. When I did Munich Airport, I was the architect with the architect liaison. They helped me research the material. They found better prices for the material. We worked together on many different levels. And I was responsible for my plans and they were responsible for realizing the plans, whereas in this project in Maryland, we were contractors. That is how we were able to make it for that amount of money, only that reason, the same with the Washington project because those pieces in the industry and in architecture would have cost four times as much.

So it is, you know—and a lot of artists are, you know, like in America, especially, you are hired as a contractor. And that is a very different way of—it is a different way of working.

AVIS BERMAN: [Inaudible.] Vendor?

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, yes. And it is still that way, I think.

AVIS BERMAN: Contract—[inaudible].

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, yes. And that is sort of like a government sort of situation. I am having a delivery. I just want to make sure that—

AVIS BERMAN: We'll just pause this.

KEITH SONNIER: —getting to the second floor.

AVIS BERMAN: Let me pause it.

[Audio Break.]

AVIS BERMAN: Beginning again, you were saying that the GSA people were very, very helpful and knowledgeable, but working in Washington, you felt 20 years ago or so, people were suspicious of contemporary art?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, there was a natural suspicion for contemporary art because for it to cost that much money, people would not be willing to pay this much money, as I said before. It could never be a million, but it could be 900 or they really—if there was a decent percent for art budget, they wanted to break it up and give it to several different artists rather than giving one artist the free range and that amount of money to make an outstanding public work.

So they were much more focused in watering things down, keeping the waters flowing gently, not making art a big political statement. We know of the problems with different exhibitions that create different problems for the public, you know, the corporate Corcoran [ph] shows and the different shows. You know, pornography might be an issue or whatever. Now there are very different issues. Now if it costs too much money to operate a work.

Fortunately for me, most of my pieces are green pieces now and they use less electricity than it actually takes to light a building at night. So there are ways—you know, there are always ways to work around different kinds of things. But the fact that art, contemporary art, now has—can play with the big boys, it is a very different thing now. You know, we can compete with movie budgets and we can—which was something that was unheard of before. And the fact that art sells for so much money now. People take it very seriously.

AVIS BERMAN: And I just want to go back to when you were saying the suspicion for contemporary art, we were using an amorphous they. Who were they?

KEITH SONNIER: I think that—it is hard to say who they is because culturally, we have an attitude that art is something you play with. It is not about—artists are not people who address and redirect culture. That is not

what an artist does unfortunately. But that is, in fact, what we do do. And that an artist might have a vision of the world and of society that could be very important and help us comprehend the state of the world. And until art does not begin to be treated like even our news coverage of art is it always ends up being a kind of joke. Well, it doesn't happen that way in other cultures. But in our culture, it still does, even if it does cost a lot of money.

AVIS BERMAN: The United States and England.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, a bit, too, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. I agree, on the continent -

KEITH SONNIER: It might have—maybe it has something to do with the English's attitude about things. But I must say English contemporary art, let's not forget, we have got our Damien Hirsts and—we have a very different approach now.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, I am not talking about the artists. I am talking about the—

KEITH SONNIER: Oh, the—

AVIS BERMAN: The news media.

KEITH SONNIER: Oh, the news media, yes, yes, of course.

AVIS BERMAN: The same—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. But for some reason, art is more attached to fashion, can be there. And it is sanctioned in a way, whereas here it is still very suspicious, I think, in a way.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, right, exactly. It is also something to do with cities, they think.

KEITH SONNIER: Well, it could be that, too. And then people always think—I can still remember beginning as an artist, my father said, "Well, do you think you would ever get like a real job?" And it wasn't until I was in my 40s that they realized this was a real job. But I think that it is these cultural attitudes that help shape, affect an institution like GSA.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, during all of this time and you are represented by the Leo Castelli Gallery.

KEITH SONNIER: During these commissions, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, during these commissions and up to the point we have been speaking about.

KEITH SONNIER: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: And I wondered if the gallery was a supporter of the public works show drawings, if Leo was interested in any of the—

KEITH SONNIER: Oh, yeah, they were very interested. But they knew that it wasn't the place where they were going to be generating any money.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

KEITH SONNIER: Now, maybe later on, other galleries realized that yes, it would. But with Leo, it was still too early. And lots of times, the gallery had to put in money to make sure public works got finished and happened. But other gallerists like Barbara Gladstone and galleries who worked with a lot of artists who did commissions became very involved in commissioned works and then not only public commissions, but private commissions. And then shows began to—you know, international shows become like a kind of mini production system for making works, too.

AVIS BERMAN: So did the Castelli Gallery ever subsidize any of your public commissions?

KEITH SONNIER: They always subsidized me for other things. In the end, I guess they did. But they didn't really like subsidize a piece. They might have for Richard. I have no idea.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I know that artists got stipends in general.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: So that would have helped.

KEITH SONNIER: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: Was there any specific infusions for any public works?

KEITH SONNIER: I think that in some situations, probably. None for me directly because mine were—you know, they were awarded commissions and there was enough in the budget to actually get them done. And my pieces didn't cost that much to make.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, right, mm-hmm. Well, let's go on and I think we want to talk about the Caltrans commission [*Motordom*, 2004] and how that came about and what it is and, you know, the important ideas in it. That was the—and I don't even know. Is that California transportation—?

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, it is the highway system in California. It is their main office. And it is situated in downtown Los Angeles across from the old L.A. Times Building. And the architect is Thom Mayne.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And you had said that there was—and I guess there was a meeting of the minds there?

KEITH SONNIER: There was a collaboration together, the work done. Once again, there were budget issues that in order to make something, we both had to sort of give up certain things and gain certain things from having given up certain things because we had a budget—we had a site picked out and we had a budget. But in order for him to get something made in the architecture, it was way more expensive than his budget and mine. So we had to change the facadal treatment.

First, it was a stainless steel curtain wall that I was supposed to work behind. And I convinced Thom in meetings with him and with the architects and engineers that we could create a curtain wall in light that would function just as well and function for less money. And in the end, it saved us both a lot of money and it was a great solution. And I think Thom was very happy with it. And the interesting thing about the piece was that it was about—it addressed the issues of what the building did. The lights simulated traffic moving at night because it was digitized. It created different phases to the architecture.

Since it was an all-glass building when the light became digitized, it literally moved through the architecture. It was in a big open facade. It enhanced its architectural setting. And we did it very efficiently and very inexpensively because by that time, I had really decided that if I was going to do public works of that scale, I wasn't going to use multicolor, I was just going to use the two colors of gas that it comes in naturally, neon gas, which is red, and argon gas, which is blue, and just use these straight because at first it was three colors, red, yellow, blue. And I was just convinced. I said, "I don't think we can go with that." First of all, it breaks up the architecture a third step. I would like it to remain consistent in its horizontality like the building is. And in the end, it worked the best at night, too.

So overall, it was a successful collaboration.

AVIS BERMAN: And who was the art administrator who selected you?

KEITH SONNIER: This was somewhat through my dealer at the time in Los Angeles. And I don't know who the art administrator was. But I think they had a committee. And it was a short list and I was one of the artists on the short list. And I think after Thom saw the work—because he was not familiar with my work. It was only after people who knew my body of work in California showed him the work that he became—he was convinced that it would work.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, you mentioned digitization. When does that enter your—is this the first time?

KEITH SONNIER: This is the first time that it entered in on that scale. It had happened a little bit at the beginning with sequencing, where light would go on and off, but not in a blink-blink situation, but more to create a psychological drama. But in this, it was much more about programming in digitization. We had a computer. It had to be a computer light program. It had 38 variations. And I had done it for theatrical events, for operas, for plays. But I had never done it in a public work.

AVIS BERMAN: So you had been using it for a while, but—

KEITH SONNIER: I had been using it for a while, but never in a fixed architectural situation.

AVIS BERMAN: Also, this was outside and so how did that go into the mix?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, it was—one thing, because of the climate in California, it is not—it is not so varied as it is here. The light was in an architectural housing, so it was protected from wind and from rain and from vandalism.

So it tended to mean it was going to be operable because I think designing a work that doesn't operate is a problem.

AVIS BERMAN: And have you been back to see it?

KEITH SONNIER: I have been back to see it. It is constantly being used in commercials and films. I see it a lot in clips and videos kind of stuff. But I haven't been to L.A. in a couple of years so I haven't seen it-

AVIS BERMAN: Well, when you see it in a commercial, is it just a backdrop or is it for a symbol of Los Angeles or how is it—

KEITH SONNIER: It is the backdrop and I get residuals.

AVIS BERMAN: Well that is great. Even though—in other words, you have the intellectual—you have the copyright on that particular work, even though it is a public object?

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: How does that work? Is that something—?

KEITH SONNIER: - If they use it for more than a minute and it becomes an actual backdrop for the piece, we have to take them to court. We have successfully. Mitsubishi, several other car companies, some movies, some rock videos.

AVIS BERMAN: How do you police it—?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, the thing is—well, there is an agency.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, I see.

KEITH SONNIER: Just like the music industry has an agency. There is an agency for artists.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, you mean like VAGA [Visual Artists and Galleries Association] or Artists' Rights?

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And they actually are seeing these things?

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, okay.

KEITH SONNIER: And if I hear of it or whatever I tell them—

AVIS BERMAN: I see. That is what I meant.

KEITH SONNIER: You know, because they are not even giving copyright either.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, that is the other question is on an outdoor work, can you maintain—can you retain copyright—

KEITH SONNIER: Sure, if it is yours.

AVIS BERMAN: In the open air?

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, because anyone can take a snapshot, of course.

KEITH SONNIER: Right, yes. But if it is being used commercially like for a television ad or whatever, you can't.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. And I guess in California—

KEITH SONNIER: We had to fight for it.

AVIS BERMAN: Yeah, I think they had to draw more—[inaudible]—in California.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: I don't know if it is in the rest of the country, but maybe California has it.

KEITH SONNIER: That I don't know. I know that here, if it happens here, but it has never happened here. It has happened in other places or it happened on film.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

KEITH SONNIER: You almost have a better chance if it is in film or something because there are laws that are pretty set up for that already.

AVIS BERMAN: Because I knew that films have to get clearances, so they are used to doing that.

KEITH SONNIER: Right, yeah. That is true.

AVIS BERMAN: Is there anything looking back you would do differently on the Caltrans commission?

KEITH SONNIER: No, I must say I am very happy with it. And I love the architecture. So it was a great sort of—I felt it really fit the architecture.

AVIS BERMAN: And was that—in terms of the space, I mean, I can't figure out—

KEITH SONNIER: Well, again, I think in a funny way, Bowie prepared me for this because it is again that situation, but it was multi-layered, but still, you know, an outdoor courtyard situation.

AVIS BERMAN: So was that the state of California or the City of Los Angeles?

KEITH SONNIER: I think it is the City of Los Angeles, although Caltrans is a state facility. It is a state—it could be the state.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, so there would have been perhaps a percent—was that a percent for art?

KEITH SONNIER: There was a percent for art. There was definitely a percent for art.

AVIS BERMAN: And, you know, you had a great architect. You had great collaboration. And now is there someone there who is coming in and trying to whittle away at the budget or get—is it one of those situations in which—

KEITH SONNIER: Well, there was definitely that. But I said, you know, like I am allowed this amount of money and I don't want to pay for building the architecture. I want to pay for building the piece because it is not that much. And that is how we came to a collaboration where we would have the piece become the curtain wall, not build the curtain wall and then make the piece because he didn't have the money in his budget and I didn't have the money in my budget to build the facade behind the wall. So in fact, the piece became the wall.

AVIS BERMAN: And he was happy with it, too?

KEITH SONNIER: In the end I think he was extremely happy with it.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you think he would work with you again?

KEITH SONNIER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] We have even talked about that. We are friends.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, that is good.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, besides what you are doing in Louisiana, are there any important public works in progress or that—

KEITH SONNIER: There have been very few. I think it is because of the recession. There have been very few public works. I was going to do something in Las Vegas, but that did not happen. I think a lot to do with the hotel industry going west. It was a large commission in a gambling casino. And I did have one piece that I really wanted to do, a football stadium in Switzerland. And unfortunately, they just didn't have the money to do it because the football team started to lose. But it would have been a great public work for me. And I liked the project very much.

But, you know, in public works, as many as you design, there are double the amount that don't get built. And this is one of the sad things about public work is that for an artist, if you do constantly pieces and they don't get built, it is a lot of wasted time. And this is what sent me back to studio work. And not only do I need studio work

to constantly have ideas if I do do a public work, but in order to keep the form language within my career functioning, working, I have to continue to make work and try new things, just the daily process of, you know, being an artist.

And the commission work at the time for me was very important because at the time, my gallery career was not enough to sustain me financially. And I couldn't do the kinds of things I wanted to do. And what commission work allowed me to do was to work on a scale I had never worked on before and to work with architects, which became a very interesting direction for me because I think quite frankly, on my part in being naive, I didn't address architecture. I was threatened by it. And now I absolutely love it.

But I think like anything, one learns to know how to work with things and what things work and actually becoming compassionate. I am interested in building things now all the time because of my interest in architecture.

AVIS BERMAN: When and how—what was the—could you elaborate on being threatened by architecture?

KEITH SONNIER: That—well, you know, it is kind of being threatened by the new movie industry in a way, too. Like how come they have all this budget and I, you know, don't? It is this sort of—it is a have or have-not situation to where am I—and then there is always the question with the artist of are you really doing something that counts, that is valuable because as it is, as I mentioned before, artists are not considered a necessary member of society in a way. And architects can be because they are, in fact, doing something useful. And so there was that stigmatism.

But I think this question has been mulled over century after century and there have always been artists and architects. And I think there will continue to be. And I think that a lot of artists, some even began as architects. And some of the best artists have influenced architects. I mean, what Gordon Matta did in the art world influenced a lot of architects to have a very different concept of their trade and of their discipline. And that in itself is a very important thing, I think, because now he is talked about in architectural history books, whereas before he was the *enfant terrible* and no one wanted to deal with him. Now he is in the books. And he should be because he was a great artist.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And would you—would you like to talk about the Kansas City Airport [*Double Monopole*, 2006] just because that seems to be outdoor—

KEITH SONNIER: Well, yes and it is the last one and it was very difficult to do because I had to build a piece from scratch. And I had to become very inventive and it forced me to be an architect. So I went into—I did what architects have to do and I learned a lot about how difficult it is and what it is about. And my decisions helped get the piece made. I knew that in order to build something that large and that was freestanding, I had to go to extruded items that already existed in the world and signage was the way to go. So I researched billboard signs and I knew that I could build a billboard sign cheaper than I could actually build an architectural structure and make an artwork.

And in the end, that became a much more functional part of the art to the architecture to the landscape. And that is what provided the housing for the water because I wanted to do something with water and light. And the drawing went through hundreds of phases. And in the end, it finally did get built. And I learned a lot of what to do about it, but not working with an architect and meaning having an architect on your team is a very hard thing to do.

AVIS BERMAN: Why was there no architect?

KEITH SONNIER: Because I was always this contractor.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, I see.

KEITH SONNIER: If you want to build that, then you have to build that, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: Get it done how you can. And what does this look like? I have not seen it—

KEITH SONNIER: I can show you some images. It is absolutely beautiful. I am trying to think if—can we turn this off?

AVIS BERMAN: Sure.

[Audio Break.]

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, we are now looking at a simulation of the project for the Kansas City International Airport. It is almost sort of like rising columns of light and water.

KEITH SONNIER: And these were actually billboard signs. I commissioned a billboard sign maker to make these structures.

AVIS BERMAN: This is fascinating. I mean, this seems to be a real departure—

KEITH SONNIER: It was. And it is the last one.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

KEITH SONNIER: And there are some—you know, it goes from the earliest drawings. There were supposed to be projections at first and giving the condition of the airport and this kind of stuff and troughs with water coming down. But this is how they began.

AVIS BERMAN: Fantastic. I see why you were probably interested in the waterfalls piece in New York City [Olafur Eliasson, *The New York City Waterfalls*, 2008].

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, absolutely. I thought that was a beautiful piece. But you can even see in some of these early drawings what—

AVIS BERMAN: This is great. I love how this water cascades down. That is beautiful.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And is this some—

KEITH SONNIER: And you see there was supposed—it had a function, too. This is a lake that recycles water. And in order to keep the water fresh because a lot of jet fuel goes into it, they had circulating water. This aerated the water for the lake by having this waterfall going.

AVIS BERMAN: So that really is green.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, exactly. And these are like the structures, how it actually worked.

AVIS BERMAN: And is this something that has to be turned on or—

KEITH SONNIER: It is turned on every—it is turned off in the winter. They leave the lights on, they turn the water off. And whether it is still maintained, I have no idea.

AVIS BERMAN: And is this something that also is more for night than day? Or is it just—

KEITH SONNIER: It is beautiful during the day, too. But it is more dramatic at night.

AVIS BERMAN: And what was the—were there other artists who worked in this airport?

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, there are a lot of artists who have worked at this airport. They actually have a lot of art at this airport. They do. Alice Ayccock has a piece there. And Dennis might even have a piece there, too, Dennis Oppenheim, but I am not sure. And this is this book that is just out by Christian Bjone, I think he pronounces the name [*Art and Architecture: Strategies in Collaboration*. Basel, Switzerland, Birkhäuser Verlag, 2009]. And that is where the seminar—he is hosting the seminar tomorrow at the Architectural Union.

AVIS BERMAN: Great. This is probably made for me as a source of crib notes here.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, and there is everybody in there. So—

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Oh, he is starting the Renaissance.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, so it really starts—it is a nice historical journal.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, here is the—[inaudible]—and Naum Gabo. This is—

KEITH SONNIER: That is the Robert Irwin piece.

AVIS BERMAN: This is beautiful.

KEITH SONNIER: This is the piece at *Münchener Rück*. That is a Richard—what is his name—that is the church. It is not a great picture.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, well, this is a very modern building.

KEITH SONNIER: Oh, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. This is great.

KEITH SONNIER: And there is one—other books that show—

AVIS BERMAN: This is very—that is a very useful book. You're so right. I mean, Germany is so hospitable to your work. They really get it. Just beautiful—oh here's *Tears for St. Francis*—a better picture.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. That is the baptism—[inaudible].

AVIS BERMAN: This is beautiful.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, there is a great, wonderful ambiance inside the space.

AVIS BERMAN: Anything else that we should mention in terms of anecdotes or, you know, important problems vis-à-vis the Kansas City Airport?

KEITH SONNIER: I think the main issue is maintenance of public works. I think that a lot of institutions don't—I think GSA has been great about sort of insisting on maintenance contracts. And I think this is a way to go to work. You know, if a piece—if any piece is going to be maintained, it has got to be serviced once a year. You have got to check and see what is operating and stuff. And so if there are going to be public works, there has to be budgets to maintain them. And even if it is washing the sculpture or cutting the grass so you can see the sculpture or whatever.

AVIS BERMAN: Would you work for the GSA again?

KEITH SONNIER: Oh, absolutely, because at least it is—you are working with an institution that knows you are an artist. You are not having to prove that you are an artist. No, absolutely. You know, I like working in America and there are fewer—you know, like the bulk of my art career is still in European museums. It is not here. So I like, you know—and I am an American artist. I like working in America.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Any other thoughts or anything else you would like to add for the—

KEITH SONNIER: I can't think of anything else. Only that I would like to hear what I said 20 years ago or whatever it was.

AVIS BERMAN: Nineteen seventy-two—

KEITH SONNIER: Longer than that.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, well, I will make—I will make sure—I will look into that.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, just curious.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Thank you very much.

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AVIS BERMAN: This is Avis Berman interviewing Keith Sonnier for the Archives of American Art, GSA Oral History program, in his studio in New York City on January 19, 2010.

And even though this is a later interview, we're going to begin chronologically quite at the beginning.

And what I want to go into very heavily is your environment because I think—your early environment because it's so important to you and you acknowledge it—I mean, it's important for all of us—

KEITH SONNIER: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: —but you recognized it very early. And first I'm going to ask you a few specific questions and then more general things. And these first few are housekeeping questions. What was your father's name and your mother's name, including her maiden name?

KEITH SONNIER: Okay, my father's name was Joseph Abel, or Abel—[uses different pronunciation]—Sonnier. My Mother's name was May Ledoux.

AVIS BERMAN: And how do you spell Ledoux?

KEITH SONNIER: L-E-D-O-U-X, like the architect.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And so they were both of French-Canadian descent?

KEITH SONNIER: They were both of French descent, not necessarily Canadian. My father's name, Sonnier, I think was part of the early French population that left Arcadia, or Nova Scotia now called, were forced out around 1812.

My mother's family, the Ledoux and the Dugas [ph], came from probably the New Orleans area and had been there earlier, and then moved to the prairies of Mamou, the hometown later on. First they had a hotel, I think, around Lafayette—my great aunts, the Dugas—and then they moved to the Mamou area.

AVIS BERMAN: And do you know your grandparents' names on both sides?

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, my grandmother's name on my mother's side was Josephine Martin Montange [ph] from St. Martinsville, which is a little town on the Bayou Teche, beautiful old town. And I never knew my grandfather's name. I don't remember my grandfather's name on my mother's side. On my father's side it was—actually, I think—his nickname was Zeal [ph] but his name was actually Diosynes [ph].

In those times, a lot of Victorian names were taken from Greek mythology, and hence—like all the street names in New Orleans are all named after gods and goddesses and—Elysian Fields and on and on.

AVIS BERMAN: So Diosynes would have been Sonnier?

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And do you know what your—

KEITH SONNIER: Eugenia [ph].

AVIS BERMAN: Eugenia Sonnier. And do you know what your grandparents did, what their occupations were?

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, they were farmers—later on, I guess, gentleman farmers because they moved into the town. They had two—they homesteaded two small farms in Cajun country at the time the crops were—this was pre-real rice farming, which now it's a rice-farming community—was cotton and indigo and sweet potato, I'm sure, and corn. And then it really moved on to rice farming and the big industry now is rice and crawfish in the area.

There's something else I was going to—oh, yes. Then they moved into town. They spoke no English, not a word.

AVIS BERMAN: None of them?

KEITH SONNIER: None of them.

AVIS BERMAN: And they were able to get along—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, yes. I mean, in the town, the town was bilingual and my parents were bilingual, and my father had a business and my mother had businesses, several businesses, and they were both bilingual. But my grandparents—my grandmother flat-out refused to speak English and never spoke English.

And she never had a job—she was a farmer's wife—but she was a well-known healer, and she did a kind of prayer healing that was, I think, somewhat a little steeped in—there was obviously some kind of faith healing and a little bit of—I think a little bit of voodoo mixed in, but it was prayer healing, basically, and she treated—it was a system called the *cote de don* [ph], which was a—it was a string you wore, a prayer string with knots.

And she was very well known for this, and people would come, and usually in the afternoons, to get this care. I still remember sitting on the front porch and her leaving her game—because they played cards every afternoon—to give the care. And of course there was no money exchanged. This was done free.

And she knew a lot about folk medicine. And there were no doctors then, I'm sure, when they were first there, so they had to do most of their healing themselves pretty much.

AVIS BERMAN: So they would have known herbal—

KEITH SONNIER: Herbal cures and this kind of stuff. But they were real characters. My grandfather died early. My grandmother lived alone for about 25 years and was completely self-sufficient and pretty much died alone in her house with—you know, my father was an only child, but attending her and the family attending her, but she

always refused to—never went to a home, never did any of that stuff. She lived in her house and died in her house.

AVIS BERMAN: And so you had a lot—during your childhood, did you have access to these farms or—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, we would go there sometimes on the weekend, sometimes during the week because they were—there were cattle on the farms too and the cattle had to be tended sometimes. And when they left the farms, they had tenant farmers who lived in the houses and took care of the farming. And they had their own livestock as well as the livestock of my grandparents.

And there were these jokes about, you know, that these cows were really not really swamp cows because the legs were so high, long. That was to keep them off the water. So they'd walk around with very long legs. Later on my dad kind of developed a more—a better strain of cattle, as he loved to refer to it.

I was never very fond of farming, but we all had to participate. We all had to do—we had to know how to grow things, we had to know about picking cotton, we all had to do it, because the Cajuns did not have slaves. This was not a slave area. Slavery barely existed there, especially in the Cajun community, whereas in New Orleans of course it was a totally different thing and there were free people of color in New Orleans, even during the whole slavery years.

But my grandparents never owned slaves, and both my parents were very liberal and were very involved in civil rights, to what they felt they could do within their communities.

AVIS BERMAN: And what form did that take?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, they were—they employed—my father employed black people in his business and tried to, in fact, sell his business to one of his black workers, but it was just not possible at the time for him to make a go of it, to be able to do that, so he never bought the business and the business in fact sold to—the business in fact was sold and dismantled is what really happened.

AVIS BERMAN: And I read that your father had a hardware store. Is that correct?

KEITH SONNIER: He had a hardware store—[coughs]—excuse me—that later developed into a kind of wholesale, and he sold plumbing and heating supplies and then later on leased supplies to contractors and the business got bigger, and he became less and less interested in it. My dad ran his business from basically sitting in a rocking chair watching television and reading and conducting all business, pretty much if he could, not having to get up if he could possibly help it.

But he was very smart and was very open to lots of different kinds of things then. They were never that upset about me wanting to be an artist. That never was so much of an issue as long as I did something. They were very hard-working people and really felt—and very religious too.

AVIS BERMAN: Catholic?

KEITH SONNIER: They were Catholic and were supporters of the church and the community, and my mother sang for, I would say, about 40 years in Latin. They sang the Mass every morning. She and her sisters were in a very small choir, but they went and sang in the morning before they began work. My mother had a business and several of her sisters who were in town had businesses as well too.

AVIS BERMAN: And what was your mother's business?

KEITH SONNIER: She had a florist shop, for one. That was the last business, and I think the business she enjoyed the most because she had always loved plants. And I think she had several other kinds of businesses. I think she had a restaurant for a while too.

Her other sister, my aunt Evangeline—who was the first baby girl born in Evangeline Parish because it's a later-incorporated parish, and she was given a plot of land in the town. And on this plot of land there was later a movie house, and she ran the movie house in town.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, is it unusual for women to have businesses at that time?

KEITH SONNIER: Apparently they had businesses. I mean, my other aunt ran a restaurant and gambling casino in further south Louisiana on the Gulf Coast of Louisiana.

AVIS BERMAN: Because also your mother had three children.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, right.

AVIS BERMAN: Or did you—

KEITH SONNIER: My mother had six sisters and was raised by her mother. Her father died very early in an early oilfield accident when I think rigs were still made out of wood then. But they all did different kinds of jobs, women, and I think basically the mother raised them as a single woman.

AVIS BERMAN: In other words, but your mother was out of the house when you were growing up.

KEITH SONNIER: She had businesses—the flower shop was at home—

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, okay.

KEITH SONNIER: —but the other businesses were in town, but town was three blocks away, you know, the main drag of town. But I remember spending lots of time alone as a kid and not—you know, feeling in a very safe environment and not being—you know, having to be concerned about anything. I went to school, walked home, you know, walked to school.

The town was around 5,000 people and you pretty much—most people in town are—and went to the local high school and elementary school. I loved some of my—I had great teachers; I mean, characters, real eccentric. I think in the South, you know, they embrace eccentricity, so people were allowed their eccentricities, and I think that probably helped being an artist, in a way. It was not so difficult.

AVIS BERMAN: Were you religious when you were a child?

KEITH SONNIER: I think that one just sort of had to be. But by the time I was 15 it was really waning and I really became less and less interested in, you know, the functions of being a practicing Catholic. I basically did it because I was still living at home with my parents, but by the time I left for school I really sort of never went to church.

AVIS BERMAN: Did your lapsing, shall we say, or just lack—you know, growing either disillusionment or lack of interest in religion bring you into conflict with your parents?

KEITH SONNIER: I think that they were concerned but, once again, I think they decided that it was—you know, it's your fate and, you know, whatever you choose—whatever path you chose is the path you will choose, and you can't force someone to do something if they don't want to do it.

And so, there was—there were never huge issues. There was no, like, denial or being upset or whatever. I think they never wanted to completely admit to themselves that maybe I was not a practicing Catholic, but it never came up, pretty much.

AVIS BERMAN: And what kind of a kid were you from, you know, when you were—

KEITH SONNIER: I spent—I think I spent a lot of time as a younger child being pretty unconscious in a way, just totally in—you know, into my friends and my free time. I wasn't a particularly great student. And it wasn't until I was 15, in high school—I was ill for a year. I had meningitis and I almost died. And it was after this period that I really changed very much as a person.

And I think it's when my faith lapsed and I really became convinced that I wanted to be an artist and threw myself into learning as much as I could about art, reading as much as I could—which I had never read that much before—and became a voracious reader and a looker and a seer and was convinced I wanted to go to art school. I didn't know quite what being an artist was, but I knew that I was interested in the process of making art.

AVIS BERMAN: What was the medical care like there? I mean, that's—

KEITH SONNIER: There was a great little hospital by the time I was a kid. There was a great family doctor who actually delivered me and my brothers at home. But then I think the hospital was probably built after I left the town, and it's quite a big hospital now. And it was a local, you know, French Cajun doctor, Dr. Sabois [ph].

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And do you remember your parents' birth and death dates?

KEITH SONNIER: It's hard to remember the actual dates. I can remember situations connected with the dates. My mother died first. I think she was 77. She had Alzheimer's, which was a killer for her, especially being a very independent woman; drove like a bat out of hell, had her businesses, had her involvement with the community, ran her life as well as everybody else's that she possibly could, including my father's.

[Cross talk.]

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. But my father was—she went to a home for about 10 days, because I went down and I told my dad, I said, "You know, if you're going to do in-home care, we have to get the house ready," meaning you have to have a hospital bed and you have to change the way, you know, you have been living.

And so he agreed finally because he didn't even want the 10 days' help. And so we took her basically 10 or 15 miles away, changed the house, and he continued with in-home care until she died. Luckily her sister was a registered nurse who was actually two blocks away and assisted him in how to run having basically an invalid.

Because at one point, you know, she was, you know, wandering and all of this. I said, "What are you going to do?" He says, "Well, I have a fence now and I'm building it higher." [They laugh.] And I said, "Well, that's your solution?" He says, "Yes, it's fine. Don't worry about it." But he just became—like he found solutions and made them work and never thought of actually putting her in some kind of assisted care living or anything. So that never happened.

When my dad died three years later, I think—no, longer than that; probably, I would say, maybe five or six years later. And he died of cancer. He had always been a smoker and loved his bourbon. And he had lung cancer and was in the hospital and brought to Lafayette, which was about 50 miles away. And the doctor told him that, you know, he had cancer and they were just going to open him up and take that cancer out and he was going to be fine.

And I was in the room with my dad and I remember him telling the doctor, he says, "Young man," he said, "if you would be 85 years old, would you have them cut you open and have your soul fly out?" He said, "You just leave that cancer right where it is, and I would like my TV to be bigger." [They laugh.]

And he actually lived for, I think, another year or something. But he was a real character and very independent, and was extremely generous. They were very generous people.

AVIS BERMAN: And we should just get you brothers' names on the tape.

KEITH SONNIER: My older brother is Charles Alvin Sonnier. He still lives in Louisiana. He has four children. My younger brother is Joseph Barry [ph] Sonnier. He lives in New York City. He is an artist as well. And he began as a musician. He began playing cello—keyboard then cello. And he's married to an architect and they have a son and they live in New York City.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Well, that's interesting that two out of the three became artists.

KEITH SONNIER: Right. Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And certainly music was such a part of that culture.

KEITH SONNIER: Right, and music was a big part, and he—I think he realized that he could not be a concert pianist too. And he also had a big turnaround in his life too that he was drafted. He was scheduled to go to Vietnam and he went AWOL.

And he was in prison for two years, and my dad really got him out basically by sitting at the prison for, I would say, at least three months until he left with him, which was amazing on my dad's part because my older brother had been in the military and been in the Army intelligence and done all of this and was very conservative and status quo, and they were shocked that he had refused to, you know, go to Vietnam.

And I'm convinced he would have been killed. I mean, it was a very—he had thought of going to Canada but he didn't go to Canada. He, in the end, stayed in America. He lived in New York for the first time then at that period when he was AWOL. I visited him several times at Fort Dix because he was in prison there, in solitary, and it was terrible. He had a very hard time. And then he was later moved to Fort Polk, the army fort in Louisiana, and that's where my dad got him out.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, indeed your father sounds remarkable. He probably was in the Army too.

KEITH SONNIER: No.

AVIS BERMAN: No?

KEITH SONNIER: He never was in the Army. I think he was, just at the time that the war was ending, and he began as a highway engineer. He was building bridges and highways and was needed and was not—I think if it had continued he would have been called up but he was not.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, and he had children.

KEITH SONNIER: And he was an only son and they were not doing that in those years.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Now, just in terms of the nature and the land, were you someone who liked to go out and fish or hunt or swim or boat or anything like that?

KEITH SONNIER: [Coughs.] Excuse me. I think we all were involved in hunting a bit early on. My dad would take us duck hunting especially. And I was interested in it for a while and then I lost complete interest in hunting. I wasn't interested in hunting. I loved the cooking aspect of hunting, and that's sort of where I learned how to cook was going with my father and my brothers and staying at a camp or maybe even—we didn't camp out so much.

My dad was not big on camping out. He liked, you know, to stay in an actual place. And even when he hunted I can still remember him sitting in the truck and shooting directly from the window—[They laugh]—and not getting out of the truck, and having the dog go and get the bird.

But I lost interest but I did retain an interest in food then because my dad was a good cook and my mother was a good cook, and her sisters were fabulous cooks. They were great—very kind of inspired chefs doing all kinds of different things, not just Cajun food. They were interested in all kinds of food.

AVIS BERMAN: I just wondered because of the environment with all of the different—the trees, the birds—

KEITH SONNIER: Well, that was very—I'd lived in the backyard as a kid. I mean, I would just come home, I had my tree house and I was in the tree house all day long.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you build it yourself?

KEITH SONNIER: Built it myself and then we built another kind of group house with a lot of my friends, and my parents finally said, "You know, we'll let them go. Let's see what happens." And we built it in the neighbor's yard, and it kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger. And finally they said, "You know, we're going to have them take it down. It's going to be as big as the house." And in the end we did finally take the house down.

But it was a great group activity to do these kinds of things, and it was sort of—you know, you could sort of do these things. There were no—you know, television—I remember television was—very early on we had TV.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, so it sounds since your father was so interested.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, and we—you know, I remember seeing all these early programs, and I can still remember my parents watching late-night TV and stuff. But it was not so—nature was so much a part of your life in Louisiana anyway. I mean, just the grass—I mean, dealing with—you know, I had to cut the grass; I had to cut around the plants. I would cut as many plants as I could do not to have to cut—to make it go quicker.

I still remember going—one of the fondest memories were actually seeing the swamp landscapes that were so beautiful. I mean, there was tons of Spanish moss in those days. And I had a famous distant cousin who was a landscape painter, and he painted huge murals on the sides of barns and rice dryers and even—he would paint on corrugated tin. But when you'd look at it, it was like a flat scene. I don't know how he actually did this, but there were scenes of nature like ducks flying and old cypress trees in the distance. And they were actually kind of fancy landscapes.

AVIS BERMAN: And was any of his work preserved?

KEITH SONNIER: I don't know. We never had any of his work, but he was well-known in the town. Maybe someone in the town does have his work, but they were all giant scale.

AVIS BERMAN: And what was his name?

KEITH SONNIER: Shorty [ph] the sign painter.

AVIS BERMAN: So Shorty was—but, so he was—

KEITH SONNIER: I don't even know—I don't even know what his actual first name was. I think he was a Richard but I can't remember what his first name was. Everybody called him Shorty.

AVIS BERMAN: So he was kind of—so he was a self-taught artist, I imagine.

KEITH SONNIER: He was definitely self-taught, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. So today probably someone would, quote—

KEITH SONNIER: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: Today they would "discover" him.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. Right, exactly. Exactly. Yes, they would. Yes. But he wasn't a folk painter, because there were folk painters, and there were folk sculptors as well. There were several black—from the black community, not in my own town but in other towns, that were great painters and great musicians, great folk musicians. But he was the only painter that I remember in the town.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, why do you say he wasn't a folk painter, just of your—

KEITH SONNIER: Oh, because they were not—they somehow didn't have that primitive an air.

AVIS BERMAN: So he must have studied some kind of—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: —photograph or reproduction.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, he obviously looked at photographs and reproductions, and there was definitely—and definitely a theme in mind that was, you know, this constant reoccurring theme of—he was one of the early what they called Cajun painters that painted the old-fashioned houses along the bayou and this kind of stuff. He was definitely from that tradition, which I don't think they were folk painters really.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, I just wanted to make that distinction.

KEITH SONNIER: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, did you—when you were thinking about being an artist, were you thinking about—were you drawn toward painting even though you were—

KEITH SONNIER: Quite frankly, I didn't really know what a real artist was. I mean, I thought it was being a commercial artist, quite frankly, because I don't think I'd seen very many actual paintings.

I remember the paintings in the old church were done on Celotex, and they literally wavered because of the humidity, like they kind of undulated a bit. And on one side was heaven and one side was hell. And they were the most fantastic—I don't know who did these paintings, but the church was all wood but it was made to look like faux marble.

And these murals were obviously taken from some cathedral or something, but fantasy, vision. It would be interesting to have a photograph of them. I've never—you know, this was something I saw probably when I was five or six or something. But then they built a modern church, which I hated, but this church was amazing.

AVIS BERMAN: Where there any other important visual experiences for you at that time?

KEITH SONNIER: I think that nature was extremely important, especially the distant landscapes, you know, and driving and seeing landscape I think is really one of my early visions of seeing a moving landscape as you move along in an automobile, because there were these long drive areas always, you know, to get from one point to another. And there weren't that many—there wasn't that much advertising. You know, it's not like—you know, the South now looks like California, but there were very few billboards.

AVIS BERMAN: Everything looks like everything nowadays, unfortunately.

KEITH SONNIER: It does. Everything looks the same. It's amazing. I mean, we had the occasional advertising signs, small, for elixirs and stuff. It's very kind of old-fashioned that way.

Like, I remember Hadacol was a very important elixir, and there were these little signs, "Drink Hadacol, good for your health," and it was invented by Reverend Dr. Dudley J. LeBlanc. And he would sell this elixir, and he was a preacher, I guess. But it was very funny. But, as I said, that was the kind of advertising, like Burma-Shave kind of.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, very individual.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, exactly.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, very local.

KEITH SONNIER: Local, exactly.

AVIS BERMAN: So how did you decide to go to the—

KEITH SONNIER: The university.

AVIS BERMAN: —University of Southwestern Louisiana.

KEITH SONNIER: Okay, it was 50 miles away, to begin with. I think it was so inexpensive too. I mean, compared to what I'm paying now for my daughter's education, I just can't believe it. I think one semester is what I paid for my entire college education, probably less than that, because I think it was probably 2,500 [dollars] a semester or something.

AVIS BERMAN: I bet it was less than that.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, it probably was even, yes. But the remarkable thing was going there and having, again, just the luck of having a wonderful teacher. As in high school, I had these very eccentric, wonderful teachers—go to this university, take my first design class, because I was studying advertising at this—

AVIS BERMAN: - So you were, at this moment, still focused on commercial art—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: —because that was what you knew.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, I thought that that's what, you know—and of course my parents were thrilled. You know, that's a job. You work and you do this—so everything seemed fine. So I enroll, take the classes. I was terrible in advertising. I could never do lettering and I was horrible. I made terrible grades.

But I did take this design course with this first professor. His name—he's dead now—was Calvin Harlan. He was so informative. He had studied in England and then studied in Paris, and he was well-versed in contemporary art and contemporary music. He was a big fan of contemporary music. He had even a radio program where he broadcast and discussed contemporary music. He was a big friend of Lou Harrison.

He was really very *branché* in this area of especially contemporary music. He, in fact, arranged for my younger brother to study cello in town. At 13 my younger brother was driving 50 miles to take his cello lessons in Lafayette.

So Calvin—I took the first design course, and I turn in my first paper. And then I get the paper back folded, and written in red it says, "Keith, I piss on this paper." He's pretty interesting. And we became very good friends from this because obviously I can't bullshit this guy.

And he really became a friend of the family too. He adored my parents. He was originally from Arkansas but he had lived in Europe for many years. He was married to a Welsh woman who was a weaver. And they had a wonderful primitive art collection and had traveled a lot. And he was actually one of the first people who made me aware of my upbringing, aware of—"You know, you're from a very unusual place. You know, you have these parents who are very open to what you're doing, and this is rare."

And he says, "You know, I've found this is true with a lot of people from your area. They have a kind of open and liberal attitude, and it's extremely important. You obviously developed this from your upbringing and your culture. You should be proud of it." Whereas before, we were always thought to think of being kind of second-class citizens, in a way.

AVIS BERMAN: The inferiority of—the complex of the South.

KEITH SONNIER: Of the South and, of course, speaking with an accent, not being able to do your TH's and, you know, those kinds of things, and being kind of, of a lower class, in a way. And so that was very important, to have this as a kind of inspiration.

AVIS BERMAN: And you believed it? I mean, when he—

KEITH SONNIER: And then I realized that, yes, he was absolutely right. And then I became much more interested in my cultural heritage whereas before I was not so proud of it.

And I had other very good teachers, very interesting teachers in language, and a wonderful woman teacher who was my sculpture teacher there. Lois Mayer [ph] was her name.

AVIS BERMAN: Lois M—

KEITH SONNIER: M-A-Y-E-R.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.

KEITH SONNIER: And Harlan—his name, Calvin Harlan.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

KEITH SONNIER: And he taught a lot of artists who became, later on, artists. A lot of people know him now from his teaching in Louisiana.

AVIS BERMAN: So you said you had sculpture. At some point did you decide you weren't going to be a commercial artist?

KEITH SONNIER: I was making—painting and—I took painting and sculpture and finally dropped the advertising classes because I was obviously doing so poorly that, but I did very well in art history. I was just fascinated by art history and was a very—for some reason I found it very easy and very—I could make connections very quickly, make art historical references very quickly.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, at this point had you seen any, I guess, actual art yet?

KEITH SONNIER: I didn't really see art until I got to the university, I mean, you know, even to see that much painting of any kind. We had—I mean, my parents—when we were kids—well, in high school my parents took me to Mexico. We went to Mexico several times, went to Canada, but my parents would not, say, take me to a museum.

That was somehow not part of the vocabulary then. Take you to a church maybe to see an altar piece or something, but the thought of actually going to a museum to see maybe art was not something very big on the agenda.

But I went to this undergraduate school, and because of Harlan—he got me a fellowship at Rutgers after—I went to Europe for a year—

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

KEITH SONNIER: —at his advice to study in France, to sort of learn about French heritage and practice my French, perfect my French, travel in Europe. I went to Italy, I went to England, I traveled in Wales. And after the year, because of this teacher, I got a recommendation to graduate school at Rutgers.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

KEITH SONNIER: And that changed everything.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, we will get to that, but let's discuss this trip to Europe.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Were you ready for it? I mean, this was after you graduated.

KEITH SONNIER: Well, you know, you have to realize I was still a country boy, and my parents agreed to this but with—there were stipulations. I had to first go to live in the country before I could go to a big city.

And there was a nun in town, a Dominican, that adored my parents and they were very friendly. She said, "Well, he just goes to my house, my family home in Normandy." And of course Normandy where the Cajuns—some of them originally come from. Perfect. They ran a calvados factory and they had a wonderful big chateau, which no one was living in. They all had—the parents had died and they lived in the little community but in their own houses.

So I lived in this kind of old chateau and had my first studio in Normandy. And I took long walks, traveled for the first time to Normandy and—to Normandy, and especially through Brittany, which I just loved. And I visited the dolmen [ph] sites, and this just completely fascinated me.

And then, at the end of a three months' stay, I moved to Paris and I went to several kinds of art schools.

AVIS BERMAN: So that would have been '63, '64?

KEITH SONNIER: Exactly, yes.

I took some of the work to Paris but I had brought a huge box with me from America by ship. I went by boat, too. I didn't fly to Europe. I took a steamer from New Orleans to La Havre, got off at La Havre and then went to this little, tiny town in France, smaller even than Mamou, where I grew up, called Chanoux [ph], which was near Comps.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, I've been there—I mean, not Chanoux but Comps.

KEITH SONNIER: But Comps, yes. Yes. And it was about maybe 15 kilometers from Comps.

AVIS BERMAN: Yeah, kind of near Le Malsche [ph].

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, yes, very much so. Yes. So I met some of the local folks and it turns out that when I went to Paris, there were some women who had married into this—Frobe [ph] family was name, who had the calvados factory. One of the daughters had moved—was living in Paris and she helped me find my first apartment in Paris, because first I went and I lived in a hotel.

In those days, Ile Saint-Louis was really a dump. I mean, it had not been restored, basically. And my first stay in Paris was at the Hotel Ile Saint-Louis in the top attic. I had a room and my studio in there. And it was very reasonable then because the hotel was a dump. And Ile Saint-Louis was kind of like a kind of ghost island in a way. There wasn't that—you know, a lot of vacant buildings and stuff.

But I did get to meet and see a lot of art at that period when I stayed at the hotel. I also met—there were all these very strange kind of organizations to help artists. There was a wonderful place that was run at Palais-Royal by a Madame Chauvage [ph]. And it was an artist—like a supper—place to go for supper, and for two nights a week you could go to Madame Chauvage's. And there were maybe about 25 to 30 people having dinner there, and these were all artists from all over the world. There were not only Parisians.

AVIS BERMAN: Kind of like an artist soup kitchen.

KEITH SONNIER: It was like an artist soup kitchen. And I still remember being in this—eating at this place and sitting down with some Yugoslavian artists when Kennedy was shot. This was when I first heard the news.

And I did that for a while. Then I got my own place at the end of the subway line at Clignoncourt . And I had an apartment with several rooms, very inexpensive, no heat. It was freezing cold, and I had never been that cold. It was just amazing.

And then I had a Swiss roommate who had one of the rooms, and we were just so different. I mean, it's very funny. I had a show in Switzerland several years ago and he came to the show. I hadn't seen him in over 40 years.

But the year in Paris was great for me. And I went to Italy. And with this Swiss guy I had found someone from having dinner at Madame Chauvage's—artists could make money by designing fabric, and I made a lot of extra money from my trip designing fabric that would be sold to local designers.

AVIS BERMAN: So how did you survive—where did the money come from for the trip?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, actually, my parents really did support my trip to Europe. And, quite frankly, my father supported me until I was in my 40s. I mean, if I needed money, I could always get—I always taught and did other things but my dad was really supportive until, you know, I was basically in my 40s. And he would—I remember him, he says, "Do you think you will ever get a real job, or is this it?" I said, "No, this is it. This is it." [They laugh.] But the year in Europe was great for me.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And just—when you were in college in Lafayette, what kind of art were you making? Is there anything you remember?

KEITH SONNIER: I was very involved in a kind of figuration—you know, very interested in Matisse and Picasso. You know, I knew a little bit about abstract painting. We did have one teacher towards my last year there who obviously was very involved in abstract expressionism, but with a very kind of European flair and was very sophisticated in a way. It was not—like now when I think of a Kline or a Pollock, it was nothing like that. It was really much more—well, no guts, not tough, not tough.

I remember when I was in Paris that last year and why I decided I had to leave Europe. I went to a show at—

AVIS BERMAN: Sonnabend—Illiana?

KEITH SONNIER: No, it was not the gallery. I went to—but I did see a Sonnabend artist there and a Castelli artist. I think it was the Museum of Modern Art, and I saw Rauschenberg's *Oracle* [1962-5]. And as soon as I saw this

work, I knew I had to go back to America. I was so moved by this work.

And I had never somehow—you know, my focus had been on art that was not—that was not the kind of art that I should have really been making. I was just not aware of it. I was not aware of contemporary art of my time. As much as I have this education and awareness and historical background, I had no knowledge of contemporary art.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, what were you making in France, by the way?

KEITH SONNIER: In France I was doing painting mainly, no sculpture at all. Now, in art school I had done sculpture and I was very drawn toward sculpture, but it was of a much more of a primitive nature—

AVIS BERMAN: Were you using clay?

KEITH SONNIER: —like modeling and casting. And they had a kind of—there was very much an interest in modeling and manipulation, and quasi-abstract but much more of a kind of primitive figuration and base, almost a kind of anthropomorphic kind of base.

And it wasn't until I still can remember seeing these pieces, like the car door and the water, like, dripping from the junk into the bathtub and I thought, well, this looks like a backyard in the South. And all of a sudden everything clicked and I realized, what am I doing here? I have to go back to America.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, had you heard of Rauschenberg before?

KEITH SONNIER: I had heard—yes, but I had never seen a work. I mean, I had maybe seen a reproduction or something, but until I physically saw the work, I had never—I was never affected by it. It's like seeing a movie that you've never seen before, that changes your life.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you—

KEITH SONNIER: And it was cinematic. The vision was cinematic.

AVIS BERMAN: And did you know that Rauschenberg was almost in your backyard?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, that was the other thing. As soon as I came back, came to America, I ended up being friends with Rauschenberg. My stove used to belong to Rauschenberg. [They laugh.] You know, so it goes back in many ways, and I did meet Rauschenberg when I did move to New York. But when I was in graduate school I didn't know him but when I did move to New York I did meet him.

And the work—you know, going to Rutgers and teaching there—and of course there were all working artists there—Lichtenstein.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, Roy was gone by the time—

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, he was gone but he had been there. [George] Segal had left too but he lived right there.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. They were presences, in other words.

KEITH SONNIER: They were presences. And then, Robert Morris was teaching there, all the Fluxus people were there, either coming for lectures and some of them teaching.

AVIS BERMAN: Geoff Hendricks.

KEITH SONNIER: Geoff Hendricks was teaching the whole time, and he brought all of these Fluxus people there.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, what was the—so, you would have been either—now, were you—

KEITH SONNIER: And Robert Watts was the sculpture teacher.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Now, you were teaching, but were you getting an M.F.A. as well?

KEITH SONNIER: I was getting an M.F.A.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

KEITH SONNIER: And I was teaching African art as a fluke, because I was good in art history. And I was even advised by Robert Watts, my sculpture teacher; he says, "You know, you do very well in art history and you should consider giving up studio work and doing this."

And I just never like the work that—I never liked Fluxus work so much for me to be doing. The kinds of work I made in his class were—and not so much—they had a kind of surrealist edge but they didn't have much to do with the Fluxus ideology at all.

But, anyway, the presence of all these people there was extremely important, and how I ended up—as my assistantship I had to assist either in studio or in history. Well, it turns out I ended up—there was one opening to work in the history department, so I was Carroll Janis's assistant, and he taught a course in African art. And we became pals and we still know each other to this day.

And it was a wonderful sort of beginning and introduction, another kind of introduction to New York too, and then going to the Janis Gallery and going to all of the other galleries at the time in New York.

AVIS BERMAN: New Brunswick must have been a culture shock to you.

KEITH SONNIER: I couldn't believe it. I thought, you know, this is the East. I was so—I remember telling my first wife, Jackie Winsor—who I met there as a graduate student too, and she was from Newfoundland but had lived in Boston. And we couldn't believe how depressing New Brunswick was.

AVIS BERMAN: I went to graduate school at Rutgers, so—

KEITH SONNIER: Oh, you did?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

KEITH SONNIER: Oh, so you know it.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, but I'm not putting words—too much—

KEITH SONNIER: No, no, right. I mean, it was a huge shock, this little podunk town that had just been beaten up, beaten to hell. And the big thing was New York was 45 minutes away in those days by bus.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Absolutely.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: But it was, you know, a very interesting real town-gown with the Hungarians and the city—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, exactly and Johnson & Johnson there.

AVIS BERMAN: And the tony professors living in Highland Park.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, exactly, right. Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, no, no, Princeton.

KEITH SONNIER: And then, well, you see, when—I think when we were there, Douglass College was part—that's where the graduate school was—

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

KEITH SONNIER: —because Douglass then became part of Rutgers.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, Douglass had the studio program and Rutgers had the art history program.

KEITH SONNIER: You're right.

AVIS BERMAN: And that is why Roy taught these—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: You know, that's why they were all over at Douglass.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And the students—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, exactly. Exactly.

AVIS BERMAN: So I don't know if you were teaching at Rutgers or Douglass.

KEITH SONNIER: I was teaching in Douglass and that's where the studios were.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, because that's where you would have—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. But, actually, the art history class was at Douglass College too.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And how did your work begin to change when you were there, despite—I mean, were you just so stubborn about Robert Watts that, I'm going to persevere or what?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, the thing is, I think that all of the graduate students were because a lot of them became well-known artists, and people were very individual and stuck to their guns. So the kinds of things I made were—I was very interested in minimalism.

I was fascinated by it, and I had—I mean, later on I ended up showing in a gallery where they were all showing, but it was very strange actually seeing these minimalist shows, because by the time I started going to shows, Green Gallery had closed.

I remember being fascinated by Oldenburg shows at Janis Gallery, the Judd shows at—I don't know if I—I didn't see the Green shows because it had closed by the time I got there, but in the end I ended up—my first gallery was Richard Bellamy, who had the Green Gallery.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, I'm a little confused by that, which I'm going to ask you—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: —in that because—

KEITH SONNIER: I'm jumping a bit.

AVIS BERMAN: No, no, that's all right, just I'm going to get the chronologies straight.

KEITH SONNIER: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: And just for housekeeping purposes, when were you married to Jackie Winsor and for how long?

KEITH SONNIER: She was there one year after me, so after my first year of graduate school she was there for a year. I think that means that we were probably married in '66 maybe. I'm terrible with dates. I would have to check it. I graduated—

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, '66 would be—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. Yes. And she had a year remaining, and so I think—I can't remember—no, we graduated at the same time and we both moved in to New York at the same time into a building with Joan Snyder and Mark Hellberger [ph], who was the art historian teacher at Rutgers. And we rented a building on Canal and Mulberry. I think they were like \$50 a floor. And it was a fabulous space—noisy as hell, like living in a tin can. But that was the first move, was there.

And then I still taught—I was very worried about the military, extremely worried. It was kind of the Vietnam War. I would call my local draft board like you would be calling your best friend, just to chat and see what was happening. [They laugh.]

And I did have a deferment from teaching. I taught high school like for a day or two in Newark, and in the end I ended up getting a job teaching at Rutgers Newark. I don't think I would have lasted doing the high school. It was very tough and I had a lot of trouble dealing with the administration and stuff. But I did teach for, I think, a good 10 years.

AVIS BERMAN: At Rutgers Newark?

KEITH SONNIER: Not at Rutgers; at a variety of schools. I didn't get along very well with the head of the department. He was much more conservative than Rutgers in Brunswick and just beginning. And I taught there. I taught at SVA [School of Visual Arts, New York City] in the end for a while.

And what saved the day was beginning to show in your—you know, with—because of Bellamy, showing at the Back Room with Noah Goldowsky, because Noah had this wonderful little gallery on Madison where he showed beautiful Virgo [ph] and Gillah [ph] drawings, early abstraction paintings, Mondrians, just beautiful things.

And Dick had literally a back room and an office in this gallery, and in this back room he showed me, Richard

Serra, Bruce Nauman, Joel Verre [ph], Lee Lozano, Neil Jenney, Robert Lobe, a few other people.

AVIS BERMAN: That's quite a list.

KEITH SONNIER: It's quite a list. And I remember that my first German dealer came and saw the work in this back room of Dick's. His name was Rolf Ricke.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

KEITH SONNIER: And he bought a series of work. Rolf had been given \$25,000 from some bankers in Germany to come and buy a series of contemporary art. Well, of course they had no idea that what he was going to buy were these early pieces of these artists pretty much I mentioned.

And he buys the work. Mind you, these works were selling for \$500, 250 [dollars], whatever. And he lays all the works out on the floor for the German banks to see the work. And they looked at it, they said, "We want our money back. This is all junk." So he had to literally, very quickly, find someone else to give them money. Now all of these works he bought are all in German museums.

AVIS BERMAN: Naturally.

KEITH SONNIER: Pretty much every work is in a major German museum. But that was the first introduction. And then, when Dick was ready to close the Back Room, rather than, as they do now—I'm closing my gallery; bye—he made sure that every artist at the time, that he had been working with, had a gallery.

He says, "Well, there are two people interested in you. You could show with Castelli or you could show with Bykert Gallery." And I ended up showing with Leo. I mean, now I'm very good with—Klaus Kertess and I—

AVIS BERMAN: Well, it's so funny—

KEITH SONNIER: —and I are great pals.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, it was so funny because of course you're opening the other—you were at Mary Boone who worked at Bykert—

KEITH SONNIER: Exactly.

AVIS BERMAN: —and there was Klaus.

KEITH SONNIER: And there was Klaus and then Klaus curating the show.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

KEITH SONNIER: So it's amazing how this really happened. And Klaus and I are truly very good friends and he's written a lot about my work.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, here is the question: When two people were interested, did you get to chose the—or did—

KEITH SONNIER: I got to chose who—I said, "Well, look, I want to show at Castelli." I wanted to show at Castelli Gallery. My favorite artists are showing there.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, it happened.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. Right.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, how did you—how did you meet Richard Bellamy, or how did he—how did you two connect originally?

KEITH SONNIER: He came to Rutgers because of George Segal. And he came to look at work. I think this was one of the first dealers who ever began to look at student work, because it wasn't done before. And he came to visit Gary Keane—

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

KEITH SONNIER: Who—and Gary was instrumental in getting me to—I think to meet Dick and to meet especially Ricke, especially Ricke because Ricke was—he was one of Ricke's first early artists. And Gary's career really took off in Germany at that period. And Gary was teaching at Rutgers and he was a model for Segal sculpture. He was constantly being cast, he and his brothers, for some of the sculptures.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, I didn't know that.

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah. And then the wives were; all their wives were.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, you think Frances [ph] was?

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, I think Frances was cast in one of the pieces too.

AVIS BERMAN: Because she was also a Douglass—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, exactly. Yes. Yes. I haven't seen here in years.

So that was how that connection happened. And then Leo came to the studio and I had my first show—I think the first show was *Uptown* [1970]. And I showed these early pieces with neon and glass after I had done all this earlier work with Dick—cloth, screen—and I sold the first time from a gallery, and Ileana [Sonnebend] and Andy Warhol bought the works.

And it was amazing. And the one work that remained in America that Dick sold, Philip Johnson bought a work, which is now in the Museum of Modern Art, which they never show at the Modern because they think it's too fragile because it's made out of pink satin, and it's in perfect condition. It looks exactly like it looked when they bought it.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, did Dick Bellamy see your 1966 show with Douglass, do you think, or did he come—

KEITH SONNIER: He didn't see the show. I think he saw my studio, and then he told me, "When you come to New York, look me up. Come to the gallery and show me what you're doing." He said, "Once you get your studio and get set up and—and then I'll come and look at your work." And that's how it happened.

AVIS BERMAN: And what was in that Douglass show? Do you still have—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: There was a catalogue?

KEITH SONNIER: There was never a catalogue.

AVIS BERMAN: Of course not.

KEITH SONNIER: In those days there was not. But there were some very—I was making inflated works. They were works that—they were kind of minimalist in structure, but then they had sections that inflated and deflated. One of the early pieces was a triangular shape in wood and a triangular shape in cloth, and one inflated and deflated the cloth.

And Lucy used this piece in a very early show called "Eccentric Abstraction" at Fischbach [1966]. And I showed there with Eva Hesse. That's when I met Eva—Louise Bourgeois.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I was going to ask you, as a matter of fact, do you feel that—it seemed to me at a certain—short certain point there were affinities between your work and Eva Hesse's.

KEITH SONNIER: Absolutely. There were definitely. You know, we were both in *The Great Palette* and we both used latex, and also Richard Serra too at this early period, and Nauman too.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

KEITH SONNIER: But Eva I knew, being a New Yorker, but my studio was very close to Richard so that was easier. Eva was in the Bowery then. And she was more friendly with Sol and those people, and Andre. I later became very close to Andre and Sol and all of those people.

But the strict minimalists like Flavin and Judd, they were very not approving of our work. They really were very angry that Leo took us on.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, because your materials were threatening.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. Yes, they were very sort of like, you know, here they've just come on the scene and they're doing this, and who are these young upstarts that are doing this stuff that's so different and so pointless? So it was difficult.

AVIS BERMAN: Just like what the abstract expressionists said about the pop art.

KEITH SONNIER: Of course. Of course. Yes, absolutely. And this is what—the remarkable thing about New York is that it goes on and on, and that's one of the great things about it.

AVIS BERMAN: Let me see; I think in one of these there is a picture of one of these—yes, this is—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, that's exactly where—the inflated piece.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

KEITH SONNIER: This piece here.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, right, which is—

KEITH SONNIER: And this is—it has a plastic lining and it's made out of cheesecloth.

AVIS BERMAN: And do you still have any of these or do any of these exist?

KEITH SONNIER: I have some of these early pieces. Some of them are plaster cast in satin. And then I have others, one called *Walk In* [1967], which is wood and cheesecloth, and I still own this piece. And I'm still—it's curious, the show—the recent show at Mary's, I really went back to some of these very early—this early form language investigation of these materials.

And I must say, I hadn't made work directly in the studio in a long time, and it was great to be able to make something *faite à la main* [by hand] more than sending it off to the factory. And I think these pieces have that quality in them.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, I agree, and also just—as I said, I was very moved by the ephemeral material on there.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, and it's made me realize too, I think, in being a continuing working artist, that you have to exercise your entire formal language in order to continue to make viable work. You can't just sort of, you know, make the same thing over and over again, because for one thing it's worrying as hell.

And then, this is how you grow, is to investigate—like anything, you investigate something from different directions. And you pursue things. I'm always interested in—my reading feeds into how I'm researching a new series.

AVIS BERMAN: Where do you see the inflated pieces in your work? Do you think that they were mature, or do you—

KEITH SONNIER: I think that it's an issue that's come up several times in the pieces. Again, it's funny that once again it's coming up again, because I'm going to do a set for Melissa Findley, a small prop piece.

She has a series of artists doing an object that she can dance with, and I want to use—and it's hard to think of because I want to use something in Mylar and it's hard to get beyond the Warhol inflated pillow [*Silver Clouds*, 1966]. But I want to do something that is inflated that she could either wear or acts like a body extension that would blow up or make her taller.

And I'm only just now beginning to—I bought some of the material but I haven't made any of the prototypes yet. But it also has to be very simple, too. So I will investigate some kind of inflated, again, either—these early inflated pieces had machines, you know, that inflated and deflated, but I would like something that doesn't have that complicated a mechanism for this—for the dancer to use.

So I haven't come up with exactly what I will do but I keep thinking of the—I remember the Warhol pillows and the beautiful wallpaper. It's hard to make something that is not, you know, using that and incorporating it. So I'm in the dilemma now of trying to figure out how to do it.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you know, self-recycling or self-plagiarism is not—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. Yes. Yes, exactly. Exactly. And that's why, you know, if you do it from your own—and I've used it before so it's a matter of finding what's the best way to use it. What's the correct way for me? What's the correct formula within the language to find to make the work correct for me?

Like these new pieces; how to arrive at that without making a redundant—without making an old piece, for one thing, and making something new that pulls in other directions and other interests.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, did Richard Bellamy show or buy or sell any of these inflatable pieces, or was it drawings?

KEITH SONNIER: No, he didn't—wait a minute. No, I showed with him after I'd made that first series.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, right, because he had sent—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: So he didn't go back and say—

KEITH SONNIER: No, no. No, no. It was what you were making now. Then, when I was working with Dick, I was making pieces with flock—

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

KEITH SONNIER: —which actually looked like they had been inflated, in a way. And the piece that Philip Johnson bought looked like it had been inflated. It was a tufted two-by-four, basically. And it looked like a minimal piece but, again, it was made in pink satin, so it just knocked all of that out.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, here is a picture.

KEITH SONNIER: And these are some of the flocked pieces, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, like here.

KEITH SONNIER: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: Here is a—

KEITH SONNIER: Right. Yes, exactly. These were some of the pieces on the wall. I just showed this piece at Barbara Castelli, and actually the piece on the—

AVIS BERMAN: Right, the flocked—

KEITH SONNIER: —on the wall, yes. And these are situational pieces, you know, that have to be recreated.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, I think another question, one I guess we should be asking here, is like at this—I guess when you maybe realize—you certainly had a big "aha" moment when you saw the Rauschenberg.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: But when did you begin to maybe realize, as an artist, that maybe you weren't just making objects; you wanted to make experiences or places that people would move through?

KEITH SONNIER: I think that it was the light, the glass and the mirror and then the television camera. Combining all those elements were the real beginning of the body of work because those elements then were carried on into actually making whole big series of works, but more importantly which extended the career again another whole different 10 to 15 years later when I made commission work, because then all of a sudden the use of the light, the glass and the color begins to be done with architecture and I began to see color as volume and to make a work out of the gallery system that is a kilometer long and a different way of designing and a different way of thinking about things.

Of course, this is why you continue to make work and expand your career—your interests, because it takes on all these other kinds of inputs that if I had not—if I had been selling work madly in the beginning of the '80s, I probably would have never made the commission work. But no one was buying my work. I had to reinvent myself because all of this—

I remember the first video I made. He says, "Now, Keith, what are we going to sell, the television set too?" I said, "No, it's a tape. It's a tape." Anybody—a television set. [Laughs.] But it's like the form was so new when we were all doing these early experimental—

AVIS BERMAN: Well, how did Leo or, you know, a dealer, how did he adjust to that? Or what did he—

KEITH SONNIER: Well, we were very lucky that living was not so expensive and that he was selling other work, and this was the end of the Hollywood system. We were still on stipend. And from the stipend and teaching, I was able to basically be an artist. You know, I could make work in the studio. I could travel. I could do many things that I wouldn't have been allowed to do.

AVIS BERMAN: How long did the stipend system last for you?

KEITH SONNIER: I think it probably ended in the mid—well, actually, come to think of it, I don't think it ended until I left Castelli. I mean, I think if you were up against a wall and were broke, you would get an—you could ask for money. And he would, in the end, take work. Now, I did, with Leo, many shows where we did not sell one work at least for 10 years, and he never said, well, Keith, you'll have to find another gallery. I did not sell any work.

And this is why I never left Leo until he died. I mean, it was like without this man I would have never been able to do anything I wanted to do as far as my choices to make work. So having that luxury of that freedom was fabulous, and I think it's what really made me the artist I am today is that I did never have to settle.

And, in the end, when I realized I had to, I just reinvented myself. I mean, there was—you know. So it's not selling in the gallery. I will still do shows but I have to do something else too, and this is—and then when I saw, oh, god, this is amazing that you can make this work this big, and interested in theater and all of this so that you see the different expansions.

And light has been very important for me. Without light, I don't think the work would have had the continuum, the ability to sort of research and use color in this very unique way, and to use and think about technology in a very interesting way, because even this new work, they're very low-tech but they're still very techno.

And I remember seeing *The Nine Evenings* [performance series by 10 artists at the New York 69th Regiment Armory, 1966] and this was a very important early influence. To see that quality of work in performance was amazing. And early dance for me was very—influenced me a lot.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you ever perform or take place—

KEITH SONNIER: I did; I performed a little bit. I mean, when Deborah Hay did these early pieces, the whole audience danced. I mean, it was the '60s.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

KEITH SONNIER: And it was incredible. And then when I started doing video, all the performers were dancers. So it was an amazing exchange and interaction with people. And, of course, it gave me clues to how people could move through the sculpture. I think this was very important in the commission work because it was about the body moving through mass and through light, and it really did influence many of the series of works.

And much more than—I love contemporary dance much more than I like theater. I did recently see—which I had never seen a Tennessee Williams production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and I did see the one with Cate Blanchett and I loved the performance. The set I hated because I thought it was too—it looked like a Hopper painting. And it could have been, I think, very different.

But she was incredible. I mean, just the mental exhaustion of her doing this performance was great, and so different than—you know, my vision of it was, you know—

AVIS BERMAN: The movie?

KEITH SONNIER: The movie.

AVIS BERMAN: Vivian Leigh.

KEITH SONNIER: I mean, it was Vivian and Marlon [Brando].

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

KEITH SONNIER: You know, that was—you know, that was the image, and to see that this can happen—I mean, earlier on, though, doing opera sets and dancer sets was the real key to the architectural work, to be able to see how the light looks in proscenium, in this proscenium sort of cube. And then, doing environmental sculpture where you could actually move through it was extremely important.

AVIS BERMAN: Yeah, that kind of brings me to, I mean, what seems to me like the—so crucial for you, and is it Ba-O-Ba ?

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, I think—I mean, somehow you also—and I don't know if this was a big deal then but you went—boy, did you ever go to color.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And I don't know if color—if that was fraught for you.

KEITH SONNIER: It was all of a sudden like opening up Pandora's Box and all of a sudden it just became so clear. And it's curious, I mean, with the whole Haitian crisis now. Ba-O-Ba came from Haiti. I saw it painted on a boat, like docked in I think the little cove in Jacmel. It was a fisherman boat. And it might have been called Ba-something, but for me it ended up being that.

And then when I was in Paris, I remember going to the movies and they had this—this was before I went to Haiti. They had this commercial that—[in French], *à la Japonaise*. And I thought, I just love how this sounds—[in French]. And then when I saw the boat—and so it was somehow to get the title.

And then I asked the guy, "What does this title mean?" And he says, "Well, it's the moon on the water." And I thought, well, this must be some *argot* [slang] or something, but it stuck with me, the title. And then when I started to do the—after I had done the single glass pieces.

Then when I started doubling to where you would have, in a series like two, like golden section, two circles, two squares, two rectangles, then the dialogue began to be so interesting and to manipulate—I was manipulating color and electricity and reflection and perception because how the drawing was based was on how the electrical current ran through the pieces too.

So these linear drawings were in fact the electrical line going through the piece. So it had this scientific person purpose, it had this philosophical purpose and then it's visual. And then you would stand in front of the piece and you were reflected in the piece. And then later then the mirrors were—it looked like you could walk into the piece. It became very important for this whole body of work.

AVIS BERMAN: Absolutely. I find it kind of ironic, I mean, just from picking up on things that you've said and other things I've written is—that have been written about you, it seems to me that Haiti was very important and of course India. It seems—

KEITH SONNIER: And India, yes. Correct.

AVIS BERMAN: —that here, when you went to France, the so-called "Mecca of Western art"—

KEITH SONNIER: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: —it almost seemed to be not the least important but having the least impact.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. Well, I think it made me intensely aware of being an American because we've got—the French can be such shits, you know, like if you're not French it's not this and it's not that and—

AVIS BERMAN: Well, were they snobby toward your French?

KEITH SONNIER: Oh, but then in the end they were fascinated by it because I was really speaking 18th-century French, using terms that they hadn't used in a long time, and not Canadian French. It was obviously very different. So that was a big joke.

I mean, too, like I would use "catin" all the time to refer to a doll, and finally I realized when I was in the country in Normandy—the woman says, "You know, *catin*, *c'est une pute*" ["it's a prostitute/whore"]. And I never really—you know, why was it a prostitute because in Louisiana it was a doll? And of course in old French *catin* is a doll. And there were many words that way.

AVIS BERMAN: And also, I guess I should ask you about if you were in Rome, just in terms of that—

KEITH SONNIER: I have been in Rome and I'm still fascinated by Rome. And I think if I hadn't have been so intensely in love with New York—I mean the toughness of New York—and if I hadn't grown up in such a rural area—I always fantasized about living in Rome. And it's very funny; when my daughter Olympia was in Rome last year, I went to see her for a half year abroad. And we had a wonderful time sort of touring Rome again because I hadn't seen it in a long time.

And we went to lots of anthropological sites and I hired a guide and a driver, and I really saw a lot of things that I hadn't seen since I was a student, and it was wonderful seeing them again. And then my good friend Joseph Kosuth lives in Rome.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

KEITH SONNIER: And we did see him as well too. But I always thought, you know, it would be very nice, you could live in Rome or you could live in Europe, but I think, being from Louisiana, I felt that I had to be an

American artist. And to this day, I mean, I would love to—I have this fantasy, oh, I'll move to Louisiana when I'm an older artist and I'll have my studio there. I think I'll always live in New York.

But I will start this foundation for artists in residence in Louisiana because I would like to do something for the little community, and I did inherit this property from my parents when they died. So that is the goal we're still working on, actually.

AVIS BERMAN: And your brothers like the idea of—

KEITH SONNIER: My brothers do like the idea of it, yes, but they're not involved in it. I mean, my younger brother definitely does not—he sold his property, I did not, because we each inherited a series of properties from them. And my older brother did not want property in Mamou. He got property I think closer to Lafayette, where he lives.

AVIS BERMAN: And when you were—just going back to that time, was New Orleans important to you when you were young?

KEITH SONNIER: You know, what's so curious; I did not know New Orleans at all. I really got to know New Orleans later, because going to school in Lafayette I never did the New Orleans trip very much. I got to know and love it more in the last 10 years and got to know it much better before—pre-Katrina.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, also, that's almost chauvinistic for me to—or ignorant because Louisiana is a very big state.

KEITH SONNIER: Well, it's big but the thing is about New Orleans is that I never realized the extent of its beauty, architecturally especially, and the lifestyle and the people. It is still—I went right after Katrina and I did go back to New Orleans. I love New Orleans.

And I think what's happening now with Prospect [Biennial] and New Orleans finally having a contemporary context is very important for Louisiana because we don't have the museums like they have in Texas or in other places in the South, and it would be very important, I think, for contemporary art.

And that's why I want this foundation to work in a context that's not folk-oriented and not—but really of a very high quality and real art, no—you know, no bullshit, no phoniness, that it's real.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, well, exactly. No, this isn't going to be by Louisiana standards.

KEITH SONNIER: Right. Well, it's not going to be alligators and magnolias and, you know, whatever.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, right. Exactly.

KEITH SONNIER: And also, the importance of a library too—I mean, I think it's very important to have them set up a library there for young people.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Yes, I guess as I was—I was just asking you is that there was just—you know, again you began to work with sound and light.

KEITH SONNIER: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: So all of these momentary—in other words, things that weren't substances—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. Yes, could really be incorporated with a good degree of facility in a way. They just seem to be normal and kind of natural. And of course this was all going on at the time too in music and dance and the arts.

AVIS BERMAN: And, you know, we have the term the "dematerialization" of the object.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you feel you were participating in that, whether you'd use that high-toned phrase or not?

KEITH SONNIER: Yeah, I think that I did but only later. I wasn't really conscious of what I was doing until much later. Like this early period of work, I just blindly made work. I don't think that I was—you know, I didn't understand the historical—I wasn't so interested in the historical context; I was interested in—I was—I just could not stop making it. It was like I was obsessed. And I think that young artists have to be this way.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I don't think artists sort of sit—I mean, I think an artist who sits down, oh, I think I'll follow this theory—

KEITH SONNIER: Oh, yeah, right.

AVIS BERMAN: —is ridiculous.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, it's not going to happen.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I mean, it's a visceral kind of response.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. Yes, and I think that you have to—yes, absolutely. And it's not something that you can just, like, work out and plan. That's absolutely true. And I think one—the more one works and one realizes it is that it is that; it's definitely that. And usually, unfortunately, when art doesn't have that, it's unfortunately not even art, so it's difficult.

AVIS BERMAN: I agree.

KEITH SONNIER: It's difficult to tell young—you know, like someone that—you know, if you're looking at their work, it's not going—you know, it's not going to go beyond what you've got there. That's it.

AVIS BERMAN: And have you ever felt that in yourself in something you were trying and—

KEITH SONNIER: Oh, I think they're—you know, when I look at the body of work, some things I think, well, this, I think, is very interesting; this one maybe less interesting. But what might happen is that what was uninteresting then, in the next time I approach it, it gets redirected and then it becomes interesting, or then it begins to work.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you think you would ever go back to whatever today's equivalent of something like video is?

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I've thought about it and it's curious; I just did a—and I just saw it—*BOMB* did a little film, or it's a video, of—they're changing their format. They're interviewing but in digital time, and I'm interviewing Ned Smyth. And Betsy is an old friend of mine and Betsy did the editing, and it was just shown Friday night at Rosenquist's loft across the way.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. And it looks wonderful. It's pretty good, and it's so informative. And everybody said this; I was amazed that they said, "You know, this is what we expect how people should talk about art and not"—you know, because, first of all, when you see art on television, it's usually a joke. It's like it's not really—you know, they're getting away with this and it costs all this money, and it's never taken very seriously, especially in our culture.

But I think it would be a great format for *BOMB*. Whether or not I address it again as an art medium—because, I must say, I left the medium—

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

KEITH SONNIER: —after I did the satellite broadcast and a lot of more high-tech things, because I realized if I stayed in this medium, I was going to be behind a desk and I was going to be like a kind of producer or something, and I just wasn't ready for it. I just didn't—I didn't want to do it.

I mean, now I'm behind a desk all the time but it's different because I'm at least motivated by constantly being able to do new work. And I know that to be able to do new work, I have to take care of things; you know, work that I've done before on my history, in a way. I have to read—tread the history all the time to be able to continue to work.

And it's part of it. I tell our young artists when I see them, I say, "You know, it's great to work in your studio but you have to also work on the mechanics of what you're going to do too. Otherwise, you won't be able to generate the money to make the work. They do—I know that there might be some artists who could have someone to take care of them or something, but I really enjoy doing it—you know, organizing it myself. I really do.

AVIS BERMAN: So you got a Guggenheim [Fellowship] in '74?

KEITH SONNIER: I got a Guggenheim. I got an NEA. I haven't gotten that many grants, but I think when I got the Guggenheim, they were not that much money.

AVIS BERMAN: No, I just—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: —was wondering what you used it for.

KEITH SONNIER: And I think—when was it, '74? I was traveling all over the place. I'm sure I used it to travel because I was in India and Japan.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

KEITH SONNIER: And I'm sure I used it for that because I went to India the first time in '72 and did a show in India for the first time. But I'm pretty sure I used it for travel.

AVIS BERMAN: Let me look through here because—I mean, I think you—you know, and then by then—you know, I think part of the journey was like, you know, you wanted to learn—you wanted to be an artist without being "arty."

KEITH SONNIER: Well, I guess so because it was so uncool then. [They laugh.] And then, of course, growing up in the late '60s and stuff, we were—I mean, the art world was so different and so small. It's a huge machine now and people are very, you know, qualified.

I mean, in that early period I never even would answer my correspondence. I just, you know, wouldn't do it. Now, I mean, it's very important to do. But it was a very small art world and now it's a very big art world.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, absolutely. Let me see. I just want to make sure that we have pretty much covered up to that early period here. Let me see. I guess in terms of what—during that time, late '60s, early '70s, were there people making environments that you were looking at?

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. In the earlier-on period there was a very interesting woman, Jean Linder, who made these incredible, like, plastic environments that were sewn. And they were blown up in some way. I don't know what happened to Jean. She was an extraordinary—she was a beauty too. She was a little older. She must have been about 10 years older than me at the time. And this was in the late '60s, '70s. I remember she had a loft on Mulberry.

AVIS BERMAN: I think she's gone, because Ursula Von Rydingsvard said that she had had Jean and Jean was an inspiration to her too.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, right, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And I had asked about her and she—

KEITH SONNIER: Right. Yes, she was quite fascinating, actually, in this work. And I think that besides these artists it was the beginning to really travel and see—like, seeing the art in Mexico, somehow translating this to sculptural ideas, influenced me much more than, say, seeing art in Europe, and then later on of course loving antiquity and seeing—going to Greece and going to Rome and incorporating that.

And it's funny that now I'm much more interested in this and reading much more on it now than I would have then. I wouldn't have been so interested in it. And I think it just—it takes time in a career to be able to—and to be free enough to move in many different directions. I think an artist has to have that kind of mobility.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, it seems to me that you have been either especially good or especially brave or just whatever—that you really were willing to say, this isn't working—

KEITH SONNIER: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: —I'm trying this.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes. Right.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, that is hard.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, and that was—actually that was—and then sometimes it's just not right. You might have to wait and then approach it another way or do something else. And then maybe then it can reoccur in the world or something. That's been the most—the most exciting about it. And I still, after all these years—you know, I do a show and I think—you know, I have all this work. I mean, I think, why am I feeling so strange?

And I work very intensely and then it's over, so I have to now approach, what am I going to do next? And so that there's all this stuff that gets in between before the process starts again.

AVIS BERMAN: How do you decompress?

KEITH SONNIER: My interests began to change. I have to—I have a horrible cold now, for one thing. [Laughs.] That's one of the ways. But I think it's taking on other—you know, taking on other things and taking on other interests and deciding to look at other things.

I mean, sometimes I see more shows now because when I'm working I don't see that many shows. And I end up seeing shows more when I go to Europe than when I'm here because I have down time when I'm doing an installation in Europe or something.

And I thought I was—I'm not going to have time to decompress after this show because I now have a show in Paris in March and I have a show in Athens in April. So these are older works but I still have to be there. That's the other thing about that when you have works that travel and reconstruct works and there is this constant manipulation of the objects again.

And this I think helps very much in the process of making the art too. When you reinstall and de-install, especially with the kind of work that I do—it's not like a painting; it's like this physical manipulation that has to happen.

It puts you through—like, you have to shed the exoskeleton and then it's like picking it up and putting it back on. It's really like, again, having to play a role, like to put yourself in that context.

AVIS BERMAN: So it's like building and unbuilding—or using the thought process, I guess.

KEITH SONNIER: Yes, and that's what was so interesting again—I don't know why I keep thinking of Cate Blanchett. She was so put into such a physical state. She transformed herself so much. You could sense the whole exoskeleton coming out, and she did a great job on this production. It was great.

And I had renewed my interest in theater again, because I don't go to Broadway and I don't do that. I mean, I have no interest in it very much.

AVIS BERMAN: Is there anything else you'd like to add about, you know, what we decided we would cover today?

KEITH SONNIER: I'm amazed that we hit on all these different things, and I feel that we covered a tremendous amount, actually, mainly because I never shut up.

AVIS BERMAN: No, that's the idea. [They laugh.]

KEITH SONNIER: But I think that—I feel that we covered this area, personally which had never been really covered this well the first time, and I'm anxious to see what—you know, what can—I think it's going to fit very well with the other stuff.

AVIS BERMAN: I think so too. And what we'll do, even though this was last, I think we'll probably—we'll put it first.

KEITH SONNIER: I think you should put it first, right. Absolutely, because we know the context of the other stuff and this really is in keeping with this approach.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Okay, well, good. Well, thank you very much.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]