

ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES ARCHIVE BALNAVES FOUNDATION AUSTRALIAN SCULPTURE ARCHIVE PROJECT

Interview with Kevin Mortensen

16 February 2017

This is an edited transcript of an interview with Kevin Mortensen on 16 February 2017 at Venus Bay, Victoria, by Deborah Edwards, senior curator of Australian art, Art Gallery of New South Wales, for the Balnaves Foundation Australian Sculpture Archive Project.

The project focuses on significant Australian sculptors and sculptural practice. It was developed with a grant from the Balnaves Foundation in 2010, which supported the recording and transcription of interviews with artists and other figures in Australian art.

About Kevin Mortensen

Kevin Mortensen (born 1936) is best known for his avant-garde sculptures and performances of the 1970s and 80s. He represented Australia at the 1980 Venice Biennale. He also taught art in secondary schools in Victoria and lectured at his alma mater, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.

This is an edited transcript of a recorded interview. Some adjustments, including deletions, have been made to the original as part of the editing process; however, the accuracy of all statements has not been verified and errors of fact may not have been corrected. The views expressed are those of the participants and do not represent those of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Unedited audio files of this interview are in the Gallery's archive.

Interview on 16 February 2017

Deborah Edwards (DE): To start at the beginning: you were born in Melbourne in 1939. I wonder if you could tell me a little about your early life and what decided you to become an artist or an art teacher – I am not sure which one is the chicken and which the egg for you.

Kevin Mortensen (KM): OK, the art teacher came after the egg. My early life. Well, my father was Danish and my mother Australian and I had two older half-brothers and a half-sister from my father's first marriage. Some of my earliest memories, particularly of my brothers when they returned from the Second World War ... I'd say that was the first shock I ever had, on a grand scale. I'd seen hundreds of wounded men, all yellow with malaria, coming off a troop ship that was khaki, down at Port Melbourne. Deck after deck of men, either on crutches, bandaged up, staggering. I was about six or seven. Amongst those was my eldest brother – I couldn't even remember what he was like before the war, my eldest brother Jack – and he was crook with malaria. He'd been fighting in New Guinea and the Middle East. He was grumpy and sick for the rest of his life, I'd have to say. He wasn't at all interested in art, for instance. Neither was my favourite brother, Carl. Carl took me under his wing and taught me how to fish and hunt, shoot and box – lots of things that older brothers do.

DE: He was living with you?

KM: In the early years he was. Then he married and had children.

DE: Your father's first wife had died, and that was why the children are closely associated with the father?

KM: Yes. So it was my brother Carl who took me into the bush and to the Howqua River, which became my spiritual homeland.

DE: Can you tell me where you were living?

KM: East Malvern, just on the edge of the 'bible belt'. Now it's quite yuppified. In those days there was a dairy with horses at the end of the street; however, it was basically suburban life. And I was sent to Scotch College. By that time my father was quite well off, from his hard work. And it was there we had quite a good art class. Mr [Bill] Helms was the art teacher. There were actually rooms designed for students to make art in. It was only still lifes that we were allowed to draw, but they would be on a stand and there was rake seating so that everyone was looking down at this object. I thought we were taught well in art.

DE: This is secondary school. Had you been a drawer before that? Because writers on your work, like Daniel Thomas, have consistently claimed draughtsmanship as the source of your work.

KM: Yes, I had, and even before I went to Scotch College my father used to give me Danish children's story books and one in particular was cartoons by [Robert] Storm Petersen – a famous Danish cartoonist Storm P, as he was known. These were black-and-white cartoons. Often they didn't have any text on them – they were just funny in themselves – and I used to copy them. That's where I learnt how to use a pencil and copy something and then use India ink and rub out the pencil.

DE: Were you encouraged? Was your mother artistic?

KM: Yes, she was. She played piano for silent movies. She was a professional pianist and she played piano every day at home. She played every day of her life really. So she

appreciated my artwork and praised it, whereas my father's attitude was that it was very good but that it was something I could do when I retire, and that I should concentrate on what I was going to do to earn a living.

DE: Not a serious profession. But was he relatively benign when you had to share with him that you wanted to be an artist?

KM: Well, I wanted to be an artist.

DE: This was by the end of high school that you had decided that you wanted to be an artist?

KM: Yes. This was the one thing I was good at, basically. I struggled with maths, and in the end an interview was arranged between the headmaster, my father and myself, and he pointed out that art was what I was relatively good at, and he suggested becoming an art teacher, which I saw very much as selling out, even at that stage. I thought: why can't I just go for it as an artist? But I took it on board and I was very glad I did.

DE: You went to Prahran [Technical College] from 1957 to 60 when you were 18.

KM: Lenton Parr was my lecturer in sculpture.

DE: Who is a very interesting sculptor,

KM: Well, yes. He was part of the Centre Five [group of sculptors].

DE: At Prahran, the diploma was specifically an art teaching diploma?

KM: Yes, it was.

DE: And you did a lot of practical work with that? How did you move from draughtsmanship to sculpture?

KM: It was a subject at Prahran Tech. It was one of the subjects you had to do, like painting, printmaking and woodwork and metalwork. But it appealed to me immediately because it was something like the work my father did. It was very physical. It involved using ... I was about to say 'manly materials', rather than cloth and bamboo, which we used in basket-making, and things like that. So it had that appeal and then I also saw it as being not as highly recognised as painting, and yet up until then all I had done was paint, basically.

DE: So you had established a drawing practice in secondary school and by the end of secondary school had also begun painting?

KM: Yes, I was going out on weekends on the bike with a mate of mine, and we'd go and camp somewhere and paint.

DE: Watercolours?

KM: Yes.

DE: This is in the 50s, with the idea of representational aims behind that?

KM: Yes.

DE: So as yet untouched by trends such as abstract expressionism, for example, or various forms of gestural painting?

KM: No, it was more a matter of trying to capture mist over mountains in watercolour.

DE: Then at Prahran I presume you were introduced to abstraction.

KM: Yes.

DE: You had Lenton Parr, who was an abstract artist. Who took you for painting?

KM: A man called Jason Gurney, who I've never heard of since. He made a big impression on all of us because he lived in a studio-garret kind of rundown place, we could smell wine on his breath, and he used to be a sailor. He would ask us things like, 'Have you any idea how long a whale's cock is?' Whereas none of the other teachers spoke to us like that. The one day he invited us to his studio – as I remember it was somewhere in Albert Park – he received us in something like a purple velvet dressing gown and whilst he was talking to us a young lady in a nightgown came down the wooden stairs. We were basically all virgins and we thought, 'Here is a real artist's life!' As far as painting technique, he didn't teach us much, but there was a man, whose name I can't remember, who taught us 'the principles and practice of design' – a subject we did which was basically to do with developing an understanding of what creates harmony, where it lies between discord and repetition – forms, colour, space, texture, line. And we used to have to do regular exercises, five by seven, once a week, for a couple of years. That was very informative.

DE: You were doing a full-time course?

KM: Yes, and one day a week was devoted to teacher training at Melbourne Teachers College, which involved then going out on teaching practice.

DE: Forgive my ignorance but you are in classes at Prahran with want-to-be artists and the only distinction between you and them is that you run off one day a week to do teacher practice?

KM: Yes. There were about a hundred of us in that group and only 15 males. We still meet quite regularly, those of us who are still alive. It's really only the men who have stayed in contact with one another, partly because women get married and change their names and are very hard to contact after 30 years. I'm one of the very few in that group who has tried to be an artist.

We hit a snag now, Deborah. I have trouble calling myself an artist, for several reasons. The first one would be that from my time in Venice I learnt that Leonardo [da Vinci] was renowned for his attitude. On his death bed he said, 'What a pity I am dying today because I felt sure that tomorrow I would be an artist'. That imprinted in my psyche and since then ... Stuart [Purves of Australian Galleries, Mortensen's dealer], for instance, doesn't think that we should call ourselves artists but printmakers or sculptors or painters etc. The long and short of that is that I can say that I practise art or I make sculpture but I tend to avoid saying, 'I am an artist', because that tends to say that I have succeeded in making art. It's alright for someone else to call me an artist – I am flattered when they do – but it's not quite right for me to call myself one.

DE: It is an interesting qualification from you because what you are seeing, from a generation only ten years after you, is art students coming out of colleges who have shows only six months after graduating and certainly consider themselves artists very early on. It

positions you in a certain way that relates to philosophies that you have watched collapse, doesn't it?

KM: It's certainly not the way anymore.

DE: I understand what you are saying but whether for most people that is just an issue of semantics and that of course you are an artist is a moot point. But, OK, point taken. It is a process of evolution, I think you are saying, and until you reach a point ...

KM: It's a weird thing. It does play out in reality that it's very hard for me to say that anything I make is perfect. There's always something the matter.

DE: Isn't that another thing? I don't find personally that the appellation 'artist' has to be attached to the idea of perfection or resolution, but you are saying that for you this is the case. That the word artist carries with it the idea of having achieved a certain form of perfection.

KM: Yes, something like that. That links in with what I was saying earlier about how we made art in the 1970s in the spirit of doing it out of love rather than getting somewhere in our career.

DE: You went through decades of the strong politicisation of art, decades where people not only stopped making paintings but stopped making art as we know it. It was a very particular time and, out the other end of it, conceptualist artists are selling their photographs from their 'process art' of that time. It seems to me that the machine just absorbed them.

You were painting. Did you start printmaking then?

KM: A little bit. I can't even remember who taught us printmaking, but there was a lovely lady, whose name I can't remember, who taught us drawing. She was very influential. She had a bad limp.

DE: You graduated in 1960. With Lenton Parr there, I can't really say it was a traditional course, can I?

KM: No, it was quite advanced.

DE: And it opened your eyes to ...?

KM: Contemporary art.

DE: Was Parr encouraging? Did you start to go off and see commercial shows?

KM: No, I wasn't going to shows. Lenton Parr didn't talk a lot but at one stage he said that he thought my drawings for my sculptures were superior than the sculptures themselves and that stuck with me ever since – the notion of whether that is true or not. I always make drawings of the sculptures I'm making, either before I make it or while I'm making it or after I've made it. In particular, in making a performance, I often make drawings of the performance once I've made it because by then I've got it on a screen and I can stop it at some point and make a drawing of that.

DE: You mentioned the Centre Five artists. It seems to me that as you start to do your teaching diploma you start to veer towards sculptural practice, which is not something you had envisaged as you began, perhaps.

KM: That's right. I hadn't even heard of sculpture, other than the *Venus de Milo* or something like that.

DE: And so the kind of sculpture that Lenton Parr is taking you into ... Did you do welding courses, for example?

KM: Yes, I was taught to weld.

DE: So, limbering up with steel.

KM: Yes.

DE: What about carving. Did you do any of that?

KM: Yes, wood carving, and how to make a two-piece waste mould. We did regular life drawing but it wasn't until I went to RMIT [Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology] part-time at night that we did figure sculpture, which is a bigger thing than life drawing in a way, similar but takes longer.

DE: Was it at Prahran that you started to see the distinctions being made between the abstract and the figurative?

KM: Oh, definitely.

DE: Which, in retrospect, people say were rather too rigid. The notion of the avant garde was tied exclusively to the non-figurative, and that's an interesting issue, it seems to me, with you, because you have straddled both; you haven't let go of one for the other. So are you starting to become philosophically aware at this time? Is this your philosophical as well as sculptural awakening or does that come a bit later? You then go on to teach for eight or nine years.

KM: That's very difficult to answer because ever since I can remember I have been able to be completely absorbed in making an artwork, a drawing or painting or a sculpture. So when did it become something more than traditional landscape painting or something of that nature? I would have to look up my records and give you some date for that.

DE By 1968 there are a whole lot of people around you.

KM: By 1968 I was a practising Buddhist and meditating and believing in the principles of Buddhism. By the time I was 30, I had had an experience of levitating while meditating, which was quite scary. I went up into the rafters of the house I was living in. I found myself up in the rafters with a sense that I had somehow got up there through my mind and that I had to get back on the floor near the TV where I had come from. I guess [the sense was that I had to] re-meditate to get myself into a state where I could get back down to the floor. And I did. No one witnessed it but I basically stopped it after that. I felt I was entering an area that was too frightening. It was completely illusory or something. And I wondered later whether after half an hour my legs had gone to sleep and perhaps because I couldn't feel the floor anymore ... But it highlighted an interest in a deeper reality of things, more than just a surface understanding of the physical nature of something, its height, width and depth. It's the spirit of things. The spiritual value of various materials came into my consciousness then. The difference between wood and plastic – there's a big one. The difference between using natural materials or using fibreglass in making sculpture.

DE: And you're talking about more than the physical characteristics of the materials themselves.

KM: Yes, it's almost its spiritual life, in a way.

DE: What comes with high modernism is the 'truth to materials' dictum, that you respect the intrinsic qualities of wood etc but, of course, not spiritual in that sense. You extended this into a different arena. I guess you are predisposed to this as you find your way to Buddhism, as you start to be an art teacher. You finished your training in 1961. Where did you go after that?

KM: I went to a school in Nathalia in northern Victoria as an art teacher. I lived in a little room in a hotel in Nathalia and in that room I made a little sculpture – of all things, plaster on steel. I had a local welder weld an armature for me and on my dressing table I mixed up plaster and used cloth. It finished up such a mess, it was just awful. I was going to take it to the tip but the tip was closed and stupidly I dumped it into a creek and the next thing there was a flood and it was swept, this thing of mine, down into the local waterways and people were asking, 'What the hell is that thing?'

DE: Was that a small secondary school and were you the only art teacher?

KM: I was.

DE: Was that for your nine years of teaching?

KM: No, I was only there for a year but it was a very important year for me in that the school had only just opened and over half the students were Aboriginal. I tried to get on with them but they didn't get on with me. One of the Aboriginal boys punched me once when I was trying to break up a fight. Now I realise that it was an almost ridiculous attempt to teach Aboriginal children whitefella education.

DE: Was there a reserve there?

KM: Yes, there was. The Yorta Yorta people who now have land rights up there. We were never taught at teachers college how to teach Aboriginal children. [This is followed by a short discussion about supervising cricket and a fight between an Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal boy.] I went back there a couple of years ago for the 50th anniversary of the founding of the school and there were only two Aboriginal kids out of perhaps 250 kids that were found and turned up.

DE: What did that teach you? What was the relationship of that to your art teaching? Did the Aboriginal kids show an interest in art?

KM: I can only remember one painting that one Aboriginal kid did. It was a pretty unknowing time.

DE: So, after Nathalia, where did you go?

KM: To Healesville High School. It was there that I started going to night school for sculpture at RMIT.

DE: Healesville would have been much bigger.

KM, Yes, much, an hour's drive to Melbourne. By then I thought, 'I want to be a sculptor'.

DE: What kind of sculptor? You were at RMIT from 1962 to 65. Who were the teachers?

KM: Lenton Parr was the head of RMIT by then. Vincas Jomantas became the head by the time I became a lecturer there later on. He was also part of the Centre Five group. I spent many years with him. I was a student of his. An interesting thing about him, which was quite contrary to any view I had, was that he had no interest in anyone's private life. He used to say, 'We are not a psych hospital here'. If anyone had any personal difficulties, they had to leave them at the door. He just saw it that this was sculpture. In many ways I had respect for him but I didn't really like how he treated the students in that regard.

DE: He would also have been a real traditionalist, wouldn't he? To go from Parr to him would have been to go back to a carving practice, wouldn't it? And a European sensibility. He was also interested in commissions for work.

KM: He made a lot of work that was cast into bronze from wood. He and I had a great relationship as time passed. I spent a lot of time in his office talking to him because he had been through the Second World War as a child, had been shot at by an aeroplane.

DE: How many nights a week?

KM: Probably three.

DE: And who else was there, re students?

KM: Unfortunately, a fellow who has died now, Alan Brown. Later on we shared a studio. I think a lot of people in my position would say this: I learnt more from fellow students than I did from the teachers. Alan could draw, much better than me. He had an amazing ability. He would come into life drawing at 20 [minutes] to 12 when it had started at 9am. And we would finish at ten past 12, at which point we would have to put our drawings up and he always had the best drawings. He was a purist. He didn't believe in the commercialisation of art, which included commercial art galleries.

DE: That's part of the avant-garde zeitgeist of the 60s, isn't it? So you are starting to absorb that. Would you describe yourself as a spiritual seeker by this stage?

KM: Yes. He and I used to argue a lot.

DE: Can I ask you how you found your way to spirituality?

KM: Through a book called *The three pillars of Zen* [by Philip Kapleau].

DE: This is part of the lexicon of progressive artist training in the 60s, isn't it? There is a huge transformation of Western spirituality, which starts after World War One, with people like Rabindranath Tagore, the importation of Indian and so-called Eastern philosophies into the West, building to a tsunami of influence in the 1950s and 60s. Kevin, I don't think I have spoken to one artist who trained in the 1950s or 60s who hasn't read Eugen Herrigel or *The three pillars of Zen* or Lao Tzu's *I Ching* [Lao Tzu is the author of the widely read *Tao Te Ching*; the *I Ching* or *Book of changes* is another classical Chinese text popular at the time]. In Sydney, artists were handing these books to each other to read. Did you also become politicised as well?

KM: I did become politicised when I joined Pinacotheca Gallery.

DE: How did that happen?

KM: He [Bruce Pollard, director of Pinacotheca] had a gallery in Fitzroy Street, St Kilda. I showed with Bruce, and before that I showed at the Argus Gallery. Alan Brown might have

even had a sculpture in that show, because it wasn't a commercial gallery, it was somewhere in between.

DE: There are mixed reports. One, that you had your first show at Argus in 1964, and the other that your first show was at Argus Gallery in 1967. If 1964, that would have been when you were in Healesville. Was Healesville the one you stayed at until 1970?

KM: Yes, but not quite. I went from Healesville High School to Beaumaris High School to Brighton High School.

DE: We need to know if you had your first show at Argus at 1964 or 1967? Sculptures and paintings. Do you think 1964 is probable?

KM: No, I think it sounds like it's too early.

DE: OK, so more likely 1967. That's a year after you graduated with your diploma of sculpture from RMIT, and over 1966–71 you are still teaching. Who are your main artist associates at this time?

KM: John Davis. He also went to RMIT and we got to know each other very well. He was a student there.

DE: You did a collaborative work with him later on, didn't you?

KM: We did, at St Paul's Cathedral, a performance installation piece that got called *Acting the goat in church*.

DE: Which I think at least one critic saw as an assertion of the pagan.

KM: Yes, it was. I didn't realise at the time how connected the goat's head was to representations of the devil. I just saw it as animalistic.

DE: Whose work did you admire in the late 1960s?

KM: Antoni Tàpies, the Spanish painter. [Alberto] Giacometti, who I still love. I love both of their works [although] I have seen some terrible Tàpies works since then.

DE: And was this through reproductions? Had you been overseas by this time?

KM: No, I hadn't been overseas, so through reproductions and through the influence of people like Lenton Parr and Vincas Jomantas. They were very familiar with these people. It was only later that [Jean] Dubuffet became of interest to me because he partly established the art brut museum in Lausanne [Collection de l'Art Brut], which I visited last time I was in Europe. But otherwise I never really went for that [kind of] fake naive painting. I don't know when people like Yves Klein had an influence on me but as a performance artist he was very influential, because he was quite spiritual in his work.

DE: Critics have commented on the slow, contemplative, ritualistic aspects of your performances in contrast to, say, the anarchic or violent aspects of others who came out of the same decades, like Mike Parr. If we are still in the mid 1960s, were you still toggling between painting and sculpture and performance? Are you beginning to focus more on sculpture?

KM: It was more the added reality that sculpture has, beyond painting, drawing and printmaking, that it inhabits the space we inhabit so you have to recognise it on that level.

DE: In terms of the politicisation of art and moves away from art as products of consumption, many had a need to try and repair the rifts between art production and real life. Was this part of the seduction of performance art and sculpture for you?

KM: The linking of my life and my art, that's where performance suddenly lifted into another level of my practice.

DE: When did that happen? Around the time you became a Buddhist?

KM: Yes, I suppose once I started thinking of things in terms of an action. One might think if you are welding something, that's an action, but it's very different from, say, the contemplation of diving off a high diving board, where it comes to a point that you are going to go ahead with it, you plan it as well as you can, and then you execute it for the action – not for a physical product at the end, but just for the action, for the thing happening. That's a very Buddhist notion. You could ally it to when one is carving: each time you take a little chip out, it's got to be perfect. You can't take it out against the grain and leave a rough bit, you have to attend to every detail of it. But that is not as extreme as planning a performance, which is like planning a bank robbery. I got this from Joseph Beuys. I used to be a big fan of Beuys.

DE: You can't say 'allusion-rich performance' without thinking of Beuys and you have been involved in allusion-rich performances.

KM: Yes. So we are jumping ahead years, but Beuys made a strong connection to me partly because of the symbolism in his work, which also included the spiritual values of works – how iodine is a completely different material to bone, for instance, or sulphur or iron. Various materials have not just a history in their use but some have had gods named after them, some are healing, some are dangerous to a person. And that's still something that fascinates me, where natural forces are at play – like gravity, the sun going up and down, the moon going up. To employ things of that nature in my work, which I have been criticised for, in appropriating natural forces, criticised [at least] once. My performances have generally been site-specific, particularly ones like the piece in St Paul's Cathedral – that was very site-specific – or a piece I did out in a swamp.

DE: The seagull piece was the one, in 1971 or 1972, by which you burst onto the scene, isn't it? [*The seagull salesman, his stock and visitors or figures of identification* at Pinacotheca in 1971] The ideas are quite esoteric.

KM: Are they?

DE: Well, in the sense that you are talking beyond the cultural significance of materials, beyond the material base in the way that acts. You are talking about a spiritual force.

KM: This is where it gets awkward – when you put it into words. It's something that exists in another form. It exists in the form of sculpture or performance and as such it doesn't have these limitations to it.

DE: With performance you invite your participants or 'involvees' into a different form of reality, but it is taking place in our own concrete reality, and I guess that dichotomy is very interesting in performance. Sheridan Palmer suggested in 2006 that: 'Technique and truth to materials has been of cardinal importance to Kevin Mortensen because the medium has to be allowed to hold its own power'. I read that as a 'truth to materials' notion but you are saying it is quite beyond that.

KM: I don't know, Deborah. It is just a reality that I feel. And I do look for something of a practical nature. I've got to be able to make it as an action or a sculpture. Often I just have to back my hunch rather than tease it out in theory.

DE: Is that related to the conjunctions between the manipulated and non-manipulated materials in your work? Highly crafted in some aspects and then unmodified in others.

[Break in interview]

KM: It's called *Objects in the landscape* at Mildura, near the river on an old site, an ex-dump [referring to an image of his work at *Sculpturscape '73*, one of the series of Mildura Sculpture Triennials curated by Tom McCullough].

DE: That was the first time that Tom McCullough had got a large parcel of land for Mildura, I think, to produce site-specific works.

KM: Yes. I had seen some eucalyptus boilers, I think they were called. There used to be a practice of collecting eucalyptus leaves in the bush and boiling them down for eucalyptus oil, and they looked a bit like these things [gestures], except these looked more like beehives.

DE: I think one critic said they looked like cairns.

KM: Yes. And they were acquired by the Mildura City Council after the exhibition and they wanted to bring them up and put them on the lawns outside the gallery and I said, no, they had to stay where they were, which they did for about two years, and then a flood came and carried them all off downstream, and that was the end of them.

DE: Maybe if we do touch a little on surrealism. It seems to me, reading though the material, that critics call you a 'shaman' when there was a real currency with that word.

KM: Yes.

DE: And they also comment on the eclecticism of your work, and a notion that there is irony and disjunction in it. This putting together of things that are unexpected and slightly disjunctive – was that starting to be a real interest?

KM: Well, I guess if nothing else it was away from the expected. Art is in some ways a bit like a joke, in the sense that it has to have a punchline to it. It has some sort of content that it comes in. And to work as art it has to hold one's attention – that could come from scale or through amazing technique – but also a part of it is to not take myself too seriously.

DE: Why not?

KM: Why not? Because I'm not certain of anything. I have never been a follower of any school of art. Although I have made pieces that have abstract qualities to them, that is just part of the design.

DE: In hindsight, decades later, would you say you were part of a very idealistic wave?

KM: Yes.

DE: A wave that did lead to the idea of creating art which wasn't buyable. And you do seem to have been influenced by art ...

KM: Well, none of us were selling anything much anyway, so it didn't really make much difference.

DE: But there were a lot of people who were making to sell in those years – Brett Whiteley, for example. But there is a particular zeitgeist at the time which you do appear to have absorbed.

KM: Yes, and what's more Brett Whiteley started out as what we used to call a commercial artist. He had a very different attitude to it, and although he made some beautiful representations of nature, he wasn't someone who loved the bush. Getting back to Buddhism, as an annual retreat I'd go to the bush by myself with my dog for a fortnight and after about three days you'd just about go mad from loneliness and separation, no TV, no people. I have used it like a retreat over the years without necessarily sitting and meditating, just to be in that world and not have all the commodities that make life comfortable, to sort through things. I've been through several marriages and that gets to be untidy at times. Three marriages really, as far as women I have lived with.

DE: I haven't asked you how important being a teacher was for you. Did you think you were a good didact? You certainly did move away from it by the time you came here, I think in the 70s sometime.

KM: Yes, I think I was a relatively successful one, in that I still have students that I am in contact with. Do you know Merryn Gates? I taught her for about four years in high school and she was responsible for teaching me something. She was so thorough in everything she did and didn't ever make a mistake. One day I asked her, 'How come, Merryn, you never make a mistake, in any drawing you are doing, for instance?' and she said sometimes she didn't know what to do and that was when she didn't change anything. And I have applied that ever since. If you don't know what you are doing, don't change anything. By that time I think I did see teaching as something quite valuable. The income from it was, of course, very little, but the business of speaking the truth and encouraging young people was good.

DE: You would have been anti-prescriptive as a teacher, wouldn't you?

KM: Yes, well, I went on to be a lecturer. I went back to RMIT and lectured for years, in sculpture and drawing.

DE: What were your intrinsic focuses in this? In other words, what is your basic philosophy of three-dimensional art?

KM: [Laughter] Well, I suppose it is its primary qualities of its physical nature, which can include things such as its lighting, its movement and how long it lasts. How long it lasts and its movement weren't things associated with classical sculpture. Classical sculpture was concerned with form and space and texture and line and subject matter, but by the time I was making sculpture that had broadened out. The idea of extending three-dimensionality out into something four dimensions somehow was getting it more like life rather than as something of a minor art practice.

DE: Even your flying machines or your smaller vignettes where you had hanging pieces had movement that was virtual, not real.

KM: Well, it [movement] could be implied.

DE Yes, but they are not intrinsically kinetic, are they? Isn't the kineticism or movement you are interested in put into your performances?

KM: Yes, in some cases. I am thinking of a piece I made called *The sun machine*.

DE: In the 1980s and associated with a performance?

KM: Yes, associated with a performance. I made it up in Sydney; I'm trying to think where that was. I did do a performance at Watters [Gallery] but not with *The sun machine*, which was a kinetic piece of equipment. [I did it] at Performance Space.

DE: John McDonald wrote about it: 'Over the course of an hour we watched a glowing orb representing the sun being raised into position by a mechanical piece of equipment. The artist with his head covered by a large bird mask slowly circled a pool of water, sat motionless on a fence, went off stage and returned. This happened with a ritualised slowness while a barrage of bush noise, birds and insects played in the background'.

KM: Yes, that's right. It was a 1000-watt lamp, that's a very bright lamp, in a polished disk out on the end of an arm, on a tripod, all motorised through electricity so it moved through a gear system. It took about an hour to go from the ground level up to its maximum height, which was about 15–20 feet.

DE: It sounds like the lamp might have been too bright to actually look at?

KM: It lit up the ... It depended where it was. I don't think it was pointing directly to the audience [at Performance Space]. It was angled down onto the stage and it lit a pond and its surroundings, largely of sand, which I had prepared. As the sun went up, the shadows changed.

DE: Can you take me through that conceptually?

KM: Yes, I can. Sitting here, there is a pond out there. One day I was sitting here at the table and a bird came and hung around the edge and then I noticed it had a companion bird sitting on the branch of a tree. The bird on the edge dipped in, came out, then dipped in the pond again. Meanwhile the one sitting on the branch was looking out. Then it came down and it went in the water, had a bit of a dip, and then they flew off. It was a very simple thing of birds coming down to water and disturbing the tranquility of the water for a moment and then it would all settle down again. That was the origin of the idea. It was very early morning. It was something meditative, something that you would perhaps hope that a child would enjoy watching. It didn't have any serious overtones. But when I got to perform it, here is a problem. With our heads in a bird mask you have to have a big mask because we have a big jaw, so it comes out a little bit like Beatrix Potter, some strange creature. I got invited to show at the ICA [Institute of Contemporary Arts], London one year. I can't remember the year.

DE: Are we talking early on?

KM: No, it would be 1982. It was called *60 ways to fool a trout*. And it was there, with the help of the staff, that I made a small boat that would hold water and I set up what they call a quay, a raised walkway. The audience came in through one door into the gallery, already raised about four feet above the floor, so they were looking down on me. I was on the floor in this boat, which had a black bitumen bottom with some water in it. And I was standing there with waders on, listening to some news on the radio that came through from when [Joh] Bjelke-Petersen was in power in Queensland. He had some trouble with Aboriginal people, had been criticised for how they had been treated by his government, in particular a group like the Uniting Church had come out and done a survey and thought the conditions for Aboriginal people were appalling and reported that to government. So Bjelke-Petersen got his own church to go out and look at the Aboriginal people and they reported that, yes, they

were not in a very good state, but that it was a result of alcoholism and sin. I had an English friend of mine recite these words as though they were coming through BBC radio.

DE: Was the performance recorded? Is there documentation?

KM: I could show you some photos of it. So, once again these things are a little like doing a bank job. You don't do a rehearsal. You don't go to the bank and check it out. You don't expose yourself before you do the performance. But I thought afterwards this was a problem. I had already made some performances. What then happened after it? What happened to the stuff of the physical objects when the gallery was still open, still on show? So I thought it would be good to have the waders filled with something so they stood up, then mount the bird head above them, standing in the boat, in the water, after the thing was over. So I headed off to London with a pair of waders that I had got from the Department of Deep Sewers in Melbourne for nothing, little realising that they had given them to me for nothing because they leaked. I got there. I had read in a book that a way to deal with waders was to fill them with hot bran – that absorbs the water and then you can shake the bran out and they are dry. So I got a hold of some bran, filled them with bran, put them in the boat. The audience came in, then I came in with a bird mask on and went up to the waders and turned them upside down to try and get the bran out to get them on, but it had expanded so much that it just stuck. It was a very awkward moment, people starting to giggle a bit, and then a lovely Scot who worked for the ICA, he came out of the audience and gave them a really good shake, and I managed to get them on and get on with the performance, swinging a lead lamp – which is a lamp on a lead in a cage – swinging it in time to some Aboriginal music that was coming through the sound system. And with all of the lights out and me swinging the light over the water in a rhythmical way, fortunately I managed to save the performance. It took on quite a heavy atmosphere. It started with a comical element, with people laughing.

DE: How long was it and is there a generalisation you can make about how long your performances go on?

KM: It went on for the best part of an hour. I did make this performance a number of times. That dichotomy of something quite serious and something quite comical.

DE: Did that dichotomy make it more effective?

KM: I don't think so. It's just something that appeals to me: its contradictory or contrary nature.

DE: Just in terms of the bird, I think there was a performance with a bird before *The seagull salesman* called *Enclosure*, which was, I think, the inaugural Pinacotheca show. The critic Alan McCulloch came in and was a bit bemused. He described it as 'bundles of sticks, wire netting, a surrounding fence with torn canvas strips, and seagulls'. That sounds like it was an installation work, not a performance.

KM: Yes, it was.

DE: But that was the first time where you used the bird.

KM: McCulloch and a lot of people took it as an environmental statement.

DE: A lot of people over time have seen that as a politic in your work.

KM: That's true.

DE: Does that then segue into what some people have called your 'avatar', which is the bird?

KM: Yes, it does. The bird thing goes back a long way.

DE: Birds mean something particular to you?

KM: Yes, they do, and not just birds but a birdman means a lot to me. This coming Saturday we have a *fugleskyding* – 'bird shooting' is what it means in English. It's a Danish ritual that I have taken part in since I was a kid, that goes back to the year 1479 where there was the first recorded shoot. Historically this is where legend started. A long time ago the king of Sweden was very jealous of the king of Denmark because the king of Denmark had control, not only over Denmark but over Norway and England. So the king of Sweden sent his magic bird to Denmark to steal the ring and the crown from the king. He flew in through the king's bedroom window – we believe it was a trained goose – he took the ring and the crown and flew off, but the master at arms saw the bird flying off and called the guards to shoot, and first they shot the ring from it, then the crown from its head, and then its beak, then its head and neck, but because it was a magic bird it kept flying off, then its tail and wings were shot off, until all that was left was its [flying] heart. And then a man shot it in the heart and he became the first *fuglekong*, the first bird king, by bringing down the heart of this bird. That is reenacted every year, particularly here in Australia and in some parts of Denmark. Only Danes can attend, and now we have women come – we haven't had a *fuglejdame*, a female bird queen – and we shoot at a wooden replica of a goose that has all of those parts to it, which can be shot off with a .22 rifle. It's a highly decorated bird, like a life-size goose. It's always made in exactly the same way – although it is decorated slightly differently each year – made out of five ply. In Melbourne, every year the bird rises again like the phoenix, as every year it gets shot to pieces. It's put about a cricket-pitch length away from the rifles. The Danish club, which puts on the event, owns the rifles; we have a shooting master. And you proceed, one shot at a time, to take a shot at whatever is the next part on the list. When you shoot down one of those things, the ring, the crown, whatever, you receive a silver medal and basically shout everyone a round of drinks, and the one who shoots the heart becomes the bird king for the year and he gets a gold medal. Would you like to see my medals?

DE: You have clearly been the bird king.

KM: I have.

DE: What does it actually symbolise or emblematised for you? [Looking at a box full of medals, one of which Mortensen designed] Because it could be taken in a whole range of ways, not necessarily conservationist.

KM: Yes, because when you say bird shooting, people think you are going out to kill birds.

DE: I can see it as a myth of regeneration, a myth of interrelation between man and bird.

KM: Given I have known about this since I was a child, the fact is that the one who becomes the king becomes the king for the year, and other members of the shooting party need to acknowledge this and buy them a drink.

DE: What? Whenever they see them?

KM: Whenever they see them. When my father and I used to be at the Danish club he would sometimes almost bow to someone, someone who I didn't recognise. He might be a house painter or plumber, and I would ask my father, 'Who is that?' – who he would treat with such

respect – and he would say, ‘That is the new bird king’, and so I got this idea of there being a bird king early on, somewhere between a bird and a person.

DE: OK, so very personal and direct, very much related to Danish mythology and to your father.

KM: Yes.

DE: Did your father become the bird king?

KM: Never, but he tried, everyone tries. It could be just a lucky shot.

DE: When you first transposed to your seagull performances ... Tell me if the critic is right who said that your performance in *The seagull* had you in the mask of a muscovy duck.

KM: Yes, that’s right. I didn’t exactly replicate this thing of the bird shooting, but the extension of the idea of there being some kind of bird king.

DE: This photograph of the performance is in our files [at the Art Gallery of NSW] and I have seen it in other files. Did Suzanne Davies take this shot or too early for her?

KM: No, too early for her. I wish I knew the name of the person but it came from an era when the photographer didn’t want his name attached to it. He was a sax player that I knew.

DE: They are very arresting images and have contributed to *The seagull* being a well-known performance of yours. I don’t know whether anyone was taking moving footage of this or of *Delicatessen* in Mildura [at the 1975 Triennial], for example.

KM: No, no one.

DE: Have you mostly used a seagull head? The one on this chariot, for example [gestures to a work in the studio].

KM: That one is more of an ibis. The idea of *The seagull salesman* has something to do with the idea of humour you were talking about. How weird it would be for a bird man to sell other birds. That was a joke in a way.

DE: It was a political piece in that sense. It was seen as such.

KM: Yes, it was,

DE: What were the plaster figures of the observers, or were they potential buyers?

KM: No, they were papier-mâché. I called them ‘figures of identification’. They were like members of the public looking in at this piece. They were life-size. I suppose they had some level of realism about them, that if you saw them in silhouette that you might mistake them for people.

DE: That work seemed to get a very large amount of press. Is it a work you could look back and think was a turning point? It seemed to some people that you had sprung fully formed onto the performance scene.

KM: Despite the fact that Bruce Pollard had no time for it at all.

DE: Why was that? Did he find it too theatricalised?

KM: I think it was some of the other artists who showed at Pinacotheca saw my work. And Mike Brown was another whose work was too popularist – too popularist, of all things.

DE: That's a little weird. What was the work which was commissioned by Bruce Pollard for Pinacotheca Gallery? Was that when it moved to Waltham Place? He commissioned you to produce a sculpture.

KM: No, that was at the first place.

DE: So you were quite closely aligned to him by 1970? You had your first solo show at Argus in 1967. Actually, did that first show go well? Were you critiqued on it?

KM: Yes, Lenton Parr opened it. My mother made beautiful Danish open sandwiches, which all of my friends gobbled up. She was very angry about that. I have used members of my family a number of times.

DE: Did they understand your art?

KM Not really, but they supported it. My mother had no knowledge of contemporary art.

[Break in interview]

KM: Recently I've become a friend of Richard Goodwin, and he's pointed out that people like Tom Arthur and myself and Arthur Wicks come from a generation that has been overlooked in some way.

DE: Certainly not looked at enough. There is a modesty ...

KM: It could be a false modesty. [Laughter]

This work, *Shards*, was shown in the Murdoch courtyard and it looked very good there. You can see that connection, the story I told you about him having stuff buried in his backyard. He was a caver. It connected into my childhood once again, often things do. Our neighbour in East Malvern was the city engineer for St Kilda and when it was his son's birthday he would give him a lot of tickets for Luna Park so in the early days I got to go to Luna Park a lot and I became fascinated with the river caves. And because Mr Moran, our neighbour, was the city engineer, I got permission to go behind the sets of the river caves and I found it absolutely fascinating, the illusion which was set up to make it appear as though it was a cave you were going through when it wasn't at all, it was timbers and props and very much something constructed. All that physical construction that went on to create the illusion – I found that more interesting than the illusion itself; the illusion was pretty weak. So the idea of making a construction of a cave appealed to me, I suppose. It was lit. It looked fantastic at night.

DE: What was the genesis of that work going to the NGV [National Gallery of Victoria, to be exhibited]?

KM: I don't know who supported it at that time. It might have been Geoffrey Edwards. No, it was someone else.

DE: 1975. Robert Lindsay?

KM: Yes, Robert Lindsay. He was an early supporter.

DE: And how did it go down at the NGV? It would have been pretty formidable.

KM: Well, it was a big undertaking, a large piece, and my neighbour who had helped with the construction owned a flatbed truck so he brought it in for me. There was very little financial support for any of that work at the time. Unfortunately, when I was invited to show it over at Adelaide, there were no funds for the work to go over in specialised transport, it had to go on a flatbed truck and, by the time it got over there, the plaster was busted.

DE: Recoupable?

KM: Well, I didn't think it was. I didn't even know how to go about repairing it, frankly. Once plaster casts are broken ... I think I just lost confidence in it and had to say I can't go on with it.

DE: They had invited you on the basis of seeing it at the NGV?

KM: Yes.

DE: The Link Program was, I think, about showing the work of young experimental artists.

KM: It's certainly a regret that I have, that I didn't say, 'Give me a couple of days to think about this and then I'll do something'. It all had to be done straight away. I also had ten smaller pieces and I thought just better to do with those. But meanwhile the main gallery was vacant and I've felt guilty about that ever since.

DE: So it was traumatic.

KM: Yes, it was.

DE: Interesting that the expectation was that it was your responsibility to get the work over there, that you'd install the work. That's changed.

KM: Yes, but I don't get invited to do them anymore. [Laughter]

DE: Back to *Extract from Onn's journal*. That's sci-fi. Is that Ray Bradbury?

KM: Yes. I guess that connects into surrealism at that stage. That's quite a surreal object.

DE: Did you look at [Marcel] Duchamp?

KM: Yes, I did, of course. You mentioned Ray Bradbury, who I didn't really get off on so much as JG Ballard, who was very influential in the making of the work *Delicatessen* in Mildura. Once I had figured out what I wanted to do with the work, I gave the man involved [an actor who acted in this installation] a copy of JG Ballard's *Terminal Beach* to read in order for him to get an idea of what I wanted this person to be – acting normally in a way but in a different time and space than what was normal, slightly disconnected from it. I can't remember the name of the actor I got to play the part.

DE: Why didn't you want to do the performance yourself?

KM: That's an interesting aspect of performance work because traditionally the artist does the performance, in contrast to theatre. But I found more and more that I was making performance like a piece of sculpture and I wanted a figure in it doing something, rather than me in it.

DE That is interesting. You are saying, in a way, that your performances become your kinetic sculptures?

KM: Yes, that I saw the figure as a moving part of the installation, so to speak. Eddie Rosser was the name of the actor! I instructed him to play the part of a delicatessen [owner] who was dreaming of his old shop. I had found out that the shop had once been a delicatessen and before that the green room for a local theatre. So it already had a performance element to it in a way. Eddie then took on that role very seriously and would come regularly to the shop once I had it all ready for show. Meanwhile some of the locals said, 'You are barking up the wrong tree, mate. There was a delicatessen here but it went bust. Why are you doing it?' By the time Eddie was doing it, he was so good at it. He wore a three-piece suit and he would arrive at work early in the morning before opening and get right opposite his shop door in the street and then walk directly across the road and put the key straight in the lock, like he had done it for 20 years. Open up, take his jacket off, put it on a butcher's hook, take a broom and clean up outside, sweeping the footpath, and if any kids leant their bikes against the shop he would rage at them. He would stay in character the whole day, including lunch time.

DE: How long did he do that?

KM: I guess daily for about five days, and then he came back every weekend after that, I guess, for a couple of months. He did a great job. He was very convincing.

DE: I think it had a huge impact. It was seen as the extraordinary piece of the 1975 Mildura Triennial. And was it one of the only or few down in the main street of town? And how long did it take the townspeople to twig?

KM: Yes. Do you know the town? There's something like a plantation down the main street with shops on either side, and one day I noticed a guy just sitting out on the grass just looking into the shop. He wasn't a member of the art audience. He was a street man. I said, 'Why don't you come in and meet the delicatessen?' and he said 'No, no, that guy in there is really spaced out'. [Laughter]

DE: It seems to have been very successful. As opposed to works which townspeople might have viewed as 'pornographic', which made them very angry or affronted, here people were intrigued.

KM: Yes. They could just walk into the shop and Eddie would talk to them. He had some bread in the window, real bread though it had gone stale, and the explanation was that times were tough and if you really wanted something you could place an order. And he wouldn't sell the bread because that's all he had in the window.

DE: And was he extemporising?

KM: No, I worked with him as a kind of material. Eddie was happy to do it as his uncle had worked as a guard up there during the war and had told him stories about how these poor unfortunate Italians and Germans, who had done no wrong, were imprisoned, sometimes for years, and some of them went mad, their businesses folded, and then one day a plane crashed in the compound and the pilot died, and that was a fact, and Eddie could talk to people about that, recalling it as though he was the uncle, and he was very convincing. Dick Hamer was our premier at the time and got introduced to him. Eddie didn't bat an eyelid but stayed in character. Tom [McCullough] was wonderful, so supportive to all of us.

DE: He became totally absorbed by performance work, didn't he? He became a kind of agent for a certain number of performance groups, including DDart.

KM: It was just horrible how he was treated.

DE: Did you take students up there?

KM: Yes, I did.

DE: Did you find that a forum for getting to meet a lot of Sydney artists?

KM: Yes, I did, not only Sydney but New Zealand sculptors.

DE: Like [Andrew] Drummond?

KM: Yes.

DE: How did it come about that they came to Mildura?

KM: It went over the period when the Rainbow Warrior was sunk. There was going to be a French contingent coming and the New Zealanders kicked up a stink about it and it didn't happen.

DE: You showed first in 1970 at Mildura, I think. There were some cloud forms, I think.

KM: Yes, they were in fibreglass. I learnt to use it, and for years afterwards I never used it again because a number of my friends died.

DE: Using fibreglass?

KM: They used to use it. It is extremely dangerous. It's glass and very fine and once you turn it into dust, you can easily inhale it. But it has certain advantages. You can put it outside, it's light, you don't need a lot of equipment, and it's not expensive.

DE: It seemed to be heavily used for five to ten years and then not, probably for those reasons. You are starting to move around a lot, with your sculptures and performances, aren't you? You are exploring a wide terrain.

KM: That's partly from Duchamp. He was very influential, mostly in his beliefs rather than the works themselves. And one of his beliefs was not to repeat yourself, in order to maintain the uniqueness of the work. Perhaps I have a short attention span, or I don't like working in series. Now occasionally I find I do drawings in series but I've seen many artists who seem to produce the next show as a version of the last show and it's very good for establishing your signature for the saleability of your work but, as far as creativity, it seems to be a bit of a suck, frankly.

DE: I am sure that can be true, although I do think you can take a theme and a subject and decide to work it through a set of different relationships or perspectives.

KM: A printmaker can work in series, for instance.

DE: Working in series perhaps also touches on the idea of narrative which I wanted to ask you about with your work, because with performances, being temporal, there is the notion of narrative elements.

KM: Narrative is important, and particularly from a Danish heritage. One of our most important Danes is a storyteller, not a warrior [Hans Christian Andersen]. My father was a very good storyteller and I realised it is something of a trait.

DE: The Danish heritage. Has that become increasingly important to you? It has clearly been an activating thread from the beginning.

KM: Yes, it has been.

DE: And relates to your relationship with your father. You are from a very happy family.

KM: Yes.

DE: When you were doing *The seagull salesman* in 1971 you were still teaching, so was that a liberation in terms of pressure to sell your art, notwithstanding that it was using up time that perhaps you might have wanted to give to art?

KM: It was fairly commonsense. By that stage I was married with a child.

DE: So when you went back to RMIT, was that part-time?

KM: No, but full-time meant that you did work four days a week because the expectation was that you would also be a practitioner. If one taught and one didn't practise what one taught, there was something false about it.

DE: Donald Brook. In the late 60s and 1970s did he cross your horizon?

KM: No, not really.

DE: Clement Greenberg. You didn't participate in the Greenberg phenomenon? He came down to Melbourne.

KM: No.

DE: You didn't go up [to Sydney in 1968–69] and see Christo's *Wrapped coast*?

KM: I was aware of it, but no, I didn't go up. I just suppose at the time I just thought it was too big; the scale of it was a bit beyond me. Later when I saw some of his graphic work I realised where he was coming from and how it could work as a financial thing.

DE: There is a kind of gigantism attached to Christo.

KM: Compared to little birds coming to have a drink at the pond, it was a different world altogether.

DE: Ken Scarlett said that early on Margaret Plant, a Melbourne academic, really responded to your work, and she described some works, 'Polychromatics' in the 1967 show, as 'small surrealist forests of wooden balls in clear plastic age colours'. What happened to those?

KM: That was an interesting piece of ... I have forgotten who I was showing with at the time but I took it to Australian Galleries and Anne Purves was in charge at the time then, and I left it with them on consignment – it was in a Perspex box – and a couple of years passed and I didn't hear anything so I went in to see what had happened. They had no record of it and couldn't find it. I got quite frustrated and kept pushing and in the end they found it under the stairs, broken, and I was angry and expressed this to Anne and she said, 'You have to learn

to sweat blood, young man' – she had pearls and diamonds on etc – and I thought, 'Ugh'. So I didn't go back there for years. But after Powell Street [Gallery] folded and meanwhile Anne had retired and Stuart [Purves] had taken over ...

DE: What happened with Bruce Pollard, by the way? He just left for OS, didn't he?

KM: He was quite rude to me. He just left a message in my pigeonhole at work that I should find another gallery, that he wasn't interested in my work anymore.

DE: That was after *The seagull*?

KM: Yes, he didn't like it at all.

DE: I don't think I got you to tell me what the commission was that he got you to do for outside his gallery.

KM: It was a very tall sculpture with some multi-coloured abstract forms bursting out of the top of it, made out of – of all things – polyurethane foam.

DE: That foam's a nightmare.

KM: Yes. I wondered how this would go inside a condom. They just go into a sausage shape with a nipple at the end of it. I had a few accidents with that, but in the end they were cast in fibreglass, some of them were chromed. It was a quite colourful piece.

DE: How long was it there?

KM: At least a year. It was right out on the street.

KM: Like a sign for Pinacotheca?

KM: Yes.

DE: What happened to it?

KM: He took it with him to Waltham Place. It wasn't well looked after, never really put together again properly. I wondered what had happened to it in the end, but when I got the note in my pigeonhole I just wanted to get any stuff left and get out of there.

DE: But he seemed a good gallerist.

KM: He was but he wasn't interested in the selling, he wasn't interested in opening the door to a client. The artist had to do that. He didn't want to come down and do a deal with a client. He was only too happy to leave it to us artists to run, so we ran it as an artists cooperative for a while and we invited people like Gilbert and George to come and visit, and I got to know Mike Brown and Trevor Vickers; they became friends.

DE: And what about Ti Parks? Did you have much to do with him?

KM: I did. Ti and I used to play darts together. Getting back to Mildura days, Tony Coleing had a huge sculpture of a vase of flowers in steel. It moved. The flowers spun. They were cut out of steel and all painted blue. And this particular day he had been up on a ladder with a spray gun and it had been a windy day and the blue paint had gone all over him, and Ti used to wear velvet trousers with fur cuffs and had long hair and was very tall, and on this particular day, 'Let's go for a drink at the Working Man's bar', and we went into the bar and

inside we could hear 50 to 80 men talking and as soon as we walked in, dead silence. Then a voice from the back, 'It's Jesus and his disciples' [laughter]. I couldn't bear it. We had to walk away.

DE: The 1968 *24 point plug show*. Could you tell me a little about that? I think Clive Murray-White seems to have had quite a lot to do with it. Was it a political statement? Something I read said, 'Mounted in opposition to the Victorian Sculptors Society show'. Was the VSS any kind of force in 1968 anyway?

KM: No, and I don't think that's correct. It might have been something to do with 24 artists showing. There is no such thing as a '24 point plug'. *The field* was on at the NGV around that time. Some of those people showed at Pinacotheca who were firmly committed to abstract painting, which had no narrative content whatever, whereas there were a number of us interested in narrative content and we tended to show together. It would have been in that context.

DE: Was it a sell show?

KM: I can't even remember where it was.

DE: It was at Argus and we found a little pamphlet catalogue.

KM: Here is Alan Brown that I mentioned before, Warren Dennis, Ged White.

DE: Were you in any kind of discussion group with certain artists?

KM: Alan Brown and I talked a lot. When I met Trevor Vickers, it became more political. You can paint yourself out of the picture. This is what Alan Brown did. [Followed by a short discussion about Brown]

DE: The notion of allusion, an open-ended allusion that the viewer can take from your sculptures or performances. You don't fully explain the works, but they are allusion-rich. Is that important to you?

KM: I think it gives the right to people, the audience, to make the work come alive. Otherwise it's almost masturbatory. They are entitled to interpret something differently to what I intended to come out. That is partly the loose nature of symbolism. What does a bird symbolise, for example? That is more the side of it I am particularly interested in – how peculiarly different we are from birds and yet how similar we are. We have the same number of bones in our body as birds; all the bones are in the same place, just in different sizes, particularly our sternum is nowhere as big as the ones birds have.

DE: More similarities than with dogs or horses?

KM: Oh yes, dogs or horses don't have the same. [Brenda] Putnam wrote *The sculptor's way* – a bible [for me]. It's basically a book about how to make sculpture, early 20th century. [Looking for a bit on birds in the book] Anyway, she has been quite helpful.

[End]