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Interview with Brian Katz, 1998

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Recommended Citation

Columbia College Chicago, "Interview with Brian Katz, 1998" (2016). *An Oral History of Columbia College Chicago, 1997 -2004*. 43.

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Brian Katz

We're interviewing Brian Katz, it's the fourth of February, is that right, 1998...

All right, well, I guess the place to start is the circumstances that brought you here?

Well, I was a graduate student at the Institute of Design at IIT in Photography. There were very few of us. One of the other graduate students was a guy named Jim Newberry, who was teaching photography at Columbia College. I had no idea where Columbia College was at the time, or even if they really had a photography program, I vaguely knew somebody who taught here sometime. I wasn't really aware of what the place was. It had no reputation at all. And I co-taught a class with Jim at IIT one year, one semester. And we got along real well and he offered me a class at Columbia. He was teaching the beginning class, and there was another section that was opening up and he didn't want to teach it, and he asked me if I would be interested in teaching it. And I didn't know enough to say no. I said, "Yeah, what's there to lose?" I was freelancing as a photographer, I was doing some freelance cinematography in this camera assisted television production. I worked for a company that made television commercials. Right now I realize that it was the first non-union production company in Chicago. That is, a production company that wasn't associated with a huge corporation and was able to do things like take the camera off the tripod and shoot, which was unheard of in those days. So that was a very exciting time. We were

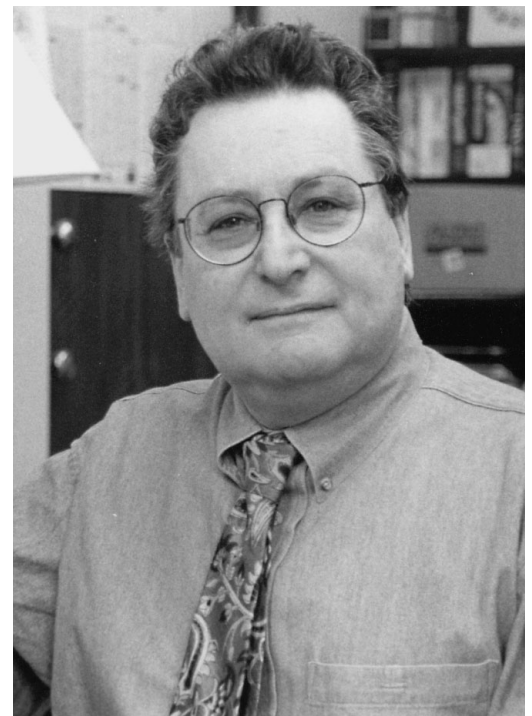
sort of inventing, to some extent, inventing modern television commercials, you know, today—although no one ever keeps those histories either.

So I took this class over and I had it on Friday afternoon, because we never would shoot on Friday afternoons because of the weekend. So Friday was always sort of a dead day so I would teach this class. You know, it was a very small school at the time, I could remember. The receptionist/phone operator/book-keeper, Janice Booker, her daughter still does books for the College, I could remember she was writing paychecks by hand, answering the telephone, and having a conversation with President Alexandroff all at the same time. And you know, you used to rush, when you got a paycheck you'd rush to the bank to cash it, you know, because the last couple always bounced. So you really had to make sure that you got there right away because there was just no money, there was just no money. And, you know, something started to happen and Photography started to become noticed. We had two or three Photo classes. And Newberry, I think, was a brilliant man. We had enough photo students so that he realized we could scrounge up enough pictures to put up a student show. And he got some money from Alexandroff to buy a matte board and some glass. And we printed photographs. I mean, the students took some good photographs but we didn't trust them to print them. We mounted them and we put everything together and it was a pretty good show. And we sent out a bunch of invitations and got a whole bunch of the photographic

community to come to Columbia College which was at that time, you know, pine floor of a warehouse building on Lake Shore Drive. And we had refreshments and, you know, it was kind of a party. And people were pretty surprised to see, "Gee, these kids are taking some pretty good pictures." And that's the first I can really remember of the actual community of the Photography Department starting to congeal.

Now, how many people were teaching photography when you started?

When I started, actually, the person who hired me was a guy named Joe Sterling. And Joe was a photographer some know in Chicago, and he was also doing commercial work. It was strange that the idea of art photographers as we know it today is different and everybody did commercial work. There was no stigma attached to going out and shooting a job. Aaron Siskind did commercial work, Arthur Seigel



did commercial work, you know, it was just a part of that world. But I think Joe's work was starting to be the main focus of his life and he wasn't very interested in teaching. He pretty much moved out of the picture and Newberry became nominally chair. I don't know when he actually became chair, at that time I don't think there were chairs. John Schultz was the chair of Fiction Writing and English, Thaine Lyman was the chair of Television but he had a full-time job at WGN so, you know, who else?

Do you know how far back, did these people talk about how far back that goes, the teaching of photography at Columbia?

Well, I don't know. I think that Joe Sterling might have, there was maybe some other people before him. At that time, there were—students took required courses. Everybody took photography and that's how you kept the curriculum. But everybody took English, everybody took Intro to Television, everybody took Radio. So, you know, we had a hundred students, so you had to pass them around, basically. The photo classes were mostly Television majors. Television was the big department at that time, and, you know, the students do the required courses, most of them are seniors because they put it off until the very last minute and now they're gonna graduate and they're taking their required courses. So, you know, they didn't want to buy a camera, they didn't want to get their hands dirty in the darkroom—it was not a great place to teach, by any means. But, as things happened, and I think it possibly, you know, around 1968 the, an Art Department started to develop out

of the Photography Department and the Photography courses started to become profitable. I mean, well, we did—interestingly enough, the photo program at Columbia is an outgrowth of the photo program at the Institute of Design. And it is the people who really started it, including Joe Sterling. We're IIT students but it was not a copy of the IIT program. It was really a reaction to it and it was very, very different. The Institute of Design, your freshman class in photography, you know, they took you in to the darkroom, said, "There's the darkroom. Go make pictures," and you were on your own. You know, maybe you could get a sophomore to show you how to use the enlarger. But depending on the teacher you got, there was no technical support. You were just expected to pick it up, you know.

Is there some reason for that?

Oh, they just weren't interested in the technical stuff. You know, they were interested in the art stuff, the theoretical and the picture making part of it. To some extent, some of the people teaching just didn't know enough about darkroom technique to get involved in any kind of in-depth discussion. They could do it, say, "Here, watch me, here's how you do it. Watch my hands." So you know, it was that kind of apprenticeship and actually you learned how to print, you know? People did, there were some people who made beautiful, beautiful pictures, but there was no method behind it. Now, what Columbia started to do was to start to put a method to it and to say, "This is comprehensible. We can teach people to do this. First you do this, then you do that," and to really make a process that, you know, people could understand—and particularly technical parts of it:

printing, film developing, that type of stuff. I mean, there are scientific principles behind it. You don't have to understand chemistry and physics but you have to understand the process. So in many ways, I think the idea of separating Photo I into Darkroom I into two separate issues—which I have to admit for the record was my idea, and I have the original proposal to that, which I will gladly donate to posterity, typos, misspellings, and all, you know, back before spellcheck. But the idea of separating the aesthetic issues from the technical issues, of having a class where you concentrated on darkroom technique and printmaking and making a view of the print and then another class where you talked about the aesthetics, the content, and not get the two things horribly mixed up. I think that's the notion behind separating Photo I and Darkroom. I think it's been a very successful model, like many of the models that Columbia came up with. You know, and I give Thaine Lyman a lot of credit; Al Parker also deserves a tremendous amount of credit. Columbia invented, without knowing they were inventing it, an educational process that is now known as the professional model of education. It didn't really have a name in those days and it wasn't really in the literature. It came into the literature as people with Ph.D.s in Education stated to notice it, started to apply it in places like health sciences, where it's very large now. Nurses are trained with a professional model. You know, what does a nurse need to know? What does a dietician need to know? And then you design your courses around those outcomes, those learning outcomes. And, you know, in some ways it's an outgrowth of WWII: What does a

bombardier need to know in an airplane? We've got sixteen weeks to get this guy into the air, what does he need to know? How do we get him? So it was that kind of really focused sort of thing. And then it worked extremely well, it really worked extremely well.

What led you to develop it?

Well, we didn't know any better, see? You know, we knew, basically, we knew that what we did in art school and what didn't work very well. None of us were really pleased with the process of education that we went through. And because there were no stakes at Columbia, you know, there was absolutely nothing to lose. It's like the Janis Joplin song, you know? "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose." If I lost this job it was like, "Oh gosh, we can't go out to dinner on Friday night because I got fired at Columbia." You know, it wasn't like our rent wasn't gonna get paid. I had another job to do that and virtually everybody did. And Mike was open to it. You know, he was never a great supporter of the American Establishment. So it's something you wanted to do, something different—fine, try it. If it doesn't work we'll change it. It was a very fast move kind of operation. And so we floated a Darkroom class and it worked

So you wrote up a proposal and gave it to Mike Alexandroff?

I think I did. I don't know how we did it. We had probably some kind of loose committee structure. I don't know exactly, it got changed from the original in, I think, 1972 or 1973. It got modified but, you know, eventually it got adopted. And it's some semblance to what we're doing still.

Tell me about the teaching of photography in the late '60s. The Institute of Design, was there other teaching of photography?

Yeah, there was. You could take photography at the Institute of Design, you could take it at the Art Institute from Institute of Design graduates: Barbara Crane, mostly the Art Institute's faculty. And that was it in Chicago. Nationwide, there was [RIT], which was very technical. There was MIT which was a mystical kind of Zen Buddhist approach to life, you know, as much as photography, which Eric just laughed at. And in California there were the followers of Edward Weston, the students still looking for his tripod marks in the sand at Point Lobo so they could set their camera up and take, you know, the same film.

And among people who worked as photographers in Chicago, did they all go to school for this, did they pick it up?

No, no, there really wasn't a way to go to school. The Institute of Design really flourished, you know, Maholy Nagy came from the Bauhaus in the mid '30s, '33. Hitler closed the Bauhaus and, you know, he tried several times in Chicago to start a school that was the new Bauhaus, eventually the Institute of Design, which went through several incarnations. I mean, it was in the Walgreen's on Chicago Avenue and Lake Shore Drive for a while, second floor above the Walgreen's. Then it moved to the building Excalibur is in, the Chicago Historical Society. It eventually ended up at IIT but they had to see whether at the time it was a mistake, strange place for it. You know, there were a lot of photographers, most photographers at the time were self-taught, working photographers. But the wonderful thing about the Institute

is they would bring these people in. You know, if somebody was doing... You know, somebody who did fur photography would come in and teach a seminar How to Photograph Texture. A number of commercial photographers, and that's how they worked. There was no art photography, really. I mean, there were a few people like Man Ray but they were, probably Man Ray did commercial work—I don't know. I know for sure Aaron Siskind did, picking up a few extra bucks. So...

So when Columbia began, in the teaching of photography, Columbia expanded a little bit. This was pretty huge, not just a new approach but a relatively small field.

Yeah, there were a few graduate students and a few undergraduate students at The Art Institute. I mean, that was always a small program. Painting and sculpture made it the school that it is today. And so, and the problem with The Institute of Design is that you had to get into IIT, you know, which is not an easy school to get into. You had to pass their entrance requirements to get in, which was quite a filter and really discouraged a lot of people.

When did Columbia, when did people start taking photography courses at Columbia?

I think it had to do with, probably, the sort of euphoria of the late '60s, '68, '69. There was a certain kind of missionary zeal, you know, in the Photography Department. There was a great deal of enthusiasm and I think that infected a lot of people. I mean, Columbia was a very enthusiastic place. At that period of time, the late '60s and through the '70s, it was a very enthusiastic

place in every department. I think people felt like they were making a difference in the fields that they loved, whether it was television or radio, film. And I think that, you know, the media in Chicago are so full of Columbia people, most of whom never graduated. Unfortunately we can't even call them alumni because they came, they took a few classes, you know, they got an internship and that was it, they never came back...

When did the Photography Department start teaching [writing] courses? I mean, it's quite a process of growth, I take it, from the two basic photography courses to all the other...

Yeah, as the courses started to, you know, to increase, we had Photo I and then we had Photo II and then we offered a color course. Jim Newberry brought his enlarger down because it could do color and that's how we started the color program. He brought his own equipment in and had four or five students who could do color—who he picked by hand to let them use his enlarger. It had to have been after I was full-time because I was working at graduation, one of the first graduations I went to—don't mean graduation, registration, sorry. And we were sitting at the registration and it was sort of a slow time. And President Alexandroff came and sat down next to Jim and he said, "How's Photo doing?" And he said, "They're practically closed" Mike Alexandroff said, "Have you turned anybody away?" "Well, no, but we're about to. You know, there's hardly any place to put..." And he said, "Would a new darkroom help?" "Yeah, it sure would." We built a darkroom. Between that moment and the first day of class

there was another darkroom built in some space that we rented, and we put up some walls and threw some plumbing together, built some wooden seats, slapped a coat of epoxy on them and we had another darkroom. That was the kind of agile planning we were able to do in those days. That's an actual term, agile.

Agile planning?
Agile planning, yeah.

It's a Columbia term?

No, it's an actual term in the world of strategic planning. We're trying to make a five-year strategic plan but try to make it loose enough so that you can maneuver during those five years should an opportunity like this occur. And Mike knew loose planning like nobody else. He was a genius at being agile, really. And that's how the place was able to go from nothing, really, seventy-five, a hundred students. Interview Bert and find out how many students were in his graduating class, very few. And it's not that we've lost the ability to do actual planning in the new process, because it's just such a big boat to turn around.

Do you miss the small size of Columbia then?

Oh yeah. I miss a lot about Columbia. Columbia's not the same place that it was. It was an alternative to the college education for a while and now I think we've lost some of that... being alternative kind of, you know, another liberal arts college where you can take some photography courses and take a course in television and... I don't think that the missionary zeal is as powerful. Or maybe it was just craziness, maybe it was the times.

Could it have been where you were personally?

Yeah, and that the times were conducive to that kind of excessive promotion.

Do you think that size is the reason for that?

No, no. I think it was just an extraordinary turn of events that brought a bunch of people together who—although they didn't agree with each other. I mean, educationally, the Photo Department and the TV Department were as far apart as you could imagine. I mean, their theories of education were very, very different...

What were they?

Oh, I think, you know, the Television Department was very directed towards getting a kid a job in the industry. And the Photo Department was probably more concerned with aesthetics and somehow trying to perfect this Institute of Design model of someone who could earn a living in photography and make art and do all of these sort of renaissance things. You know, going into a portrait in the morning and then go photograph a building in the afternoon and then, you now, do art in the evening and not see a conflict in those things. You can see photography as a way of expressing yourself, making a living, making a picture that people in a magazine can look at it and understand and get some communication. When I say the Photo Department was this sort of in reaction to the Institute of Design, it was in reaction to the teaching methodology of the Institute of Design, the very much into the philosophical underpinnings of the Bauhaus and the Institute of Design. And so is the Art Department in many ways. Although people have come from

all over, you know, there is still that notion of the foundation year, people sharing a common set of skills in the beginning and then building on those skills and going off into their specialization. But, you know, that's an Institute of Design notion.

When did you become full-time? Some time in the early '70s, and then Jim Newberry tried to fire me at one time. I appealed that to the ERC, which was the first governance body of the College. The elected representatives of the chairperson and that's who—the full-time faculty were chairpeople so there were not very many faculty other than chairs. So, and that appeal was upheld and I was not fired. That was in 1973 or '74. There were all kinds of half-time positions, quarter-time positions and people started to move in and out of full-time. It wasn't as cut and dry as it is now.

That's interesting.

Yeah, if somebody got a bunch of freelance work they would not be full-time for a while and then they'd appear again. You know, it was kind of a little more amorphous than it is now.

Do you mind if I ask you about the firing?

Oh, no, not at all. Jim was a little disturbed. He, I think that he wanted to run everything; he wanted total control over everything. You know, he just couldn't have it. You just can't have, you know, people in positions of responsibility with no authority. And so it became a question of, you know, and he made some allegations, just paths that crossed.. We remain, you know, acquaintances afterwards. I mean, there was no really terrible hard feelings, we had

worked together for a long time. It was just one of those employment disagreements. It was resolved, I think, without any hard feelings.

So as a part-timer, up until you became full-time, you were teaching on Fridays, or did that change?

Well, yeah, pretty much because there are certain days you don't schedule a film shoot. You don't schedule on Friday because you're up against the weekend. If you have rain, you can't rent anything, so the weekend is sort of dead. So I would teach one class on Friday, basically a Photo I class. At a certain point, I realized that I had to make a commitment to one or the other. And I decided, at the time, that probably my personality was more suited towards teaching than it was towards the business, and I think I made the right decision, or I hope I did. If I had stayed in the film business I'd probably be dead. That was a lot of pressure.

So you were in TV?

Television commercials. And so actually, I taught in the Film Department. I taught a lighting class in the Film Department. But that was not that unusual that people would, you know, kind of move around. The Art Department, I taught a course called Making Things with Hand Tools in the Art Department... You know, the 3-D Design program grew out of that Hand Tools course. We needed work benches so Barry Burlison, who was the chair of the Art Department, and I came in and worked with Jake Caref, the school's carpenter, and built workbenches between semesters.

When was this?

This was in '73, '74, '75. And some of those workbenches are still up in the Art Department. We did a good job. I mean, being full-time faculty in those days meant that, you know, you had to keep a pipe wrench in a drawer in your desk. There just wasn't the kind of support that there is now. You look around, who's gonna fix this? Guess.

Did the College own the building?

They rented space. This was the first building that they bought. When we moved to this building which was, when was it, '76?

I would say '79 but I'm foggy on the numbers and dates.

Yeah, I'm not sure, that may have been—no, I think it was '76. I think we moved in '76 and '77. It was a two-year thing because the Photo Department stayed in the old building for a year while there were classes here, you know. The students had classes there and classes here. So we were over there for at least a year before they built this darkroom.

What other courses did you teach, an interesting variety...

Well, yeah, I had always been a proponent of the professional program in photography. And I always thought that students ought to be able to earn a living as a photographer as well as do their art. So, when John Mulvany came as chair of the department, we started to talk about a professional program. We had had a commercial course taught by various commercial photographers in the city but there really wasn't any focus. It was a course or two that people took, but that was sort of it. There was no preparation. We started a course

called Basic Studio where people learned photographic studio techniques, but—John put together a committee of Peter LeGrand, Chuck Reynolds, and myself to really look at the professional program and put something together. And we came up with what is now Photo III, which is a studio course that deals with introduction to view camera, introduction to lighting and a little bit of locational lighting; that sort of thing. So it's really the precursor to all the other studio programs where people get their foundation of working actually in the studio, to control light, that sort of thing. So, and really putting together a commercial program where students had structure, you know, but they weren't real good with food photography and fashion photography and all of that. But my real involvement with that was really with Photo III. I taught Commercial a couple of times.

You taught Commercial, you taught Making Things with Hand Tools, you taught Darkroom...

Yeah, I actually, my other course no longer really exists in the sense that it originated was a Darkroom Workshop II, which started out as a remedial Darkroom. If you didn't quite get it in Darkroom I then, you know, "Why don't you take this other darkroom class and maybe you'll figure out how to print in one more semester?" And as that became less and less necessary, that is, as Photo I or Darkroom I curriculum evolved and we really did figure out how to teach people to print, then the second semester of class became sort of a catchall. And I started to think about what it could become and came up with a curriculum about testing film speed, about really a systematic approach, a

really sort of chemistry/physics approach to photography, which became Darkroom II for a long time. [It] was a required course in the department. And kids would actually write lab reports. We did really sort of scientific little lab reports on a film test. And it wasn't like, "I really like this film because it's really cool." It was like: purpose, procedure, results, conclusion sort of thing, and supporting material and that kind of thing. It was a very cut and dry sort of science course that I thought was really necessarily needed in the department. And then it—over the years, the folks in the department seemed to think it was not as necessary and has now become an elective course. But it's no longer a required course so it's possible for someone to graduate with a degree in Photography and really maybe not even know what's in developer. I'm not particularly happy to see that happen but other things have come up. I taught a Digital Photography course for the second semester of Photography. Again, Chuck Reynolds and Peter LeGrand, we were a pretty good team, we did a lot of good problem solving together. You know, and it became clear that digital was gonna just knock photography right out of the water. We went and saw the machine at some color separation house that cost seven million dollars and, you know, would do anything that you wanted to do with a photograph. Of course now you can do it with a two thousand dollar computer and six hundred dollars worth of software but, you know, that was ten or twelve years ago and we saw that and we said, "Whoa, that looks like the future to me." And Pete said, "Well, yeah, but it cost six million dollars." "That's today, wait." So we started

the first digital program, put together a lab for fifty thousand dollars. You know, we have twelve or thirteen computers and a color printer and scanner. And, you know, people said, "Hell, you can't do this without high-end Macintosh machines." And, you know, we did it with off the shelf, 486 computers. Again, you know, give credit for those things. Now we've got a multimillion-dollar lab with high-end Macintoshes and people still think we can't do it.

Well this is one of the things, isn't it, that makes the College a bigger boat than it used to be?

Um-hmm. There's now a huge investment in stuff and that's—yeah. And there's psychological investment. I mean, the Photo Department just built a graduate darkroom that's a wet black and white darkroom. I don't know why. If I was a graduate student I don't know that I'd be wanting to learn a 20th century process. I don't know what the future of that is.

Separate from the undergraduate students?

Yeah, exactly. I don't know what really the thinking there was.

Who were some of the people you remember best at Columbia over the years?

Oh gosh, you know, Harry Bouras is of course the most memorable character that anybody ever met.

Tell me about Harry Bouras.

Well, Harry, he was a brilliant man, maybe one of the smartest people I've ever met. Sadly, misdirected in some way. He was a terrific artist and somehow people don't know that. You know, he was a great thinker. He didn't write enough for anybody to read what he had to say. I hope that his WFMT programs are preserved on

tape somewhere, you know, an archive of his thinking. That's about the only place it would exist. Harry was just, he was always just a lot of fun, you know. He was an iconoclast, he was sarcastic, he was outrageous. He defined—in many ways—the spirit of Columbia at the time because he could get away with anything, you know. Us nobodies had to watch what they said but Harry could get away with anything. He could stand up in front of a class and say, "Imagine, now, if semen was bright green and indelible." You know, and not get in trouble for raising that issue in an Art History class or an Art Appreciation class, you know?

When did he teach here?

Oh, all through the '70s and the '80s; pretty much right up until he passed away. Oh God, you know, the characters that came through here, I have to stop and think. Larry Heinemann in the Fiction Writing Department...

Before digital transformations of photographs, right?

Yeah, but it's always been the case that photographs...

Oh, you were talking about characters and memorable people.

Yeah, well Thaine Lyman, I think, deserves a lot of credit that he has never gotten from the Photography Department. Because you know, when Photography started to grow, the big department at Columbia was Television. Television was the prestige department; he was chair of that department. And I think he had the wisdom to see that, you know, a rising tide raises all the ships, and really supported the Photo Department in its initial years when there wasn't much money. You know, I think he was a

real advocate of a strong Photography program and did a lot to, you know, funnel resources that he probably desperately needed for his program. I can remember when the television camera was a cardboard box with toilet paper in front and people pretended, you know, pushed it around on casters on the floor and pretended it was a camera. But, you know, he realized it was an expensive initial outlay to buy enlargers and do plumbing and all of that and supported it. So I think he deserves a lot of credit. You know, the Film Department people have just been great. You know, Chap Freeman and Michael Rabiger, they put together a world-class Film department without looking at historical models. They put together something that really made sense from all kinds of perspectives. They still kept that functional filmmaking aspect of it, it never became theoretical. The emphasis in the Photography Department has always been about making pictures, the Film Department is about making films. And they're different than thinking about pictures and writing or talking about pictures or film. Although that's important, the actual doing of it... I mean, it was interesting to see the Mary Blood display in the library, the founder of the original College; the original motto of learning by doing. You know, we haven't come very far from that. You know, I think that she would not be disappointed to see what Columbia College has turned into.

How would you describe the mission of the College?

Well, you know, of the most memorable characters, certainly Mike Alexandroff has to be the

most memorable. I mean, he has to be the patriarch, the founding patriarch of Columbia College. And so much about the place reflects his personality, his craziness, you know, everything about him—it still does and will, you know, for a long time. And, you know, Mike used to say at graduation—incidentally, one of my great archives: I recorded every graduation speech that Mike gave surreptitiously. I had a tape recorder, I'd bring it to graduation every year religiously and record Mike's graduation speech. Because people thought it was the same speech. But as you listen to them all you realize that there are subtle changes between one year and the next. And so, I have an archive of those all through the '70s until he retired. I also recorded all of the Contemporary Trends, the lecture speeches during the—we had a lecture series during the '70s and early '80s. So I have tape recording of...

What is that?

Well, that's a lecture series that the Photo Department has been doing for probably almost twenty years, where they bring in three or four nationally known photographers every semester and they give a free lecture, open to the public, and then they do workshops for our students. And for years I recorded the lectures.

That's a treasure.

Yeah, it's a treasure and I don't know if anyone's interested in doing anything with it, but I'm gonna sit on it. I also have a lot of tape of Art Simpson talking about the Institute of Design in the early days.

Oh yeah?

Yeah. He was their first photo student. He talks about what it was

like right after World War II in 1946, when he came. But I was talking about Mike's graduation speech. One of the things that he used to say, which I thought was so apt, was that we're a college without a clear idea of what we are about. Well, at some point he stopped saying that and I thought it was a sad loss because, you know, one of the great things is that we didn't have a clear idea what we were. We had a pretty good notion of what we weren't about but, you know, we were struggling to find out what we were about. And that was the exciting part of it.

When did he stop saying that?

I don't know. If somebody wants to do the research in the tapes you could certainly—I think about the same time he stopped referring to Attica. His students are like, "What's Attica?"

That's great. I'll have to listen to a bunch of these.

I'd be happy, if you want to transcribe them. There are many hours of Alexandroffian prose.

Well, let me go to the mission, maybe we covered it, I don't know. The mission of the College, what is it?

What is it now?

Well, yeah, and how has it changed?

I think that it, you know, it's evolving now and I don't know that I like the way it's evolving. I think that Mike's idea was that everybody deserves a shot and it was a kind of Jeffersonian notion that everybody deserves a shot. You want to be a film director? Take a chance, come see. Maybe you'll make it; maybe you won't. And we're moving towards something where we're guaranteeing success for everybody and then blaming ourselves should this person fail to become a film

director: Oh, where have we failed, what have we done wrong? Where, in fact, very few are going to be chosen for that, and I think that's a real danger. You know, we start to take the responsibility that is inherently the student's responsibility, and then blame ourselves for the students not succeeding.

When maybe in a sense they do?

Well, yeah, I don't know. I think that the notion of open admissions is that everybody deserves a chance, not that everybody is entitled to success. You know, some people are gonna take their chance and fail. It's not our fault because if they aren't willing to do the work and if they're not willing to put in the effort, whatever, don't have the talent—well, talent counts for the smallest part of the equation. The talent part is way overrated. It's perseverance and hard work.

And being able to do it while juggling other jobs...

Yeah, exactly, and making the sacrifices that are necessary to be made. You know, spending the first five or ten years living off a shoestring because that's what you have to do in a field like photography. If you're gonna establish yourself, you know, you just have to be ready to do that. People who aren't, don't. People—now, we've been at this long enough that we can look at our history and say, "Who was out there? Who succeeded?" And we look at those people and say, "What were they like as freshmen?" Well, many were not super talented, they were certainly hard workers. But talent, I think, often goes unrecognized. People who are talented, you know, it seems easy to them, they value it, whatever. How many great musicians have perfect pitch, how many just plugged away and made it without perfect pitch? I'd like to

know. You know, I'd really like to know. I had a friend in high school who had perfect pitch and incredible musical ability and he could never get beans with it, you know. He just didn't value it, it was so easy for him, "Can't everybody do this?"

To be a musician or to be anything else, it takes a lot of different kinds of talent as well as a lot of different kinds of hard work.

Yes. And sure, we can't supply all those things.

What do you think about the mission—historically now—the mission of the College in relation to American society?

I think we predicted, at one point, we predicted a trend. You know, that media was going to become extremely important at a time when, you know, it seemed like there was no access to media. How do you become a television producer? No one had a clue as to how you'd go about doing that, you know? And Columbia said, "Well, here's how you do it. You take these courses, you do your internship, and you meet some people and you work your butt off and eventually you'll become one of the names that roll by in the end credits that we see all the time on television." And it gave kids who didn't have family connections, it gave them a way to get into the media. And I think we were way ahead of our culture, American culture, perceiving that and, you know, opening that door for people. Now I think, you know, that's an established, "Yeah, of course, that's how you do it." You can do it at fifty colleges now. You can take Media Studies anywhere. And so it's not a big deal now. And I think we're searching, we're floundering around searching for what our identity is, are we

gonna be just another second rate liberal arts college that, you know, tortures freshmen until they drop out and, you know? We went to school, right? My freshman year of college I was in a huge auditorium full of other freshmen and some administrator was standing in front, he said, "Look at the person on your left. Now look at the person on your right. If you graduate, those two people won't." You know, and I looked at the bozo on my left and the one on my right and said, "Tough luck, guys." And he was right, neither of them graduated. So, that was their plan: We're gonna flunk two-thirds of you guys out of here. And, you know, they were right out in front with it. We're moving in that direction where were gonna have to say, "Many are called, few are chosen."

Has your personal vision of education changed?

Well, I'm not teaching anymore, I'm working... So I think, yeah it has.

Because you're working here?

No, I think I'm, I don't know. I mean, I've taught an awful lot of people how to develop film, an awful lot of people. At some point I realized it was time to let somebody else teach people how to develop film. I had done it. So...

But I mean, as far as an administrator, in a sense your vision of education is arguably at least as, if not more, significant than someone out in the trenches teaching Darkroom I. If you were to go back and do it, would you want to go about it differently?

No, I don't think so. I mean, I still think that people learn things by doing them. I think, you know, that people learn things that they're interested in, and that you

can provide the connection between all kinds of intellectual worlds if you make that connection through something the student is interested in. Students will learn how to read when you give them something to read that they're interested in. You know, if somebody is interested in taking pictures, and that's the hook that gets them to read a book about the history of photography, and that gets them interested in the history of their country, and that gets them interested in the history of the world-well, fine, you've accomplished your goal. You didn't do it in the traditional sense by teaching history by starting with the cavemen but I mean, I think that's probably part of the problem with historians. They already understand the big picture so they can't connect to the kid who doesn't have a clue. I think, you know, the idea of letting someone explore something that they're interested in and then using that as a means of exploring the world is certainly valid. And, you know, I'm not sure that that's the direction we're moving in. Another direction, a more scholastic oriented direction right now. People go through an educational process, it's more like what we went through.

To some extent, Columbia's sort of established the norm...

We could and that's, I think, you know, if there's something that really makes me sad it's that. We could have been, "We could have been a contender." We, you know, nobody knows that we demanded the professional model of education, we're not in the literature. Somebody needs to do a Ph.D. about Columbia and to make the world aware of the fact that we invented this stuff without any

model. I mean, we just did it on guts. And nobody knew how to teach Radio Broadcasting. Columbia invented that. We got a bunch of smart people together and said, "Here's what kids need to know," and we made courses about it, as they did in Photography and Film. There was no path to follow so they sort of hacked out a path and some were dead-ends and saying, "Oh God, that was a terrible course, what were we thinking?" Well, we dropped it, went on to something else. But there was that creative experiment and they tried to figure out a new way of doing it. And, you know, I don't hear those kinds of things being discussed, so I don't think that there is that same kind of, you know, that same kind of passion about figuring out new ways. And now it has to go through this committee and that committee and be approved by this office and that office. So it's not as easy to do those things because there's just more steps. And the culture's changed, you know. Accreditation, our first accreditation, the people who came for the site visit were so blown away. I think they all wanted to teach here, "Wow, what a cool place. Look, it's in a warehouse! Look, that kid isn't wearing shoes! What's that funny smell?" You know, it was just a wacky place and they didn't know what to make of it, by and large.

Was being accredited in any way a problem? I'm wondering if this is...

Well, it forced us to a whole bunch of compromises. Once we started taking federal money we had to abide by federal guidelines. You know, it used to be, Friday afternoon there was a line of people in the elevator...

