

INTERVIEWER: Good morning. We're at the home of Professor and Mrs. Gyorgy Kepes in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Professor Kepes is an artist, educator, author, founder and first director of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT. Twenty-one years ago, I received a grant to visit Professor Kepes at MIT and learn more about the center. I did not come then for a number reasons. However, I am here now, and it's indeed a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance, Professor Kepes.

This interview is about-- or the reason for the interview at this time, is that the California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, California is having a show at the Student Gallery directed by Dr. Jeanne LaBarbera, and since you were unable to visit us for the opening of the show to present your ideas, I was asked to come here and, in some way, document some words that you may have for the audience or the community in California.

The show is about the wedding of art and science in service to society, to community. Originally, I first heard of your dream when I read some articles in a magazine, or a couple of magazines, and my interest is in knowing what were your original intentions, your dreams, in terms of goals and objectives? Would you just elaborate on that?

KEPES: I will try but, as you know, all this kind of confrontation with one's inner realities in outside world. It's not an easy assignment, but maybe I should start with a mini autobiography. I grew up as a child in Hungary, and my involvement with life was a hardship of life. I grew up after the first World War, and it had many both tragedies and hopes.

Usually when you are seeing very dark, then you have at least dreams of much light. And so that was my own life, always confronted with the sadness or the tragedies of social and personal life. And I was hoping to compensate for the missing part by dreaming about much better world than I had.

So my interest in art was not just a personal subjective kind of thing, anger about a misplaced existence, but a dream about an optimum existence. And so since my early youth, I had always Utopian dreams, how to converge whatever have in this life and utilize all means and all tools and all equipment into realizing a richer, better, more honest life than we can have without this extra scaffolding of existence.

As I know now for many years of practice, my English is still Hungarian, and if you feel I derailed from legibly understanding, please interrupt me and ask new questions. So for the time being, that should be it.

INTERVIEWER: Originally, when I mentioned 21 years ago, I applied for a grant to come to visit you, my primary reason for that is I too am extremely interested in art as a means of raising social consciousness. My parents came from Mexico as farm workers, and I grew in Kansas, and when I read of your intentions of bringing about social change, that attracted me extremely, because that still remains center-most in my efforts and artistic efforts.

How were you specifically, through your center, going to resist or raise social and environmental consciousness? That is, an ecological awareness. What were the processes that you were going to pursue.

KEPES: Maybe, like everybody, when one has a distant goal has to set priorities, and when I had this Utopian hope to create conditions which will optimize one's existence, I had to recognize that in a certain way we are shaped by our environment. And so my priority was to create an artistic awareness of the positive and negative aspect of our environment.

I was fully aware I was an addict of William Morris and Ruskin and 19th century dreamers, and I knew that living and growing up in 19th century slums had some role in setting the goals of these great world thinkers or dreamers in a world which has richer environment.

So my own goals and dreams were shaped by these notions that to be a full human being you have to have the conditions which let you grow up fully. And so my early dreams were-- and I use the term again-- to find living condition which optimizes one's awareness of what is wrong and try to set targets of what could be better and could be richer.

I was an addict of William Morris and Ruskin. In this time, it was a rather neglected area of dreaming, and so I tried to find goals which were starting from Ruskin, Morris and Carlisle and some of the 19th century dreamers and tried to go not beyond but try to reinforce their dreams with greater honest reality.

So my interest was to create with education or through the education and art and living condition, which seems to project one's neglected dreams, which was to create an environment which gives an individual human the chance to be fully human. And so that's in a nutshell-- in a cracked nutshell-- my early dreams.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned in one of your writings that coming to MIT and the Harvard area that the cultural times were right for you to establish this center. What do you mean by the cultural times were right for the establishment of your center?

KEPES: I'm always concerned when I'm confronted with my own statements, because one dramatizes, exaggerates beliefs and conditions. What I meant that it's right, that we were rather dislocated from our better self, and one sees light only in darkness. I know it sounds paradox, but it's not my paradox. It was Master-- or Meister Eckhart, the great 13th century German dreamer who said so. And what he may have meant, at least as I can see, was that you cannot really see your clearer self without seeing the negation of your best self.

I thought after the Second World War and all these bloody difficulties what my generation, or all those in my generation, had to go through has to be corrected, and the best way of correcting was-- or could have been-- if we face what we don't have from the full humanness. And the full humanness is that we have all the intensity and richness of individual life without neglecting social obligation.

That seems to be the crisis or critical aspect of our existence. The 19th Century Project had a great deal of honest big dreams, and these big dreams were derailed, and the reality was far from these dreams, and as you are coming from Mexico-- did you grow up in Mexico?

INTERVIEWER: No. My parents--

KEPES: I see.

INTERVIEWER: --are From Mexico. I was born in the body of Kansas City.

KEPES: I see.

INTERVIEWER: But the practices, the cultural practices of my parents were prevalent-- dominant-- in our home.

KEPES: In any case, maybe through the reflected light, you could sense the richness of the Mexican small scale of existence--

INTERVIEWER: Definitely.

KEPES: --so when you formed you own dreams, these dreams where partly woven around these early experiences, what you partly got or inherited from your parents.

I had a little similar condition, that I had my own childhood dreams of a rich life, which was fresh air, blue sky, honest human relationship. And in this condition I recognized when I came to MIT that we have all the means or tools, but we miss essentially the heart of it. And so my target when I came to MIT had to be modified, because I saw the means, but I observed as the hard targets, we are not anymore there.

INTERVIEWER: I believe that that is what has always-- in reading your writings, your books, articles-- that core, that sense that you just described of more simpler ways, more a sense of community in your home life in Hungary and in my home life in Kansas, although it was Kansas, it was still a Mexican household. We practiced our sense of community, a togetherness.

I'm from a large family, and those are the things that have, to this very day, in reading your material, has always corresponded, has kept me connected, where I have learned so much from your writings and practiced using your theories to underpin my work. Again, the core of my work deals with bringing about social change. As you can see, I am a person of color, and we are in this country where there are these kinds of problems. As a matter of fact-- having to do with color of people.

You established the Center of Advanced Visual Studies in the mid '60s-- 1967. This was in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, to be followed by the various movements of free speech at UC Berkeley-- University of California Berkeley. Then, of course, followed the environmental movement-- not necessarily in that order-- the Women's Movement. I personally am a member of the United Farm Workers and attempting to bring about a better life, a stronger life, more equity in this country.

Do you have any specific instances in the work that has been done by the Fellows who you brought to your institute or any of the work done by others that directly deals with social change? Can you think of any specific instances?

KEPES: Not in the Center, but in the family. Our daughter, who is now actually involved in environment issues, she is a partly moving force of the urban garden movement here. She went to the South during the difficult times, and she was arrested, and she went through the whole kind of feeling, the full strengths of the trouble. And as we are a very closely knit family, I felt very strongly what she felt or she felt strongly with my wife and myself. So I always had a strong sense of the underdog or the difficulties.

Also, in my own experiences, I grew up-- born and grew up in the-- if one can call it growing up-- in the early part of the century, and I felt a great deal of the ideas, what was expressed in-- I'm sure you know the music of Bela Bartok, and I felt also a great sympathy and involvement in the ideas that art has a major role in transforming the inner self. And we saw the inner transformation seems to me not very hopeful to transform the outside world.

So my own commitment was the transformation or hoping to contribute to the transformation of the inner self and hopefully the future with the quality of experiences, to shift gears and try to mobilize the social forces to make changes in the outside world. And I assume everything is basically interconnected, and whatever I did in my own life, it was always not integrated but interwoven by the opposite factors. Inner life is external world, and the external world is inner world.

INTERVIEWER: That's extremely interesting, because as I sit here and look around this room, all the art, the artifacts that I see here, are artifacts that are interwoven or a part of life, integrated with life. The crafts, the rugs, the weavings, this type of thing. And at the same time, I notice a complete absence of so-called modern art that some people look at as being artist commodity. You have art here as ideology, the facet of ideology, but I don't see the artist commodity. Is this the reason, in other words, that you actually feel so strongly about it?

KEPES: It is very difficult to point the finger on a single factor which makes one's life values, but I feel-- and my wife has the same need-- that whatever we have around us should be radiating this quality of life which is coming from a committed existence. And somehow these simple art forms, the honest craft forms, have this inner radiation on the positive sense, at least for us.

We have this Peruvian fabric, which is maybe almost a thousand years old, and I think the great pieces of art-- I don't really know the book of Boas-- Franz Boas, *Primitive Art*-- I learned from this book a great deal about Peruvian art, and so whatever I have around here is a conglomeration of everything which added to my own sensory gratification.

INTERVIEWER: In one of your writings you mentioned, Professor Kepes, the idea that you and your colleagues many times felt frustrated that ideas were often clipped, that you would like to see these ideas fulfilled. I suppose what that meant was that some of the students or others would have a seed that looked as though it was about ready to bloom, give blossom into something powerful that dealt with ecological consciousness, and then it perhaps died out or was translated as commodity or some kind of a product for making money, et cetera. And the objective of your center, your dream, was again perhaps centered on this social environmental change consciousness.

I know, because of my own personal experience, that California which is incidentally about 50% people of color who are very interested in social change, equity, piece of the American dream, et cetera, et cetera, would find-- particularly the artists-- your writings that you did 21 years ago and beyond that extremely important to their work now, the theories to underpin their work in the broader, large-scale context. That is, the urban environment. I believe that because of the present social environmental crisis and what we know as the paradigm shift in terms of design, that is, the paradigm shift that is viewing the world again as an organism rather than as a mechanism, the way we began to view it right after the Industrial Revolution, that your work will receive extreme amount of-- how should I say-- popularity, importance, in the work of these artists that are now facing the future and must, in some way, confront this abyss that we are at at this moment.

California Polytechnic State University, which is located halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, is extremely interested in that. It is an environmental center where the people are very seriously concerned about their environment. What are your thoughts on that? How do you see this? I know that you have not visited-- or lived in California, that is. You've lived from time to time but--

KEPES: Now just that I fully understand the question, that I answer the real question. You want to know what my response is to the present situation in California. I have to be what the Romans call what is a future seer to give it a valid answer.

I think, as far as I can judge it from here, California has an incredibly complex population and more mobile than any other part of this country or maybe any other part of the world. And consequently the forecasting of what is the major social task and reading the present situation, one has to have a clearer sense of living, and maybe I put it another way.

In order to give a valid comment of observation, I have to know more about present California, and whatever I know from my very last trip, which was maybe 20 years ago-- whenever it was-- and some of the newspaper comments, which is always just echoes of echoes and never has a clear notion of reality, but my guess is that California has an incredibly complex social situation. And the fact that you, coming from a Mexican family could be what you are, it implies that the potentials are immense.

In the middle of this kind of turmoil, what we live in late 20th century, you have maybe a better chance to sense the pulse of life than any other part of the world. It's was not a most lucid comment but, in any case, the feeling was in.

INTERVIEWER: Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo is very well known for the students, the young scientists, engineers, et cetera, that they are producing. And it seems to me that by wedding those efforts of technology with art, whose function it is to alter consciousness, would not only broaden their perspectives, allow them to contribute to the welfare of society but, as you mentioned here in our conversation, give them more humanness-- not exactly in those words that you put them-- but a moreness to their humanity.

I am hoping that-- and right now it's happening-- that the liberal arts are being emphasized, are being encouraged, but I have a sense that some of the students in the sciences may not quite appreciate what does the liberal arts have to give them. How does it broaden them? How does it give more power, make them more socially and environmentally responsible?

KEPES: I fully understand what you refer to, because when I came to MIT, had a similar feeling. MIT was, during the time I came, the very end of the Second World War, it was really just the arsenal of the world. It had a tremendous competency in producing intelligent weapons without heart.

So when I came I was practically shocked, but I was lucky enough because I had a few good friends at MIT administration, and I discovered that they are with us in the sense they feel also a great social loyalty, and they are seeking like you or I was seeking for implementing this loyalty in real life and not just dreaming and projecting sometime Utopian dreams but try to find the real means to bring it to concrete social reality.

I still feel that a course like yours and mine or MIT had an immense-- and still has an immense role-- in piloting not just the knowledge but the heart of the knowledge and create circumstances which will raise the level of awareness of all problems, not just artistic problems but all problems. And I feel fortunate in my life to be invited to MIT.

I came there in '45, and that's a long time ago, and I never was disappointed. There are actually narrow-minded people everywhere, including a fair-minded world, and so I feel a lucky man to be able to be a participant in MIT search for a higher level of reality. And I made close friendship with some of the real major figures at MIT, and I learned from them a great deal, not in terms of technical or scientific knowledge, but in their deep world awareness of the issues that you are referring to.

INTERVIEWER: In California, there's an assemblyman in Sacramento, which is the capital. His name is John Vasconcellos. He has implemented a program, a task force, that deals with raising the self esteem of citizens of the State of California. It's a task force the governor, Deukmejian, approved a couple years ago, more or less, several millions of dollars to support this program, the task force. Every county in the State of California is encouraged to have a local task force committee.

It seems to me that using your philosophy, your theories, your writings, et cetera, as the underpinning structure for using the human-built environment, the cultural landscape, in order to dignify the lives of all people, the pluralistic society, to empower them rather than to disable them, which has been the practice by many, the way you control people as you lower the self esteem, you deny them their culture. You deny them their history, and consequently you fragment them and destroy the community, and you can control them, and this is in the minds of many people, part of what we call institutional racism.

Now the idea is to re-integrate these people to make use of history, that deals with the history of these people, the so-called minorities, history that's not been taught. And the vehicle, the medium, of the human-built environment coupled with the liberal arts taught at our universities throughout would play a central role about all this, but it must start there in the curriculum and students taking courses and liberal arts, et cetera. But there you have a wedding, in my opinion, of science and arts being underpinned with your very good work as a beginning to a very--

KEPES: In any case, they share your hopes.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you very much. I want to thank you Professor Kepes. I found that extremely stimulating. I could go on and on. I have many other personal questions. I know that you now have gone into continued painting. I don't think, in my opinion, some people say that you returned to painting. In reading what you have been doing in the past, I don't think you ever really left painting.

KEPES: No. You're absolutely right.

INTERVIEWER: You never left painting. You never left the well from which all of these aspirations and all these dreams spring from, the internal you. You never left that. That's where it's coming from, the integration of the interior and the exterior. Now it's being manifested on canvas perhaps, but as a painter I don't think that you've ever taken a break.

KEPES: A painter dreams, and the social human dreams too, and when these two teams converge and synchronize into a real existence, then you may produce something which has a quality and meaning. Are you a painter too?

INTERVIEWER: No. When I was a child, I started-- as I mentioned, I was born in the barrio, in the railroad yards of Kansas. Consequently, I heard many of the sounds and saw many of the images of industrial America. At the same time, I had access to an art teacher when I was 4 or 5 years old, and I have always practiced that. And I went to art school when I was a young man, and then I also taught at the Kansas City Art Institute in the Foundation Department.

I always have pursued art, and I used to paint, but I think that what happened and, again, this is another reason why your work's extremely attractive to me, because it is also my work, is that the wedding of bringing these two things together-- art, the visual expression of my aspirations, being brought up in an environment with machines surrounding us, et cetera, et cetera, it just never occurred to me that they could ever be separate. They were always together.

So I didn't leave one thing to go to the other. I just begin to work in a different kind of way, in a more conscious way. And, again, because of my own personal lived experience in a Mexican household, social change was extremely important to me, and that's the reason I pursued that.

The reason that 21 years ago I did not come to visit is that-- and perhaps I may have been mistaken-- is that at the time I was teaching at the Kansas City Art Institute when I received a grant. I realized in reading what your intentions were that these were very high ideals, and I shared them. I also know that you mentioned that some of the Bauhaus influences would be made use of in the teaching in the classes, the processes. I was working with a group of people in the Foundation Department that were using those processes, while I was familiar with them.

The other part about the social change, I thought that I would stand back and look. My assumption was that here you are at MIT and Harvard where, generally speaking, fairly affluent individuals were in attendance. I could not see at the time why these people would want to bring social change. Predominantly white students, upper middle class, and consequently I thought I'd wait.

For the next several years I followed your work very closely and reading the *Art Forum* and reading these various magazines, et cetera, and some of your books, and that remained very solid. But I kept looking for things that were coming out of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, and I saw a lot of interesting findings but, to my recollection, not your personal work, but none that were being done by the Fellows that directly addressed social change or no readings where the intention was mentioned. There were ideas, the potential possibly. The tools were there, but I never actually saw where they addressed social change.

I finally in 1968 put together a collaborative of 20 some odd painters, sculptors, architects, landscape architects, et cetera, in Kansas to do a \$22 million project using your ideas, your concepts, and we did it and we built it. But what I had to do, which was devious perhaps, but much art that's made is devious, was recycle some of the art that was for commodity-- recycle it in order to use it. And so I guess it was a process of deconstruction for the purpose of reconstruction for the future.

KEPES: Sounds promising. I would like to know more about it. I was, in fact, in the Kansas Art Institute maybe five years-- I think they gave me an honorary degree, something that. I know I gave the commencement speech.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, uh-huh.

KEPES: But it was a short exposure, so I did not have much to explore or exchange notions.

INTERVIEWER: I want to conclude with an observation which I am certain, after meeting you and talking to, being here in your own particular environment, your home, a comment that was made by an art critic which was-- it always has been a question in my mind, but it's a question no longer.

This comment was made by a critic by the name of Pamela Allara, or "Ayarra--" depends on how you to pronounce it-- *ARTnews*, October 1978, page 150. And it states in the article-- and the article is "MIT Cambridge Exhibit."

"Across the river at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, an exhibition of a more experimental artist, Gyorgy Kepes, to rate his paintings, photographs, and life sculpture from 1945 to 1947. This is influenced by German expressionism and Russian constructivism. Kepes gave up painting in 1928 and '39." I think that's the first error. I don't think that you gave up--

KEPES: I never gave up painting, but I shifted gears.

INTERVIEWER: Right. Into high-- into another, yeah-- shift gears. "Because he considered it to be an insufficient vehicle for motivating social change, he devoted himself to photography and film and in founding the Center for Advanced Visual Studies in 1967, hoped to facilitate the use of technology as an artistic medium in the cooperation of artists and scientists in large-scale urban projects."

This goal" in her opinion, "has produced a few positive results and Kepes' return to painting is, in effect, an admission of failure of his ideals."

I do not believe that.

KEPES: Who was who wrote it?

INTERVIEWER: Pamela Allara.

KEPES: Allara.

INTERVIEWER: I will admit that when I read this article as part of my research of your work-- and I have many, many other articles. I have a very thick file on you and your work--

KEPES: Then you know more about me than I know about myself and definitely more than I know about you.

INTERVIEWER: It's disturbing to me, not in that it casts a doubt about the validity of your work to bring about social change, to bring about environmental change. But it disturbed me in that I felt that it was muddying the waters and that there were many artists who may read this, or potential artists, who may not receive the full potential of the power of you work.

I have found with many art critics that the perspective that they have is one of viewing art as commodity-- solely as commodity-- that it's fragmented, disconnected from social, economic, and political realities. And this is not the case. In my opinion, the kind of work that you've been talking about, or part of the work that attracts me, and that is art as a facet of ideology.

That is a part of the fabric that does recognize the political economy. That is, takes into account the social, economic, and political realities in the process of mediation of your work. Only then can you actually bring about social change, alter consciousness when you take it, place it, keep it in that context. Obviously, to me, she has removed it from that context.

KEPES: I don't know her, so I don't know what-- sometime if one project's a fragment of one's vista, you may misunderstand what is in the background, and I don't know her ideas.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I'm very familiar with that type of strategy, because I know that, personally in my case, except for what my parents taught me at home, I feel that as a person of color that there was an effort by some to fragment me from the context, from my history, my identity and that type of thing, and it works in some cases. Thank you very much.

KEPES: You're very welcome. I wish I was more clear and more intense, but as you may know my age, I'm not as fresh and not as alert as your mind must be. I'm over 82, and I feel it off and on and then one's alertness in this kind of dialogue is not as intense and not as fast as the other person. But I enjoyed your question, and wish and I hope that I will be valid enough and strong enough to make sense. And thanks for asking me.

INTERVIEWER: Well, your work is there, and it's lucid, and strong, and it's clear, and it sends some message for the future, a direction.

KEPES: I hope you are absolutely right. I believe in it, but not everybody.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you again, Professor Kepes.

KEPES: You are more than welcome. I would like to know more about your own work.

INTERVIEWER: I will mail you slides, et cetera, et cetera. One thing that I've done, unfortunately, in terms of academia, I have never allowed publication of my work. And I haven't for the simple reason that the publications that normally asked were sort of glossy, national architectural publications. Not many instances, but sometimes an artist must mediate his or her own work if the critics are not capable of doing it justice, such as in this case that I just quoted.

In one case where the slick magazine, a national architectural magazine, asked to publish my work, I wanted to on the condition that I would explain it and since that permission was not forthcoming in the way that I wanted, then I didn't want it, because that is important. The mediation is extremely important to the work.

But I have many slides, particularly of this project that I mentioned to you. I made some artists angry when I published an article and said that I took artist commodity and recycled it like junk and made it meaningful. And that, unfortunately, made some people-- upset some people.

I recall my father, the way that he in the barrio, where many of the young people didn't go to school for many reasons-- they had to work. The way that he got us all involved and interested in going to college-- first finishing high school, then going to college-- was that he took us out, and he used the built environment, the cultural landscape, the urban form as a teacher. He would deal with the social, spatial realities of the environment.

He would take us to the railroad yards. He would say, look what that man is doing, and look who he is and then who is the boss. Then he would take us downtown. Who are the people carrying the briefcases and driving the cars, and who are the people that don't have jobs, et cetera. So he used the built environment as teacher. That's why I know it as power.

I know that when I read-- when I first heard your name or read your name was in *The Image of the City* by Kevin Lynch, and that book originally came out as an art book. It had a little thing on the back-- Art. Now it's architecture and planning, and he was very kind and mentioned your name, Professor Kepes, and the role you played in teaching him to see. However, that first book dealt with form and not with content, and I was somewhat perplexed. Later, of course, as he expanded he did deal with that, and that was extremely interesting in the way that developed.

So yes I have some of my work, and I'll mail you copies of the slides of that project that I developed the concept, and I was the coordinator for the entire project. And, like I said, we had 20 some odd people. A geographer was my primary collaborator.

KEPES: Do you know Kevin Lynch?

INTERVIEWER: I met Professor Lynch at UC Berkeley, on the campus at Cal. Yes, I met him shortly before his death. And Appleyard-- Professor Donald Appleyard.

KEPES: He died too.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. As a matter of fact, after I left teaching at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, I resigned teaching there, and it was very simple as to why I resigned. I mentioned to the Dean that I felt that I wanted to take leave because the curriculum was destructive to my culture. It had to be broadened-- and destructive to my community, and I felt that it should be broadened.

I wanted to do research in order to implement new-- design new courses, very much in line with-- they were not new in terms of the work that you were doing, but I had learned enough from your writings and so forth that I wanted to put these things together, and I also had a model that I actually had done and built.

Nonetheless, after I left teaching, I went and lived and worked with Cesar Chaves in United Farm Workers. As a matter of fact, I have one of the pins that, with your permission I'll--

KEPES: Do it.

INTERVIEWER: I've been meaning to put it on from the beginning of this.

KEPES: I would put it on too.

INTERVIEWER: Well, in that case, let me put it on you. May I?

KEPES: Sure.

INTERVIEWER: That after I left teaching for a while, I joined the United Farm Workers for two years and traveled around the valley and met the campesinos firsthand. I wanted to know more about the population in California, the rural as well as the urban population.

Then after that, I went and became a graduate student, returned to school. I was 51 years of age at that time. I returned for eight years to UC Berkeley to take more of the courses that I had never taken when I was in school, and they were grinding me out as a technology person. Very narrow, so I thought I'd go back and take more liberal arts, psychology, history, and I had a lot of fun for eight years. And that's when I met Professor Donald Appleyard. When he was killed in that terrible accident in Athens, that is when I finally left. Otherwise, I think that I would still be there.

So, again, this is wonderful that we're sitting here talking about these things so informally, but your friendship and your influence with Kevin Lynch, he time and again mentioned your name, wrote about it.

KEPES: We were close friends. We were co-directors of a project that became his book, *The Image of the City*, or what was it?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, you received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation-- I think \$100,000 or so, which was big money at that time.

KEPES: I don't know details, but it was--

INTERVIEWER: What happened exactly? I understand that you announced, we have nothing to report. And then--

KEPES: I cannot recall what it was. But my own nature was not a systematic exploration of anything. I think with my heart and with my eyes, and Kevin was a brilliant man but also a brilliant heart, at least a very warm-hearted guy.

INTERVIEWER: And that was your way in.

KEPES: Actually, Kevin was my student for a while. When I came to MIT, just came back from the war, from the Pacific, and took courses at MIT and took one of my courses. But he was actually a giant in his spirit.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, yes.

KEPES: He was a great human. We see his family still, practically every month.

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hm. His last book, I think that that was published when-- 1982 or--

KEPES: I don't remember. In any case, he gave a great deal to all of us. And you know he had this tragic-- not tragic, [INAUDIBLE]-- peaceful dream, slipped away from this world.

INTERVIEWER: Oh.

KEPES: He was reading, and died in reading.

INTERVIEWER: While he was reading. Tell me, where may I see your paintings? Is there a local gallery?

KEPES: Yes. I don't know. I would take you to my studio, because I have a fair amount of material. I will have a mini museum in Budapest, and I was just preparing to send my work. I wish I had the energy, but I will see-- how long are you staying here?

INTERVIEWER: Until Monday. But, like I say again, that you read so much about-- even books published by MIT Press that says that you took up painting again, and I always say, well, I never re-- because through the--

KEPES: I never put down painting.

INTERVIEWER: --readings I could see that there-- below that.

KEPES: Do you have this? I think I brought down this catalog of MIT. If you are willing to grab-- I think that's it. If you don't mind. Have you ever seen this one?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, I believe I've seen--

KEPES: Oh, that may interest you. That was lectures in Mexico.

INTERVIEWER: [SPEAKING SPANISH]

KEPES: You still speak good.

INTERVIEWER: Always. That never leaves you. That never leaves you.

KEPES: At least left me, because I spoke a good Hungarian and now it's a very rusty Hungarian. I can give you one if you are interested.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, yes.

KEPES: Are you interested in photography too?

INTERVIEWER: Oh, yes. I mean, I agree with-- well, you just have to look at the recent election and know about the power of video and photography and how things are packaged, but photography is a fine art. It's always been one of my interests. I have a difficult time separating it-- separating the various levels. I just see it at various levels. I don't see that there is a separation. It's a continuum, whether it's photography-- I know as a child, I used to water my--

KEPES: They are interdependent entities.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. I know as a child at home, one of my tasks was to water the plants. My mother, she had hundreds in coffee cans, and I'd water them, then I would draw them. I would draw the plants, and then one time our house, the wallpaper was peeling off, so I finished peeling it all off in the kitchen, and all the cracks in the plaster, I traced them with pencil. And then I colored the various patches of plaster with primary colors like yellow, red and so forth, all over. My parents didn't stop me, and it looked just like the plants that I used to water. So that interest was always there.

KEPES: [INAUDIBLE]

INTERVIEWER: I could explore throughout the house. So I never have seen these things separately. It's interesting that--

KEPES: That's not mine. This is just--

INTERVIEWER: I will mail you a copy of some of this-- that project that I told you about.

KEPES: That would be very [INAUDIBLE].

INTERVIEWER: As a matter of fact, when I returned to Cal, UC Berkeley, I did all my coursework for a graduate degree. I got my Masters in Architecture there, and then I did all my coursework for landscape architecture, and my thesis is on that project that I did, that urban design project where I used all these artists. And my primary collaborator was a geographer, because I wanted to get an insight as to the social, spatial qualities of the state. But that might be of interest, and I will--

KEPES: Whatever you could give me as a background to your own work. This gives you vague summary on my own work.

INTERVIEWER: Jeanne Labarbera. I've seen this before, although I don't have a copy of it.

KEPES: Now, if you to have it--

INTERVIEWER: Ah, yes. Thank you very much. I saw this. Jeanne Labarbera showed it to me, but I'd seen it before in the libraries, but now I'm very fortunate to have my own copy, thanks to you. I kind of feel as though the camera is intruding in our privacy now.

KEPES: And it is a question whether our private conversation has a relevance in terms of the video or whatever it is.

INTERVIEWER: I read a book by Moholy-Nagy and when you started the New Bauhaus in Chicago, and I'd made use of the concept you had when you had this of stringing lights over the lake, the Great Lakes, when you were doing consulting work for--

KEPES: Oh, yes.

INTERVIEWER: --the United States government. And the idea that if we were invaded, they'd drop the bombs into the lake. That's a fantastic idea, and so consequently on various projects I did-- I was urban design consultant in a Mexican community in Southern California.

I used that idea in the street, where I created some myths, and I began to-- I sort of seeded these myths around, because these freeways were tearing the communities apart. And the main street I told this story, and it was interesting how people picked up on it, about how this dragon came in and how it turned the serpents into stone and now we know them as freeways, but they're really serpents that were eating up the-- it's just in how people elaborate and pick up on stuff like that.

I am only very sorry that I did not come 21 years ago to meet you and to get a much closer look at your activity at the center.

KEPES: Also sorry for many reasons, because one brain or gray matter gets grayer and grayer in stage of life, and I don't feel I'm as alert now as I'm supposed to be, but--