Transcript #9
May 23, 2008

In conversation with Marthe Whitcomb

with Robert Hass, Brenda Hillman, Douglas Kerr, & Andrew Leavitt

BH: So we're talking about the photos that Doug brought. Today is May 23rd, 2008 and we're in Andy's house—Doug, Marthe, Bob and Brenda and Andy is bringing tea.

DK: These are photocopies of a *Life* magazine article that came out in October 1957 called "Big Day for Bards on the Bay."

BH: "Bards on the Bay?"

DK: "Bards on the Bay." And these are photographs of—one of Kenneth reading with Jess.

MW: Now I didn't remember that he read that night.

DK: The only picture from the night at your home is of Michael [McClure] and Michael is the one who clued me into this, so he knew. And the other photographs are from around the scene at the top and the photographer who took them, Nat Farbman, he's not actually named in this article, was a steady *Life* magazine photographer. The year before he had done a photo-essay on San Francisco on why it's worth living in San Francisco.

MW: Oh, OK.

DK: And he went to get photographs from the jazz scene.

AL: Do you know the name of that scene?

BH: Are they the same ones as "Life goes to the party"? Is he the same photographer?

DK: He's the one who's on the back of these photographs that we have. Yes, we're sending to *Brick* are from the same photographer. That's right. [Photos at brickmag.com / Summer 2008]

AL: Do you know the date of this?

DK: This is October of '57. October or September of '57.

AL: It is just so wonderful to have you guys over in my humble abode, and later we have some things… Those are two of Kenneth's pastels.

BH: Oh, wow.

AL: Phyllis Diebenkorn gave me those. I decided a few years ago to try and track down the drawing and ultimately I got in touch with her, and we had the most amazing meeting at her house in Berkeley. So I came down there, there was this little exchange that went on, she had to look, she had

to talk to family. So I show up at her house, and she has 24 drawings spread out all over these tables and we looked at them and then she let me take some. Pretty crazy, huh?

BH: That's great.

AL: So it's pretty wild. Very nice of her.

BH: Did they know each other well?

AL: The funny thing is that I don't know that they knew each other well. She vividly remembered the whole process and said, "Yes, I used to have to go drop Richard off, and then I'd have to go pick him up and then it was this and a few times back and forth." So she remembered the whole event very well which I thought was kind of funny, given the fact that there are a lot of events in their lives, but when I asked her about this drawing she gave me, it was just hilarious. We actually had a wonderful whole day, something amazing, when I asked her specifically about that she looks at me with this look, somewhat searing, but not at me: "The publishers never give you back the artwork."

(everyone laughing)

AL: "Who knows who has that one!" It was hilarious.

BH: In somebody's bag.

RH: You can bet that it's in the New Directions archive, I would think.

BH: Yes.

RH: The question of Kenneth's relation to the Bay Area, to the whatever it was, both the abstract figure in the scene in those years—

MW: Yeah.

RH: Did you guys socialize with painters at all?

MW: Well, Kenneth, especially in the years when he first came to the city with Andrée, they socialized a lot with painters, and she herself was a painter and they did a lot of painting time together but… Ryan was a very good friend, and I've known him since I first started coming to San Francisco. Were there painters around?

AL: Would you say Jess was a friend or an acquaintance at that time?

MW: Oh, Jess, I don't think of them first as painters.

RH: I was thinking about the Institute of Art. Hoffman in Berkeley, Diebenkorn, David Park… I don't know.

MW: I don't know.

RH: I think Kenneth wrote something about Morris Graves.

MW: Well, Morris Graves was a good friend, and we had some Morris Graves' paintings. There were two very large ones in the house, and then I truly don't know what happened to them.

AL: (laughing) That's the story of many things that got away over the years… "Well, I have no idea where those are."

RH: Other Northwest painters in the '50s. Morris Graves and Mark Tobey…

MW: You know, the names have left me. Morris Graves was a very lovely person, and we visited him up north somewhere—Washington. He did a wonderful drawing of Mary, my daughter, and just gave it to us. And Kenneth had a crane that he had done before settling into the North. I would say that before the era in the '60s, that Kenneth's best friends were painters. But the ones I remember—and Jess of course—they were more like family friends.

BH: Yeah, so you had many painter friends and artist friends. So what was Kenneth's—did he have a feeling that he was respected by them as an artist or a visual artist? Or not too much?

MW: I think what happened for Kenneth was that he painted all his life. And because we had so many paintings from his past that were very geometric, very Matisse-like—the base was pastels. I'm sure he did, because I visited in Santa Barbara after he left the city and he was painting in the little garden house out there. It was just a part of his life and maybe he had a show. I don't—I wasn't aware of any show. He had a lot of pastels that were very pretty. He had this way of working on them, and he enjoyed it. I think it sort of saved his sanity. He really enjoyed it so. And we just used them. We had them all over the house.

BH: That's very appealing, that's beautiful. It's very pretty.

MW: The pastels, some of them are very beautiful.

BH: And what happened to Andrée's paintings?

MW: You know, I don't know.

DK: I want to check the UCLA archives.

MW: I think so.

DK: Because they have the more early works. I've never looked for her paintings.

MW: Kenneth had a good friend at UCLA. Who is it? Oh please, my friend, I can't think of it… But he was great about protecting collections, and so I think that is where Andrée's paintings are.

BH: Uh huh.

RH: Could be Lawrence Powell.

MW: Oh, it might be him. Thank you.

AL: So translations?

DK: I have one segue question into the translations. There is a small… When Kenneth wrote "The Heart's Garden"—"The Garden's Heart"? When he wrote the long Buddhist poem from the '60s, there is some calligraphy with it. Do you know if Kenneth actually dabbled in Chinese calligraphy?

MW: Oh, yes. He loved calligraphy.

AL: That's why Mariana does it so much, I bet.

DK: Was he practicing some of the brush, the Chinese characters at all in the '50s?

MW: We had some things he had done all over the house. Chinese and Japanese poems that he loved. He would do the calligraphy. He sat around and he practiced, he perfected and he also had all the right equipment.

DK: I think he signed it himself

MW: Is that the one? *The First One Hundred.*

BH: Yes, Japanese. But he did…

DK: He might have.

AL: Look, this kind of proves it, huh?

MW: This is a different one. Copy number one. Signed Kenneth Rexroth.

(everyone laughing)

RH: My copy doesn't have this stuff on it.

AL: Fancy stuff.

BH: Number one. What year was that?

RH: Interestingly, there's no date.

BH: Really? New Directions?

MW: That's the late book.

BH: There's no date? There must be a date. How about on the back?

RH: They do have the dates here. December.

BH: '71. But when was it actually published—the Chinese?

MW: *One Hundred Poems From the Chin*ese.

RH: Decorative calligraphy of the names of the poets in this volume and of the title of the cover is by publisher/translator. So this is 1959.

MW: That's the Chinese.

BH: So it never says about the earlier printings. In this it just says copyright '71

RH: Does Hamalian's bibliography give the dates? I read Hamalian to learn what I didn't know—that you had started to take Chinese at Berkeley and then—

MW: Oh yes, I did that.

(everyone laughing)

RH: So what led you to Chinese?

MW: Well, I was a philosophy major and at Berkeley you need an MA equivalent degree in another area and obviously that could've been English, because I'd taken all those courses. But I thought, with Kenneth's urging, that I wouldn't mind doing it in Chinese…but then I *really* minded.

(everyone laughing)

MW: I think it had to do with the esteem of Kenneth's.

DK: What's the date?

BH: '55.

RH: This is the Hamalian*: The Signature of All Things*. This would be the 1950. Rexroth shifted his attention to writing poetry, to be published was *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* and he felt detached from this particular volume because he had written most of the poems collected in it 25 years before. *The Signature of All Things* would be published within the next year. New work was long overdue. He asked Marthe to start typing up the collection of Chinese poems so he could refine what he had done so far. He wanted to resume work on "*The Dragon and the Unicorn,"* a long poem about their trips through the US and Western Europe. So you were involved in helping him type out the Chinese translation?

MW: Yeah, now that you recalled it to me, yes.

(everyone laughing)

AL: This is the power of persuasion.

BH: Recently I've been talking to Richard Moore because I've been helping him put together his poems and I was talking with him about the very early Friday nights and I asked him what they consisted of and he described them and I said, "And so how did the composition of the group—what decided who was allowed to come?" And he said, "It wasn't so much who was allowed to come as who Kenneth hadn't kicked out." And he said it with all affection.

AL: It's funny you say that because Katharine's descriptions to me were of these things, these Friday night things, and that various people would be kicked out. There was this great memory of Kerouac being kicked out for being drunk.

MW: He cleared out the house.

BH: So, back to the calligraphy and the translation connection. What was your idea? That there was some sort of continuum between his visual art and his idea that visual art is a kind of translation and that translation from the Chinese, Japanese—he had done the French in a translation and so he's doing Chinese—Japanese first and then Chinese—That Pound got the idea-gram?

RH: Fenollosa.

BH: Yes, Fenollosa's essay—the idea that the appeal was in part the dual or, in part, a kind of plainness and immediacy of the figure and the character in—what connection were you making between the calligraphy and the translation?

DK: I was reading the poems with a biographical frame this time around because I was very aware of how Kenneth's persona and his idea of evasions coming up time and again. It's an interesting question to see how there is calligraphy with translations here—and to remember, to be very conscious that he was a pastel painter in his phase with you and in the early poems his art was constantly there.

MW: Definitely.

DK: He was very engaged with these translations for years and years. I think we'll find in the Lerner book that the Du Fu translations helped him finish his first book, *In What Hour,* and taking poems of sensibility so what I'm leading to is, I think he wanted to—with painting calligraphy and the translations—escape to a sensibility that was beneficial for him and could communicate well, that he could slough off a lot of the other stuff. And you see it in how he talks about Du Fu and how he explains about Du Fu's life here in the back. "Look, here's Du Fu's life and the problems I have with his politics and I picked the poems of sensibility and the direct of experience."

MW: And I think there was always for Kenneth a connection between his absorption in painting, pastels, oil, with his need for relaxation and for a different treadmill or getting off a treadmill about writing and I know that the oils and pastels that he did when I was around him were a source of

comfort and of soothing to him—it was not combative, mostly non-competitive, it gave him peace of mind.

DK: Which is intriguing since when I read a lot of his work one of the combative elements or the defensive ones is the need to teach, to be making grand allusions and statements. And when he was doing the Du Fu translations here, he was picking poems that had no extra literary allusion to them. It was sort of cutting off all of that and going towards direct perception of experience and that could have something to do with the writing of the figures as well.

BH: The immediacy.

DK: Especially the way that calligraphy was treated in the, say the '50s, where with the Japanese avant-garde and the desire for universal communication there. One of the people who did calligraphy for Kenneth's books in the 1960s was an avant-garde Japanese calligrapher and he was in the '50s trying to make calligraphy—to push it to such an extreme. Often the idea was to make the writing so abstract—the Chinese figures so abstract—that you almost didn't recognize it, but in making it abstract it became more universal form. It would be read formally in the east and west, more accessible. So that was the dialogue between the calligraphers in Japan and the abstract expressionists in New York. It was one of the things in the air, I think.

MW: And this was also for Kenneth in the selection of what he was working on by his translations of all the great poems, like the great Greek poem, Dante's great love letters and all of that. It wasn't to be like the most important translation of anything. It was, I think it was, it gave him peace of mind in the mode for translation and then things went on from there for him.

RH: When you first read him that book did you get a sense of how engaged he was with either doing Japanese or Chinese?

MW: He was very engaged.

RH: Already in the beginning? He must have been writing.

MW: Oh, very and the house was full of calligraphy and old poems of that, on the wall, and then with his calligraphy, yeah. I get the sense that the high time for pursuing that may have been before with Andrée, and he never gave it up. And he taught Mariana to do calligraphy.

RH: There's an article that I haven't been able to track down about his Japanese translations, but I get the impression that he really worked in Chinese but basically just used other English texts for the Japanese.

MW: Yes—definitely. And I don't know how much. I don't think I was around during the Chinese translations.

RH: I think they're already done. That's why this detail in 1950 of him asking you to type them up to see where they were, because they came out in '55, so he had another round with them during those.

MW: Well, it was one of the things he held over Laughlin's head all the time. He wanted to get them published.

RH: Laughlin was resistant and it turned out to be—were they very successful right away?

MW: Yes, they were pretty successful. It's the right size book.

RH: Yeah.

BH: When I was a little hippie college kid, this was the first time I ever heard the name Kenneth Rexroth, this little book. This is the Chinese, 1971.

MW: Oh really? Yeah.

RH: There's a very good PhD dissertation on the Chinese translations by a scholar from Wisconsin, who went in the '70s to the library in Santa Barbara, so those must have been the basic books that Kenneth looked through. So I don't know if these looked familiar to you?

MW: They do! They look very familiar.

RH: It's called the *Harvard-Yenching Book of Characters* that he looked at.

MW: Yeah, I love that. That's great

RH: He was also working from two volumes of French translations which, interestingly enough, when he talks about what he worked from he doesn't mention those. But this guy found in the library that they were all marked up.

(Marthe laughing)

RH: And often when there appeared to be mistranslations of the Chinese, that they were translations of mistranslations by the French.

(everyone laughing)

AL: Of course.

MW: And here all the time I thought Arthur Waley wrote him little notes.

RH: I don't know if he had any correspondence with Waley.

MW: I don't know either, but he certainly had a… Waley, yeah.

RH: He was also very involved.

BH: Where did you get those, Bob?

RH: I've had them for years. But I only just looked at and discovered them. There's also one really good recent essay. Just to give you an example, early versions of the poems would be, were kind of written out in these quite long lines, you know?

MW: Yeah, really.

RH: So here's a poem: "By day, by night I now endure anxiety. We brothers are each in a different district. Dead, alive—we do not know or whether the road between us stretches far we escape [inaudible] gravel. We divide and scatter. Starving, freezing—we gaze perpetually toward each other. Who would not return to his rustic gate? Who desires to go out in those dreaded tigers' waltz? Looking up I see wild geese among the clouds. Beast, bird each has its place in line." Actually, that's better. The ones I was looking at were more flowery than that.

DK: Is that part of the autobiography?

RH: Yeah, this is, and all of the Du Fu poems in the *100 poems* are taken from the book as a starting place, which is interesting. It's interesting how early they were, because I'm pretty sure that that persona he invented is an invention of Du Fu.

BH: Yeah.

RH: And these things go a long way; this study is saying, in writing this way about Du Fu, making them feel like these intensely personal poems of this disillusioned guy in the middle of Singapore.

BH: Yeah.

AL: Where's this from, sorry?

RH: You know, I got it off the Internet and I don't know the name of the magazine.

AL: You just got it off the Internet?

DK: Bob, does this go along with how you're talking about it right now? At the end of the *100 Poems by the Chinese*, on page 136, Kenneth writes: "I've chosen," and he's writing about Du Fu, "I've chosen only those poems whose appeal is simple and direct with a minimal allusions to past literature or contemporary politics. In other words, poems that speak to me of the situations in life like my own. I have thought of my translations as finally expressions of myself."

RH: Yes. I mean they clearly are and the studies show how much that is true and also that a number of the poems in *Signature of All Things* and *Natural Numbers* contain scraps of translations. Of Du Fu. He must have thought of them as allusions.

BH: I was going to say sort of Daddy Pound gave him the permission to merge with the figure so he had merged with the figure and then started just sampling, but sampling a whole stance in some way.

DK: There is a Japanese scholar wrote some time ago that Kenneth was actually stealing the Japanese, Chinese vehicle of allusion. You take someone else's poem and put it right into your own

poem and it's not supposed [to be] recognize[d]—it's not supposed to be so flashy—hidden. And he was definitely doing that in *The Heart's Garden.* My question for that scholar would have been: How conscious was Kenneth of that tradition in Japan? The Poundian question is a good one, too.

RH: It's hard to know.

MW: I would say very, very conscious.

DK: He's also quoting and re-quoting his own poems in here so—

RH: And the answer to that would lie in the bibliographies in the back of those books which are extensive. I will look at the Japanese poems again, but I think that he probably read—is the Japanese there?

MW: Oh yeah, that was a big thing.

RH: I need to get my hands on these. I tried to look at the Arthur Waley, of course, at the scholarship. His bibliography is an amazing history—a slow assimilation of Japanese art by European and American scholarship.

BH: Marthe, I know we talked about his reading in the bathtub before which, the image gets to me every time I think of the bathtub now, but was he just reading all the time and no matter what was happening in the household? Because my impression is that he read so much.

MW: He read amazing amounts. He read very late at night. He was almost a student—student-like in the piles and the books that were in the works that week and so forth, but he seemed to me to have enough time for many other things. He did the cooking, for example, he took care of Mary. He didn't take care of Katharine by then. He was traveling, but he had a separate scholarly life.

BH: Yeah.

MW: I think that was why it was very important for him to go to Lagunitas. Because he was alone and had uninterrupted time.

RH: This is slightly off-topic, but on the way to Inverness we drove up Devil's Gulch. It says you can't go there.

MW: Oh, did you go?

RH: Yeah.

AL: Where was the cabin?

MW: Devil's Gulch. When you go in from that road across from the park and you walk, you have to cross the stream and then it's very soon. You were walking up and then you got across the stream and it was on your left.

BH: We drove all the way there.

MW: This was towards the right, as you were walking. The trail kind of goes to the right.

RH: The current road—it might be different.

MW: It's not a road.

RH: So when you cross the stream were you on the ocean side or the bay side of the street? If you're coming from San Francisco, you turn up the road.

MW: Okay, you're coming from San Francisco and we turn off that road to the right and climb over the fence or under the fence or it's open, and then we take the trail going back along the street.

BH: You walked.

MW: And then the stream continues and the cabin is to the left.

RH: When you're on the trail the stream is on your right or the left?

MW: When we're on the trail the stream is on your right.

BH: Now, you know there's a road that goes up Devil's Gulch?

MW: Oh, there is a road?

BH: Yes, you turn off Sir Francis Drake. There's a main road that you can take.

RH: That's probably the old path.

BH: And now there are a bunch of hippie encampments up there. There's a hippie encampment, but there's also a—

MW: The farm?

BH: I think it's an official part of the park service. I think it is because there are bathrooms there.

MW: Oh no, we had none of that. There was nothing.

DK: When I talked to Michael McClure, this was about 5 years ago, he said he'd been down there, and it was still there, which would be nice.

BH: The cabin is still there?

MW: I think it is.

BH: How far do you walk? Was it a mile or…?

MW: It could be over a mile.

BH: Over a mile. Like 15 minutes?

MW: There was no sense of being in the park, even though the park was right across the road. You just set off, as if you were going across a field and there was a little trail and we walked over a mile, I'm sure. When we were staying at the cabin we needed to carry everything in. It was very sparse, and the cabin was this one room, big. Now, are you talking about across from the main park, the main Samuel Taylor?

BH: Yeah.

MW: Because that's now part of the park, isn't it?

BH: Well, there's something called Devil's Gulch where you actually turn on a road now, but it's just a dirt road it says only authorized vehicles past a certain point.

MW: So you can drive?

BH: We just kept driving and then we found a bunch of campers up there, like a big bunch of campers.

RH: It's a group camp.

BH: It's a group campsite and you have to make reservations.

RH: Above the creek.

MW: Oh, that's all new to me.

RH & BH: It looks new.

MW: There was nothing. It looked like part of a rolling farm.

BH: This was very heavily, sort of wooded on one side.

AL: Maybe it wasn't the same place.

MW: You know what, I don't think it's the same place.

RH: We'll have to ask Michael McClure about this.

DK: Whose the fellow who recorded so many songs and recordings for San Francisco? He has one name [Kush]. I talked to him years ago and he had gone up there, because he always has a video camera I wonder if he filmed it.

RH: There was somebody laying down a memorial plaque.

MW: A memorial plaque for what?

RH: For: "Here was where Kenneth Rexroth wrote his books…" for whatever reason, I was out of town at the time, maybe seven or eight years ago anyway, we'll track it down. The boys would probably like to know.

MW: Exactly.

BH: Yeah. The Devil's Gulch group camp is very new. When we were first together there was no Devil's Gulch turn.

MW: Oh, there's no turn.

BH: I think it's the same place but they've just made it an official group campsite and if we walked farther up.

RH: Except she said you're walking across a farmer's field.

BH: I know but I bet we just hadn't gone far enough.

MW: Maybe.

RH: But did you walk up hills a way?

MW: A trail, but anyway…

RH: Questions about the translation thing. Were there Chinese or Japanese scholars or people that he consulted that you were aware of or?

MW: Yes, Kenneth had a lot of correspondence with people in Japan, and I don't know their names.

RH: And did he use the public library or the Berkeley? Where did he get access to all of these? Did he use the Berkeley library or he must have had access to an amazingly scholarly or did he?

MW: He did go to Berkeley a lot and so much of the early work was on flimsy paper and just reams of it in his file that he used in putting together the books because Laughlin did want the books and was urging him to put them together. He had a few people, friends down in Chinatown, but I don't think they were his scholarly peers at all. It was like it was a part of his life that was done before, and it just sort of arrived with Kenneth, and he seemed to always know it and he always had the poems going.

DK: Did he buy a lot of books?

MW: Oh yeah, he had a ton of books.

RH: We ran into somebody in my travels who said, "Oh yeah, I knew Kenneth Rexroth. We went to his house once. I never saw so many books in one place before."

MW: It was awful. It was overwhelming.

BH: Du Fu then was his presiding muse in all of this. It seems like he had Du Fu really up there on the pedestal with Sappho. In his notes he says, "Du Fu is, in my opinion and the opinion of the majority of those qualified to speak," Typical, typical Kenneth, "…the greatest non-epic, non-dramatic poet who has survived in any language. Sappho, for instance, can hardly be said to have survived." And then he does put Catullus and Baudelaire in with Sappho as sort of second string. But I wonder how, without the Chinese, he felt like he was qualified to speak on that because he was working with translations himself.

MW: Definitely.

RH: He studied the poems intensely. I know folks who have studied Du Fu and Li Bai looking up the characters in books, which is what Pound did. One of the things the dissertation says is that Kenneth comments on the characters. That is, for example, the scholar says he makes the mistake that European often make of reading a character by character rather than a phrase. Like "shi-han," which means brilliant and "ha," mountain, he would translate to "the shining mountains," but the phrase means "excellence."

MW: He was separating. He was taking the characters apart.

RH: So Kenneth was reading, "For a long time I had dreamed of the shining mountains." And Du Fu had written, "A long time I dreamed of reaching the highest position in the world" and he tended in that way to read down to the more concrete.

BH: More physical.

RH: But here's an interesting example of this business of his remaking himself. This is from Florence Ayscough "Snow Fall": "The clash, the cries of battle, sounds of weeping,/ wailing. Many fresh spirits of the dead./ His heart burning with autumn grief. The old man/ sits alone humming poems in a deep low voice." Kenneth published in 1945, at the end of World War II, in */Briarcliff Quarterly* a poem called "The War is Permanent, after Du Fu," that goes, "Tumult, weeping, many new ghosts. / Heartbreaking, aging, alone I sing / To myself."

MW: Oh god.

RH: And then in 1951, he did *100 Poems for the Chinese*. He re-titles it "Snow Storm." "Tumult, weeping, many new ghosts. / Heartbreaking, aging, alone I sing / To myself. Ragged mist settles / In…" So this is kind of lovely evidence of him before you guys were together. He was working on these poems and seeing himself as Du Fu in World War II, in the middle of the war, the same way that Du Fu wrote in the middle of another war.

DK: I was thinking the same thing. From an even earlier Rexroth, this the end of August 22, 1939, so this is *In What Hour* and he addresses—

BH: "Writers and readers." I was just using it as an epigraph.

DK: He begins it with a number of questions, a meditation, begins, "What is it all for, this poetry, / This bundle of accomplishment." And the questions at the end are: "Do you remember? / What is it all for, this poetry, / This bundle of accomplishment / Put together with so much pain? / Do you remember the corpse in the basement? / What are we doing at the turn of our years? / Writers and readers of the liberal weeklies?" And this is from *100 Chinese Poems*, a Du Fu poem called "By the Winding River II," he says, "Everywhere petals are flying / And Spring is fading. Ten thousand / Atoms of sorrow whirl away / In the wind. I will watch the last / Flowers as they fade, and ease / The pain in my heart with wine. / Two kingfishers mate and nest / In the ruined river pavilion. / Stone unicorns, male and female, / Guard the great tomb near the park. / After the laws of their being, / All creatures pursue happiness. / Why have I let an official / Career swerve me from my goal?" So that kind of question echoes the "writers and readers."

RH: That poem I was just quoting ["Snow Storm"]—it ends in English. "The fire has gone out of the stove. / Everywhere men speak in whispers. / I brood on the uselessness of letters."

BH: Persona. But persona and style. It does sort of interest me the way he annexed energies because he had gotten from Pound this idea that it wasn't just about great Western canon, you had to make this stuff available and when he came upon Du Fu with such power and, in a way, he sort of annexed himself to the persona.

MW: And he goes to the other.

BH: Instead of his own work he remakes his own poetry in relation to the persona that he was in part creating.

DK: And he also highly regarded Waley. Because the persona that Waley put in his translations, that actually matches and filters the one that Kenneth made. They are complementary to each other. The poems he chose and the lost stature that they we're talking about.

MW: I think that that was very strong for him.

RH: Pound, as well, and it's really how he found his way out of Cubism—through Du Fu translations. In a way, I think that the Cubist, the fragmentary and early work had to do with the way he kind of invented himself as a person.

MW: Yes, always.

RH: The translations of the Chinese and the Japanese were a next step.

MW: Kenneth invented himself many times. I think a lot of his stories of his childhood, especially stories of travel, the invention, served a purpose for him. And it was constant until some of it all started to be true. It was one of the ways I was able to acknowledge him because some of the early

poems about his life, when he was a child, I think they were the life he wished he had. He would talk about having been someplace before, and I think it maybe wasn't that geographically accurate.

(laughing)

RH: There's that way that he means having lived and experienced so intensely in the imagination, he felt like he owned it, and more intensity because of that really terrible childhood that he had.

MW: Yes.

DK: The period that I very much want to know about, Kenneth engaging with the Du Fu translations, would be 1937, '38, and '39. I probably mentioned this before, but he put together manuscripts in these years.

MW: He did. When I first knew Kenneth, the translations were all done. It just took years to get them published.

DK: Well, something was going on there, because the first manuscript at that time had all the Cubist poems that Bob just talked about. Then the second one, say in '38, '39, starts to show some of the effects of the Du Fu poems. Because as *In What Hour* that invention was coming about, he was finding it. Then there is between '38 and the publication of this book in August, 1940. He writes a lot of the poems that we recognize now as the poems of Kenneth's sensibility and one of the, for me, the intriguing things about *In What Hour* is about how the invention is not complete, it's split. When you read *In What Hour* there's still all these Cubist - objectivist poems from the abstraction period together, meshed together in this interesting way with all these new poems of sensibility, and he even split the book into four parts to try and match and make it all work. It just wasn't quite working so in hindsight you can see what he was trying to do and how close he was. And then in 1944 the second book is much more complete, apparently, because the Cubism is gone. But I think the Du Fu…

RH: What was in 1944?

DK: 1944 is *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*. So what we're saying now is he translated Du Fu in the late '30s. It helps complete his process. But they're not published until 1955.

RH: The tortoise is a Chinese figure in itself.

BH: Well, that's really cool—

MW: That's really great.

BH: I was thinking as we were talking of Dickinson in 1861—'60-'61 and Whitman in 1854. They're building it up, but there's this catalyst, a turning point in the persona-building of a poet. Where some outside thing, a catalyst, that makes their persona. In your theory, it has to do with the Du Fu and the development of the Du Fu translations all the way along. He's building it over a period, but really by the time he's together with Marthe he has his persona, his writing persona, really well in

place and he can write from his persona. Something from the outside, for him, was this synthesizing mechanism.

MW: Yes and it also, it includes the work and Kenneth very completely.

BH: Yeah, and it really affected American poetry a lot. It affected everyone who wrote. Gary Snyder wrote in this kind of plain style, wasn't just sampling it from Williams and obviously—

MW: No, it wasn't, it was more.

BH:—Obviously Kenneth was also affected by that form of Modernism, too. But it's interesting.

DK: And he keeps developing it on and on. Do you know the Marichiko poems where he tired to invent woman Japanese? He was writing the poems and he tried to pass it off as his translations.

MW: I didn't think that was very successful.

DK: No.

BH: He was challenged with his anima.

DK: I talked to a scholar at Stanford [Christine Guth] because she had been studying Ernest Fenollosa and the kind of idealization of the East Asian woman in the salon—even in the goddesses that you get in Pound and Kenneth really comes right out of Ernest Fenollosa. She's tracked it to one painting in fact where he instigates this and really Pound and Kenneth were taking so one would really want to look at the books he had because that whole corpus rose to the idealization of that feminine figure.

MW: It's interesting.

DK: I think so. She wrote an interesting book on Longfellow's son who went to Japan and tattooed his whole body.

BH: Oh, ahead of his time.

DK: The whole American heritage. So she has this really interesting engagement with studying Americans and Europeans in Japan in the late 19th century when a lot of the Chinese came into the Modernist sources, like the Du Fu. It really brings a lot of things together that we've talked about for me. Because the whole building of a life and the influences, the self-mythologizing and the literary mythologizing for writers are very much interconnected.

MW: It's very connected.

BH: And so obviously we talked about his idealizing of you last time and all of his self-mythologizing that had to go into that and his bringing these other all of his powerful—

DK: I've been reading the Chinese poems and reading how Kenneth describes them, and he was really upfront about creating the poems and patching the Du Fu. It was an interesting experience.

RH: There's one chapter that's about the way he constructs his own persona. In the translation there's also really interesting technical stuff because he did this Chinese translation on the syllabic method which he was calling then, in the '30s, the counting measure.

DK: Ah.

RH: And it's interesting, there are technical reasons why it's interesting because the Chinese tends to go four or five characters and go bing, bing, bing, bing, bing. Boat, river, green, rains, fast. And he would do: boat, river, green, rains, fast over on the next line and he started trying to find some measure to keep them from being what he felt was slack by doing syllabics. Seven syllables, seven syllables, seven syllables—which at a certain point he switches to in his own poems. He said he did it to make it more dynamic and the first reviews of the book all complain about the fact that there are articles and prepositions at the end of the line.

MW: He was very self-conscious about syllabic counting in his own verse and… but do you think that came from the absorption in the Japanese?

RH: It does seem to me, yeah—that's the missing part…because Chinese prosody is about the number of characters but the Japanese…that's what they do is count syllables.

BH: I wonder if he knew...did he know Marianne Moore at all …was he influenced by her? She was really into syllabic…she was the main syllabic poet of the great Modernists

MW: I don't know. He considered himself very syllabic…and I think maybe he went towards that. He knew Marianne Moore's poetry and her.

BH: She's 22 when she…when did she published her poem… around the same year? 22, right?

RH: And then in '45 but she had dropped syllabics by then…But he had read everything.

AL: That was the impression I got from Katharine. Probably the most recurring description of him was that he just read everything under the sun, just literally. She said this more than once—every year or two he read the Encyclopedia Britannica cover to cover.

MW: I never…who said that?

AL: Katharine. I'm asking Marthe to validate that…

(everyone laughing)

AL: Unlikely, huh? The face says it all.

DK: Something he might have said.

AL: OK, every five years…

BH: Kenneth…just had this gathering inside of himself and then he could reorganize it and have access to it. So even if he didn't read the encyclopedia… he had read it

MW: And it never stopped

RH: Was he on the radio shows on KPFA when you were together? Was that during the time you were together?

MW: Yes, yes—oh yes. He would sit and talk, and you know how that went…he would start talking about a book and then he'd start talking about—

BH: The other book.

MW: It was not a precise book review program.

(everyone laughing)

RH: Those were printed eventually

BH: I think they were—

RH: He shared it…everything he read.

MW: Yeah, oh yes…

RH: Someone must love the stuff…but he was also trying to make a living I guess…

BH: KPFA…was it in '55?

MW: I think it was '49

BH: '49, that's right because Dick Moore had dropped out.

MW: What is this?

AL: I just wanted to show you some stuff I found that might be interesting. This tie up – it's a Beastiary for her daughter's…

BH: Oh cool. Did he design it himself?

AL: I can't speak to exactly, obviously… It's him, I'm sure.

BH: But he made the book

AL: Yeah, I thought this was pretty cool. It says 15 copies custom made…February 1, '57. This copy is number 12 to prepare for the Palo Alto collector.

MW: In "Beastiary."

DK: Wow.

AL: So, it's all this.

(laughing)

MW: Illustrations.

AL: Just goes through the alphabet, so it's kind of cool…Illustrations.

BH: How old was she when she got that I wonder?

AL: Well this was passed to her. This was in '55, and she was born in '54.

BH: Oh ok….Some of these are interesting…

MW: I like the drawings.

BH: Look at this unicorn, isn't this great? It's sort of Picasso-esque unicorn…the unicorn is supposed to see the verge…I love this unicorn…so is this printed anywhere?

RH: Yes…Oh, well, not with the drawings

BH: We should send it to a book …

DK: *In Defense of the Earth* – they were published there.

BH: I know, but I mean…Xerox…reproduce it…more copyright.

MW: You want the drawings?

BH: Oh yeah…I think the children's…

AL: That's a neat idea…To have it remade in some way.

BH: As a children's book...the drawings are really wonderful

AL: Really it is.

RH: As an art book

BH: Yeah, as a kid's book

MW: I wonder who owns…New Directions?

DK: It's in the book…

BH: But not the drawings

RH: New Directions.

BH: The drawings would be separate.

MW: The drawings are…

BH: And also there's a holograph there wouldn't be a poem because you obviously, that's a different object

RH: I don't know how that works

BH: The poems...I was going got say that's a different object…Yeah…you may not even have to get copyright…

AL: We'll call in on that… We can see the text.