Communication Scholars Oral History Project
Annenberg School for Communication Library Archives
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, PA

# KLAUS KRIPPENDORFF

interviewed by

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transcribed by

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recorded by

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*December 20, 2016*
*January 18, February 22, April 12, and May 17, 2017*

Philadelphia, PA

## BIOGRAPHY

Klaus Krippendorff (1932–2022) was a distinguished communication scholar, who spent his career at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. Krippendorff made notable contributions to a range of disparate fields, including the methodology of content analysis, information theory, cybernetics, discourse analysis, and design. Krippendorff was born in 1932 in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, and spent his childhood in the city of Halberstadt. After World War II, Krippendorff served as an engineering apprentice in Halberstadt, in what was then the Russian zone of control. He and his family migrated to the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) in 1949, settling near Düsseldorf. Krippendorff studied engineering at Hannover's state engineering school, graduating in 1954. After briefly serving as an engineering consultant in Düsseldorf, Krippendorff matriculated to the new Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm (the Ulm School of Design), where he was exposed to a variety of lifelong intellectual influences. Soon after completing his Ulm degree in 1961, Krippendorff traveled to the United States on a Ford International Fellowship and Fulbright travel grant. After visits to a number of universities, he took up doctoral studies at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, where he took courses with, among others, Ross Ashby. Before completing his doctorate, Krippendorff was appointed in 1964 to the young Annenberg School, where he remained affiliated until his 2022 death. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, as an assistant professor at Penn, he wrote on a variety of topics, notably information theory and cybernetics. He was, in this period, working with Annenberg School Dean George Gebner on the Cultural Indicators Project, with Krippendorff's contributions centered on the methodology of content analysis itself—the topic of his 1967 dissertation. Krippendorff's 1980 book *Content Analysis*, updated in multiple editions, established his reputation as a leading methodologist. In the late 1960s he introduced a measure of inter-coder reliability, known as Krippendorff's alpha, to measure the level of agreement among trained analysts, which remains in wide use. His work on cybernetics and information theory culminated in *Information Theory* (1986), published after his 1984–1985 presidency of the International Communication Association. It was in this period that Krippendorff revived his interest in, and engagement with, design and design analysis, particularly product semantics, as marked by *The Semantic Turn* (2006). Over his decades of teaching at the Annenberg School, Krippendorff taught a series of long-running graduate seminars, notably *Content Analysis*, *Models of Communication*, *Semantics of Communication*, and *Language and Social Constructions of Realities*. When he died in 2022 at the age of 90, Krippendorff was the longest-tenured faculty member in the School's history.

## ABSTRACT – Session One (December 20, 2016)

The interview focuses on Krippendorff's childhood through to his decision to leave for the United States in 1961. His parents' familiarity with the U.S., including affiliations with a German-American exchange program, is discussed, alongside his father's occupational background as an academic engineer. Special attention is paid to Krippendorff's childhood years in Halberstadt, including the city's history and character. The interview discusses Krippendorff's remembrances

of the Nazi era, including the treatment of Jews in Halberstadt, up through the end of World War II. The Allied bombing of Halberstadt in April 1945, which hit Krippendorff's house, is recounted in great detail, including his family's re-establishment in the nearby village of Schwanebeck in the Russian zone of control. He describes his father's improvised machine-repair business, subsequent imprisonment by Russian authorities, release, and emigration to West Germany (near Düsseldorf). The interview traces the plan for the rest of the family, including Krippendorff, to escape what had become East Germany, after completing a three-year engineering apprenticeship in 1949. The escape itself is described in great detail, followed by an account of Krippendorff's matriculation to Hanover's state engineering school. After recounting a stint as an engineering consultant in Düsseldorf, he describes his decision to apply to the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm alongside his involvement in the informal youth association Wandervogel. His experience at Ulm with students and influential professors (including Max Bense, Horst Rittel, and Bruce Archer) is discussed, along with the school's faculty politics. Krippendorff's practical diploma project, a motor-grader, and especially his thesis, on the sign and symbol characteristics of objects, is described in light of his subsequent intellectual trajectory.

## RESTRICTIONS

None

## FORMAT

Interview. Video recordings at the home of Klaus Krippendorff, 510 South 24th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19146, USA.

## TRANSCRIPT

Transcribed by Beatrice Field. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Jefferson Pooley. Transcript reviewed and approved by Klaus Krippendorff, Jefferson Pooley, and Jordan Mitchell.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY AND CITATION FORMS

### Video recording

**Bibliography**: Krippendorff, Klaus. Interview by Jefferson Pooley. Video recording, December 20, 2016. Communication Scholars Oral History Project, Annenberg School for Communication Archives, University of Pennsylvania. **Footnote example:** Klaus Krippendorff, interview by

Jefferson Pooley, video recording, December 20, 2016, Communication Scholars Oral History Project, Annenberg School for Communication Archives, University of Pennsylvania.

## Transcript

**Bibliography:** Krippendorff, Klaus. Interview by Jefferson Pooley. Transcript of video recording, December 20, 2016. Communication Scholars Oral History Project, Annenberg School for Communication Archives, University of Pennsylvania. **Footnote example:** Klaus Krippendorff, interview by Jefferson Pooley, transcript of video recording, December 20, 2016, Communication Scholars Oral History Project, Annenberg School for Communication Archives, University of Pennsylvania, pp. 34-35.

# Transcript of interview conducted December 20, 2016 with KLAUS KRIPPENDORFF (session one)

Philadelphia, PA

Interviewed by Jefferson Pooley

Q: This is day one of an oral history interview of Klaus Krippendorff, conducted by Jefferson Pooley in Dr. Krippendorff's home in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The interview is part of the Oral History Project of the Annenberg Library Archives of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. The date is December 20th, 2016. Thanks, Klaus, for sitting for this interview. I wanted to start out just by asking you to tell us about your childhood.

KRIPPENDORFF: I guess my childhood starts with my parents; my father was born in 1900, and my mother three years later. They grew up both in Dresden in Saxony in Germany, and my grandfather—whom I never met—died early in 19—during the first World War. And that was also a tragic situation. He was a lawyer and then he was drafted by the German Army in the First World War, and as an academic you can't be an ordinary soldier, so he was immediately an officer. [He] had to ride a horse, fell at some point from the horse, got a hernia and died in the military hospital. So this is kind of the background of an unfortunate European history of war and the tragedies and unnecessary dealings.

My father was—became an engineer, and—an academic engineer, and later on wanted—in the term of his practice, he had to go, I think, for half a year, [to] do something practical, and he hired himself or was hired on a ship going to India. So he was an engineer on this ship and going to India, and came back with rice and gifts for my grandmother. And then at some later point he was a student again and, in 1924 I believe, he—there was a program to study in the United States—[a] work-study program. It was actually, basically, giving the—offering the fare, but once you're there you have to almost take care of yourself. So he went to the United States and he was fascinated with mass production. He worked, actually, among others, at the Ford assembly plant, and made many friends: a Frenchman that he communicated for the rest of their lives with each other. So, yes, that was, I think, his American debut. Then he was hired a few years later to a man in [an] office in New York, because these German students that came with this minimal support in the United States—some of them got lost. So he was actually in charge of keeping track of these German work-study students, actually [unclear] or "American Work Studies Program." And so that was in between 1927 and '29.

My mother's father died when she was very young, also in 1919. He was a painter and he had bronchitis and other minor complications, and because of malnutrition and maybe bad medical service he just didn't survive what nowadays would be no problem. So he died in 1919. That

was for my mother a big threat and so then she had to work, and her mother and her grandmother, the three of them. And actually my mother had also a sister—she married relatively early, she was out of the house—so my mother had to work in the bank first, and then she worked in Dresden in the Technical University [Technische Universität Dresden], where my father studied, and she became kind of an account manager for student budgets, etc., etc. So all these German—well, several of these German students—they were very enthusiastic going to the United States, and she said, I want to go too. And she wrote, actually—and I read it recently in her biography—she was actually in some sense primed because she had a teacher who, in geology, was always fascinated with Yellowstone Park and geysers, etc., etc., and she said, I want to see that. So in 1928 she came to the United States and worked as an au pair girl, as a housekeeper in New York and in New Jersey and at some point three other German students said, We want to go cross-country, driving with the Chevy cross-country. And they said, Well, you can cook and we'll drive, and she said no [laughs], I want to take my share of driving. And that's what she did. So they went all the way through the United States, and among others of course she had to go to Yellowstone Park, and so most of my life, actually, I got from both of my parents, stories of the United States: the adventures, the people that she met—they both met. They got actually engaged at Niagara Falls, and I went also at some point to Niagara Falls, and when I was there I called my mother and she reminded me of the Misty Queen, which is the ship, and she remembered that, and we just took this boat also [laughs].

So that was kind of her background, and there are lots of fascinating stories—my mother never had a good education, and she basically was a housewife, one could say, but one who had so many initiatives and energy that she just couldn't stay like everyone else. And she helped, for example, in a project later on when we were born—she helped other mothers to exchange baby milk—some had too much and others had too little. And so she did a lot of things besides being the mother of four children. As I said, I was kind of primed because we had constantly talked about the United States. And my parents actually talked English when we children couldn't/shouldn't understand it [laughs]. There was also, which is kind of interesting, because it was during the Nazi time—it was dangerous to be kind of, I wouldn't say associated with the enemy, and the United States was never really an enemy of Germany—but my father had always hidden two things from his past memory: One was an American flag with 48 stars, and another one a white ball that he played with in the Panama Canal when he was going to India. So these two things, they were always there [laughs], but they were hidden and not many people knew about this.

So, as I said, my father was an engineer and he changed jobs every four years maybe, and during the war and the end of the war we ended up in the city called Halberstadt, which is in the middle of Germany. It is a small city, 56,000 people, and my father was actually—saved himself, I think, from the draft by working in an airplane factory and building wings. And that was for Junkers [Junkers Zweigwerk Halberstadt] and that was a factory in Halberstadt, and that's what he did.

But I think maybe I should say something about Halberstadt, just briefly. I think, in my experiences, when you move around, then you start being someone when you move out of the

family. So while? my earliest recollections go further back, but where I really feel at home is Halberstadt. The main reason was when I was 10 years old, I went out—have a gang of friends. We climbed all trees, we knew everything on the street, we knew the holes in the fences where we could climb through and bother neighbors [laughs], if you want. And there was a place, a garage of sorts, and there were no cars at that time anymore, but we wanted to play there and we were always chased away. So I mean that was kind of where I went out of the family. And then came, of course, my studying in the *Gymnasium*, so then I learned a lot about the city. And if I'm being honest, I think I know more about Halberstadt still—about the mythology, the history—than even about Philadelphia [laughs]. So, and [Halberstadt] is an old city that was founded in 800—it was a bishop's seat—and one thing that I learned far later, that the bishop that was there—actually I can show you later on, there is a map of the old city and there is one wall around the bishop's seat with two churches and with the accommodations for the bishop, and then there is a bigger wall for the city. And the bishop gave, actually, Jews protection for whatever reason, and probably they paid a lot of taxes. I don't know, I can't say, but Halberstadt was at some point a large city—had the largest population in Germany of Jews. There was a pogrom in Halle, which is not so far, and they were all moved to Halberstadt. Halberstadt was also open to other kinds of immigrants. There were the Huguenots that came from France, so Halberstadt had a French church. It must have been a very interesting city.

As a child, I didn't know that much. I actually, I didn't—I met—I remember very distinctly I had one experience of seeing an old couple with the Jewish star, and I didn't really know what that meant and so I asked my parents, my mother, and she just explained these are Jews, but there was no hostility, at least on my parents' side. And I learned much later in 1943—oh no, before that I learned there was a program called KLAUS, K-L-A-U-S, that means Kinder Liebe Außer Sichtweite, or Children Better Out of Sight, and this was a Catholic organization that took Jewish children for a vacation in the North Sea so their parents could find places elsewhere in London, in the Netherlands, to go there. So the Halberstadt Jews, they were actually maybe better off than most, and most of them disappeared. But in 1942—and as I said, I have no recollection of that but I read later—there were about 400 that were picked up and never seen again. So now but, as I said, this is what I found out much later, but I had no clue, my parents neither. I mean, yes. There was in 1945, the end of the war, we were bombed out totally. And that was actually on April 8th, that was a Sunday morning. I was with a friend not so far away, and exchanging stamps which we both collected. And then came the alarm at about 10 or something, so I had to rush home, and at 11:30 bombing started, and the whole city was very badly damaged. But when I say damaged, it was really I think something like 80 percent of all houses were destroyed, and this was, one could say, an unplanned attack. I read later that there is a famous German author, Alexander Kluge, who was in Halberstadt and knew him from that time. He was in a different high school. There was a reformist or science-oriented one which I was [attending], and the other was more humanist or Greek-oriented and he was in that. But he made this research as to what happened and what people recalled and what they did and so on. So he described in great detail, among others, that Halberstadt was not really the target. This was the secondary target, because there was another area that they had to bomb, and there was no—there were clouds and they couldn't see, so they had always secondary targets,

and tertiary ones if they couldn't get rid of the bombs, because they couldn't land with the bombs in England.

So anyway, there came about two waves of 200 bombers each, and they just threw their bombs on Halberstadt. Now, Halberstadt was not a military town, there was nothing of—there was not strategically anything important in Halberstadt. There were several hospitals. There were the Junkers Works [Junkers Zweigwerk Halberstadt], but they were outside, and they were not actually harmed. So it was an unfortunate incident, and in my case my parents—my father was around, that was very nice, but my mother took my other two children to a small village in Schwanebeck about seven miles away, mainly because almost every night we had alarms and we had to go in the basement, and huddling in the basement with blankets over their head. And so that was at some point too much, and so she took them to Schwanebeck. Myself and my father we were in Halberstadt and when the bombing started our house was hit, and there was a bomb that was maybe about 10 feet away, maybe 12, 15 feet away from where I was, so had I been just this much closer I wouldn't be sitting here. So, half of the house collapsed, and I remember for example, one scene—my father was 45 years old, and he was kind of at the prime of his life. He knew what to do, and there was a refugee from the Rhineland and there was a mother and daughter and the daughter's baby. So they were living for temporarily in our house somewhere, and when the bombs fell and everything was thick of dust, the baby stopped breathing and the mother, she was Catholic, and she screamed holy Catholic prayers, and so my father simply took the baby and dumped it in the water bucket that was there and gave it back to her, and she was fine. I mean this was the kind of things that I do remember.

Then I went out of the basement and climbed through a window on the street, and I couldn't recognize my own street. And as I said, I knew all the trees, there were no trees left, everything was bricks. I had to stumble over the bricks and then I went to a—there was a school close by and we had made an agreement—my father always said go to this and I will pick you up or something. But when I came there I was with other people from the same house, they said you can't stay here, this is too dangerous, everything is burning, etc., etc. I should also say the strategy was, first, they put explosive bombs on it and then on top of it came—what is this called?—napalm-type bombs that got the wood that was now exposed all on fire. And when I left the house and walked over, then I saw already the fire bombs starting and exploding. And so I went to, actually—to a house of a friend of mine that was just half a block and I wanted to see this friend, or at least I couldn't see him. But I stumbled through a staircase that was collapsed and it was very difficult to walk on the edges of those steps and then I—then another wave of bombing came, and then something very unusual for me. But in these emergency situations human beings huddle together, and so we, lots of people, maybe 15, we just huddled together. And then—just because there was so much noise and droning and it was actually not in our area where the bombing took place. But then I looked up and half of the house was hanging over us, so any small thing would have killed us all. So I went the other way and went to another village, by myself or with these friends, and later on I joined my family in Schwanebeck where my mother had been.

My father, meantime, he—as I said, he was a very energetic and strong person, 45 years old. He tried to save whatever he could. He went, in fact, up on the house, the stairs were still intact,

he saw his writing desk down there, and then he—we had one guest room and there were our shoes, and so he took the sheets of the guest room, put the shoes on it, bundled it up and carried it out because that was kind of a very valuable thing. Later on he tried to save this from our burning house to another house. Anyway, so it was pretty bad, but I went, as I said, outside and when I—there was a mountainous area before we went to this village, there I could see Halberstadt burning. And I had never seen a whole city burning, the flames, they—I mean two houses high, red flames of otherwise black smoke in great—I mean in great quantities. So that is the last thing that I saw of Halberstadt, you know, at that time.

And then I went, as I said, and joined my family. And they were very worried, rightly so, that I would be not available anymore, and so that was the end of the war. I should like to say, this Halberstadt on 8 of April, the bombing, was just three days before the Americans marched in, and it was, as I said, totally meaningless militarily speaking. And when I was in this little village, Schwanebeck, then the Americans came and this was really not fighting anymore. There at the entrance of the village where we actually lived for a moment, they were shooting one shot in the direction, and then there was no response and then they drove through. That was the end of the war as far as I'm concerned. Well my father had no job so—but he knew that there were—in close by there was a train with machines that was in—I mean they were transported from, I don't know where, in the last minute of the war. And so with the help of American commanders who were actually very set on getting the German economy going again, he got some machines and started a mechanical workshop. Now he was an academic engineer and not really a practical one, but he had the idea that there are so many cultural machines in this little village that were neglected during the war, and so he would repair them. And he had this mechanical workshop. So, and that was right in May of 1945.

But then the Russians came, and my father was arrested and put in prison, and that was of course a very big problem for my mother. She had four children, and then this mechanical workshop, she tried to get it going. And maybe I can tell you just why he was arrested. It's a sad story but it's—that's what it was at that time. He was, as I said, an engineer in the Junkers factory in charge of transportation, and the transportation at that time was kind of electric cars where someone was standing in front had to do all the stuff, and he went from one place to another. There were lots of—at that time there were lots of workers from the east, from Poland and Ukraine. They were in Germany and some of them were basically forced to live—work in German factories. Some of them volunteered because there was nothing over there, whatever. But there was one driver, a German driver, who was fraternalizing [*sic*: franternizing] with these women and was behaving pretty badly and [Krippendorff's father] said at some point, Look, you have to respect these people, you cannot just talk down to them or misuse them or get involved with them. And so that was one story. Now after '45 he went to Halberstadt for whatever reason and met this guy, and so he said, How are you? etc., etc. And I have to tell you that the boss of Junkers, his boss, is in prison. And my father said, You know I'm sorry to hear that. And that was it. The next day, and they asked also, Where are you? And my father said Schwanebeck and so—and the next day the Russians came with a truck and picked him up. And then, when he went in Halberstadt prison, who opened the keys? That guy.

So this is the way justice was administered after the war. And he spent about half a year in prison. Then he was transported to a concentration camp which the Russians now ran, and the Russians had a system of quotas, so they had to deliver a certain number of prisoners from Magdeburg, where he was, to this concentration camp, and many of them died on the way, so they gave additional and he was left over. He was left over—everyone was picked up and he was left over—he was sent back. And now he was kind of off the books, one could say, and the commander of the—the Russian commander of the prison called him and said, You innocent, tomorrow you back with children, but what can you give us? Now, we were bombed out, we had nothing. So my father said, Well, I have—I run this mechanical workshop. I'm happy to repair things, whatever, I can do whatever you want. But that's not what they wanted, and he found out later when there were several others who were released, that someone had to bring a watch to the translator or—something like this. So this is the way it was. Well, we stayed there—oh no, while my father was in prison my mother had difficulties with four children and in a small village, and not that much to eat. But my father, because he had worked—had this mechanical workshop—he had lots of friends among farmers.

So we worked also a bit, as much as we could, on farms picking potatoes, etc., etc. So we got as a payment potatoes and something to eat. So we managed pretty well, but my aunt, my mother's sister, said, Why don't you give me one? I'll take them to Dresden. That was me. I was the oldest one. So in Dresden I was, and I went—that's when the school started—and I went in fact to a school in Dresden, and it turned out to be the same school that my father was in a long time ago, and one of the teachers even remembered my father. So it was, you know, coincidental, whatever. But I have to say I was very good in mathematics. I was very good in biology. I could draw flowers and all of these kind of things. But I didn't have any interest in Latin, and Latin was part of it. And now there comes a kind of—as a 13-year-old person you don't appreciate what is maybe important in the future, and I hated it. I said, Who in the world would want to learn a dead language? So, well, nowadays [unclear] have done very differently, and I have to say I probably blame my parents because they listened to me. And I said, I want to get out of here, and they took me out of school and I became—I went home to Halberstadt after a year, and then I became an apprentice in a mechanic's shop. An apprentice—there's this old German craftsmanship, so that you are [for] three years [an] apprentice, then you become a journeyman, and—then the journeyman you go from one place to another, ideally, and then at some point you get married and you become a master, and so that's kind of the tradition. So I became, actually, an apprentice from 1946 to '49, and during that time my father then came back and worked further on this mechanic workshop.

But at some point the Russians decided that whatever was before owned by the government should not be in private hands. So they picked up all the machines, and then my father was again out of [a] job. That was in 1949, and then there was of course the border between the Eastern zone and the British and French zones, and he had a good friend from the time when they were both in the United States as American exchange students, and he said, Well, I can give you a half-time job—find a half-time job in a company—in an organization that is charged to revitalize the German industry. So he and my brother, two years younger than me, they went to West Germany and he started this job, and I continued through my apprenticeship.

But now how to get out of there? Well there is—maybe I should go back quick. Before we decided to go, I mean just to get food–we had chicken, we raised rabbits for food, and we were connected with the farmers, we got turnips to make sugar syrup. I mean—it's amazing to me how my mother coped with it all. But anyway, we did—oh, I have to tell you something else. Before, as my father was in Russian prison, we were—that was right after the war ended and the Russians had come. We were living in a small—on the second floor of a tiny, tiny house on the roof, all five of us–six of us. It was intolerable, but the mayor of the town said, Well, you have to have a place to live. And there was an empty storage house, one could say, and they said, Well, we'll make that into four apartments, four places. And it was empty but there were—this was made of prefabricated panels, very primitive, not much insulation, but—and it was unfinished. [Unclear] said we could arrange the walls in the way that we wanted. So I was 13 years old and I found an amazing solution using the number of panels and the number of doors I had available, and arranged the interior in ways others didn't. The standard way was to divide the area in four rooms and have an entrance and that was it, and the entrance was kind of a second door against the window, and that was it. And in my case I decided to make a hallway along the line to have a door in the back where there was a shed, and where there was chicken and all of this, and the toilets. And then the rest went one big room and two small ones. So the number of panels I had available—and that was, 13 years old, the first architectural project one could say [laughs].

So, that's where we lived in, and it was really very livable. There were lots of minor inventions that I made, but now, coming back to the end of our stay, when my father left to the West–that, we couldn't tell anyone. And one should also say this village was very small. Everyone knew each other. Everyone observed each other. There were rumors of everything. So we had to carefully plan to escape without notice. Now I wanted to finish my apprenticeship. My mother sent parcels to her sister in Dresden, so that the post people would know that we moved to Dresden. She bought the train ticket because they know also who is going where, and all to Dresden, and then they stayed there for a few days. And as soon as I had my apprenticeship finished, the next day I was supposed to meet them in Halberstadt. I was in this small place in Halberstadt, and there we hired a teacher to get us over the border. But the very evening, the last day I was supposed to be in Schwanebeck a farmer came and said, You know, I was in the City Hall and they—I overheard a conversation. They couldn't find the Krippendorff in Dresden, and where is he? And then the City Hall—there is one Krippendorff here. Get him to tell him where his father is. So that was kind of a—the very evening the farmer came and told us this. So the next morning the first train was for 4 o'clock in the morning. I was on the train and was gone out of the village.

So later on I met—in that place, I met my mother and my sister. She was then nine years old, and my little brother, who was then six years old–five years old. So we had this teacher–now I have to say Halberstadt is not too far from the border, that's one thing, and we knew kind of the area, but this teacher, he had connections. He lived there for a long time. So we started out late in the afternoon taking a train to a place very close to the border, but from then on we had to walk, and quite a bit. But in order to come to the border one has to avoid people, and there are lots of tiny, tiny villages, farm villages, and most streets go, of course, through the village and then out, so we couldn't do that. We had to go around. And I remember it was dark and

dogs have a way of hearing unusual noises or sensing things, and when there are many dogs, this doesn't—you have probably no experiences of that, when there are many dogs in a small village they stimulate each other's howling. And I still hear this howling of the dogs when we passed by these tiny villages. Then there was another incident, that this guide—he was just very, very clever I think, or sensitive. He heard some noises in the back on the street. Now, on the streets in Germany in general there is a street and there is a ditch and then the field starts, and then are trees before the ditch. So he thought, there's someone coming, so we had to go in the ditch and waited. And now this is also difficult—a little child is not so easily kept silent. So that's where we stayed and then three Russians came talking, talking, talking on the street passed by, and then—so that was kind of a tricky moment. Then we went to the other side and then it became morning and then suddenly we ran into soldiers, but they were British. And I remember that my mother hugged them [laughs]! I don't know what they were thinking but she was so elated to be out of this and be now in freedom and so on.

I remember I took the train from there to where my father was in Düsseldorf in the western part of West Germany, and I was surprised to see so many cars, and so many—it was just very, very different. This was West Germany. So, that was our escape from East Germany. I should also—maybe I should tell you another story. While we were in Schwanebeck, and my father had come back, he invented or made, produced a mill to make poppy seeds into oil. So kind of a hand cranked—and so he made several for people inside for Schwanebeck and Halberstadt—and someone in West Germany got hold of the idea, I don't know how, and so there was a plan that my mother would bring one of those mills and get a piglet in exchange. Now, a piglet is something you can carry in a knapsack, so the farmer said they make noises and we cannot afford that when we go over the border with controls, and so he gave the piglet some sleeping pills or whatever, and so on the way—on the train to West Germany—to the last village before the border, we looked at the pig and it was dead. So I remember distinctly we had to get rid of it, and so she—we opened the window and she just dropped it out. And I remember how it bounced! There were kind of threats—how it bounced, I have these sounds in mind. But we had at least no piglet, we had no fear of being arrested crossing the border. Many, many years later, my mother was a good storyteller and, you know, with other friends, and there was a woman that said, I was on the train to Helmstedt, this village, and there was a woman, she had a pig and she had to throw it out of the window [laughs]. So it was just, I mean, amazing things, amazing experiences, but we survived that all. So in Halberstadt—in Düsseldorf or rather Ratingen–there's Düsseldorf and there's Ratingen where we were—where we lived on the outskirts, and that was actually even called a different kind of village. We had a very tiny wood house given to us by the same guy who got my father the job. There was all these American connections [laughs], you know. And actually he was married to an American also, so that's also another story. So we lived in this, and I got a job in a factory, as a mechanic, as a toolmaker—but I was never really satisfied with what I did. So one of the things is, and you wrote down, they wanted to know about the Wandervogel and I got involved in the Wandervogel. Now–

[INTERRUPTION]

KRIPPENDORFF: Well, the Wandervogel is a very German organization, one could say. Or not even more than a movement, let's say, and it started around 1900 when German youth

discovered nature. Before that, I mean, everything turned around the city life or farmers and so on, but nature was just not accessible or of interest. So in, I think, 1908 there were a group of people that thought, We should go on walks, see the forests, and the beauty of the country and so on. So that was in 1908—or maybe a little earlier. That was in Berlin largely. But then this caught on and lots of people were interested in participating, camping in a way—all young people. And in 1911 there was a big celebration of the 100 years defeat of Napoleon. And there were all of these camps—[from] the Wandervogels' perspective, all the bourgeois that didn't really do anything to defeat Napoleon. They celebrated in big cities with wine and beer, got drunk, and so on. And most of these Germans thought, We don't want to do that. And they gathered on a mountain area in the middle of Germany called the Meissner, and they formulated a philosophy, one could say. And saying, basically, we the youth, we want to be our own, determine our own history. We don't want to be bothered by the bourgeois, we want to guide ourselves and our inner—there were lots of kind of strange philosophies, but the point was, it was a movement against the established older generation, towards nature, towards understanding each other. There was, for example, they didn't want to drink alcohol, sex was ruled out, I mean among young people. I mean, this was kind of a back-to-nature in many ways. So, that was in 1911. Many of the people died, actually, in the First World War—they were drafted—but in the Second World War, after the First World War, it started again. And my parents, both of them, were in some ways involved in that. But in 1934 the Nazis took over. They outlawed everything that was of this kind of movement and incorporated all of them into Hitler Youth. There was no way of doing that. I actually—I read a lot of things, the history—one of the things is that we all knew each other by nicknames. Nobody knew who they really were but we knew each other by nicknames, and when the Gestapo tried to infiltrate the groups that didn't want to go in the Hitler Youth they were befuddled because they couldn't figure out who's [a] member [laughs]—what they were talking about. So I think during the Second World War there were pockets of the Wandervogel still existing, resisting as much as possible, but the Hitler Youth basically forced everyone to be part of it, and adopted many of the symbols, like with walking with flags and having—there was a certain kind of a jacket that came from the Wandervogel and they took that over. So it was usurped, if you want.

But after the war—after the Second World War there were several people that lived through—before the Nazi period. Their children started it again, and I was one of them. And it went for me also a kind of a liberation movement, away from the generation that we had said, they collaborated with the Nazis or didn't do anything about them. And we wanted to do our own thing. And, for example, unlike, for example, Boy Scouts in the United States, we never tolerated anyone as a leader that was maybe two or three years older than us. So we were all young people and we were hitchhiking all through—I mean, I was twice in Italy, Denmark, Sweden, and France. We hitchhiked everywhere and we were students, or young people. We had no money, and we all decided that in some sense, you know, we should take advantage—we provided service for people that gave us a ride by giving good conversations and we often did. So we were flexible and moving everywhere but we also participated in many other activities. One of which was, for example, a project to reforest areas that had been cut down. The British took a lot of forests away as reparations, so they cut the trees and left everything there. So reforesting was kind of a summer activity that we participated in, but then also we

tried to make seminars among others to understand the Nazi past of Germany, to study Marxism, and the new emerging—the differences in democracy in the West, and what happens in the East.

And so we tried to educate ourselves in the times in which we lived or what happened before us or what we wanted. There was a very interesting thing that, at one point the East German youth organization, that was a state organization, Freie—FDJ [Freie Deutsche Jugend], Free German Youth Organization. But it was a very communist organization. They had a big meeting in East Germany, and they invited some of the bourgeouisistes and they got hold of us [laughs]—that was a big mistake. We were so well-prepared, we came there, maybe 15 people, and we came in this big meeting, and we simply asked questions that the East Germans were not allowed to ask. So, we were ostracized, we were heavily criticized, but we made also numerous friends that stayed in touch with us in many ways. So, that was kind of our way of coping with that problem, and I'm—that was one minor thing. My brother became a political scientist as a result, in fact, of perhaps these wonderful involvements and the trying to find out the ideologies behind that and the structures etc., etc.

So that was, I think, for us, very important. Now then I was working, when I was in the West, in a factory but I wanted to study–and in the East I have to say also, one reason why perhaps the decision of my parents were not so wrong to get me on to a practical track, if you want, of apprentice or away from academics was that as a child of an academic there was a quota and there was a very small number of children of academics who could study. It was made available to workers' children. So there was a good chance I wouldn't have even gotten there. But I wouldn't say that I had academic ambitions, but it was not satisfactory to me to work in a factory, even though I was okay, I could handle this. So I took evening courses in Düsseldorf and I made several practices that were required to become—to start at the engineering school, and then in 1951 I joined the engineering school in Hanover [Hochschule Hannover]. And I graduated in 1954 and that was kind of a first step into a more kind of scientific or engineering activity. I should like to say two things. One is I stayed in touch with Wandervogel and at some point in the summer I decided, we decided, six people, to go to Lapland. The most northern part of Sweden where nobody goes, only Laps exist, and this was kind of a wonderful, always a mythical place where you go, where nobody goes [laughs]. So we—the six of us, we hitchhiked through Denmark, Sweden, and met in Umeå, and then we took a truck to kind of the last outpost where Laps could buy things, and from there we walked into the—into nowhere. I have still a reindeer horn upstairs [laughs]. So, I don't want to tell you our adventures there, but this is one of the things I constantly stayed inside the Wandervogel and also afterwards.

But now in 1954 I graduated and there wasn't a possibility of having an examination to qualify for university education. This was kind of, one could say, a professional education in the engineering school, and there were three people that applied and I passed the examination, so I was qualified to become a university student without the *Abitur*, which is the high school diploma that one would normally get. I should like to say, also, this the climate in the engineering school—the people that were graduating there or in it, many of them were actually former soldiers that came back in 1950 from Russia, and people that were thrown off in the war. I was one of the youngest, in fact, and there were very interesting people, I have to say. I

stayed in touch with a few—but it was a very different kind of—it was not the normal studies thing. So, anyway, I graduated, then I had—we had another kind of dream to go to Yugoslavia. Now, Yugoslavia at that point, it was a very interesting place. First of all nobody went there, second it was communist but it was independent of the Soviet Union. They had the idea of self government. They distributed the responsibility for factories to the workers and so the government was communist but in a very different ways. And in part that was in case the Russians would attack them, they would distribute the responsibilities so that everyone could defend their factory, etc., etc. So it was an amazing place and we wanted to go there, and so we hitchhiked again, and it was very adventurous. We went to Belgrade, and then we went to Mostar. Mostar is in the middle of Montenegro. It is on a river, there is a famous bridge, and there was actually at some point a movie made, a German movie or German-Yugoslav co-production, of partisans in Mostar, and a German military nurse who worked then for the partisans. And so this was again a fascinating symbol, and we went there.

And then we wanted to go to a place north, and there was already something that came later, very apparent. They said, Don't go there, they are all thieves, they'll kill you. So we decided, let's see, and we hitchhiked and we walked, and then we went there and they said, Where do you come from? From there—What, you came from there? These are all murderers [laughs]! And so there was already, at that time, lots of antagonists between these various kind of groupings that later on in the Yugoslav war came to the surface. But we had always good connections—we were human beings and we related to other human beings in a human way, and so it was a great adventure. And, well, we came back and then I continued my work in an engineering consulting firm. And I was there for maybe one and a half years or so and I have to say I was a Young Turk. And as a Young Turk you don't have very much of a voice. I was very competent, I could calculate almost everything, stresses, speeds, whatever engineers need to calculate, though others couldn't. So I felt in many ways I was underutilized. That was one factor that I thought I couldn't—shouldn't stay there, but the work itself was not so unpleasant.

But then came a very important event that made me question that—this occupation. There was a firm that asked our firm to consult with a problem they had with the organization of the company. Our boss went to the board and three of our engineers went to the ground, to the workers. And we saw clearly the problem, but the board had other ideas and they paid for it. So whatever we found was discarded, and then I thought, That isn't an ethical kind of way of being, and to be involved with that, that was not for me–not in the long run. And I remember kind of, somewhat arrogantly, I wrote a letter of resignation in which I cited the unethical practices [laughs], etc., etc.

Well, but then the other thing was what to do, and there was a friend, a Wandervogel friend, who had just come—went to Ulm [Hochschule für Gestaltung, founded 1953] the first year and she described in glowing terms what they were doing there. And I visited the place and I was enthused about this. So I applied and I mentioned or you mentioned the application form, no? Besides having to tell you the little bit about the background, they [in the Ulm application] asked, What newspapers do you read? What kinds of art do you like? Make a comment on this and that art. And so there were a lot of questions that showed that they wanted to evaluate you as an individual, as someone who participates in society, what you would do, etc., etc. That

was very attractive or very unusual. And I was taken—admitted. But I had a feeling later on, I noticed, that I was taken for the wrong reason. This was, one could say—well, it was a design school, it was a very avant-garde school. It had just been formed in 1953, and [in] 1956 I became a student, so it was really very young. And they wanted—actually one of the founders, Max Bill, was Swiss, and he was a very, one could say, advanced thinker, and he said design should help Germans reconstruct Germany from—I would say now 'popular culture'—from the ground up. And he had the idea of what is a good form without, you know, symbolism and ornamentation, which of course the Nazis explored in numerous ways, and before that the Art Nouveau, etc. And he wanted to get rid of this all, so this was an effort to—his vision was to help Germany to rebuild itself and not get into the same type of trouble.

There was another important element and that was probably even more important—Max Bill was the kind of the intellectual or the architectural grandfather. There was Inge Aicher-Scholl. Inge Aicher-Scholl was the sister of two people, Hans and Sophie Scholl, who in 1943 formed a group, a resistance group, against the Nazis called the Weiße Rose, White Rose, and they wrote various pamphlets exposing the behavior of the Nazis regarding Jews, regarding the occupied countries—occupied areas—and they distributed that widely, often through the mail, and to people that they thought would be sympathetic to that. But of course mail is—first of all you don't know all the people and there were lots of people that got that and they were really afraid that they would even get it and they went to the Gestapo and said, I got this, etc., etc. And they were caught in 1943 in Munich distributing these leaflets in the university. And they were executed in 1943. There is a famous film called *Sophie* of Sophie Scholl and so that was—and also I have to say Hans Scholl was in the Wandervogel. Actually he was in the branch of it called Jungenschaft, and he became, as many of them, he became a Hitler Youth after everything was taken over but he continued the culture. They were singing certain kinds of songs which were not Nazi songs, they were hitchhiking, doing daring things which the Nazis didn't do. So he was suspect from the beginning, and so he was then executed and we thought always, he is one of our heroes. So the school was founded in the name of the executed brother and sister. So that was, I think, kind of my motivation to go there.

But there is a side story to that: When I came to Ulm in the first year we didn't have a place to stay on the mountain or the hill where the Hochschule was. We had to stay downtown–and I was staying—renting a place with someone who started telling me, saying Inge [Aicher-]Scholl was the biggest Nazi in Ulm. She was the second highest—no, she was the highest next to two people for the BDM [Bund Deutscher Mädel], the Hitler Youth for women. There were two officers, one could say top officers, of Ulm and she was one of them. She was a devoted Nazi, and she was feared by everyone, and this woman [the co-renter] she was just—she was probably also one of the—like everyone else had to be—was drafted when they were 10 years old so—and she just reported that. And I was actually shocked, but I'm even more shocked now that I did not really act on it. I should have asked her [Inge Aicher-Scholl], What is the transition between being a high-ranking Hitler Youth for women and now against Nazism and forming the school in the name of the children? I found out later on that when this happened in 1943 the two, brother and sister, were arrested, she was totally shocked. She couldn't—she was not in it, nobody told her because they knew she wouldn't tolerate it. There was a German law called *Sippenhaft* that means when you are a relative you are responsible, and so now the father of

Sophie and Hans, and also Inge Aicher-Scholl, they were arrested and put in prison. But Inge Aicher-Scholl was a Nazi, so I searched later, and I was in contact with lots of people, one American—actually she was Jewish and she lived in Germany and she investigated that all, and there is no Gestapo protocol of her [Aicher-Scholl's] interview. Now, it could be that there was never any taken. It could be also that she managed to squash it. I don't know. But her father was actually a tax accountant and his clients were many Nazis. So he continued, while in prison, his business of tax accountant, so it was all very dark and very strange.

After the war this was convenient that she was arrested because she could now claim to be a victim of Nazis, and she played that role very well and I don't really know whether or how that—whether this was really an eye-opening experience or whether this was just an act, I cannot say. But she got the money from the United States—the High Command in Germany, Clay was the—whatever, I don't know what it was called—Justice [Lucius D.] Clay, and he was in charge of the American zone, and he gave a million dollars or something, and she founded that school with Max Bill's help and also Otl Aicher, her husband, etc., etc. So this was one of the motivations to go there but it was also a disappointment, but as I said it was more a disappointment that I never followed up with—I found that out later. But maybe it shows that we were not really that oriented towards the past. We wanted to create the future and that's the reason why I think I didn't follow up with that—only later.

Q: Can you say something about what the school was like—its grounds, the social atmosphere when you first got there, especially that first-year course that was basic for everyone?

KRIPPENDORFF: Yes. Well the school was actually built on a hill, and Max Bill designed it and it was a very interesting design. It was hugging the hill. There were several levels and there were places to live–not enough, they were not finished, but that's the reason why I went for one year outside. And then there were faculty tracts, and then there was a big—well, a meeting space. There was a famous bar that was kind of curved so as to allow conversation. And then you could go to the lecture rooms and to the workshops. That was the physical layout, and it was all in concrete grey, and the windows were a natural wood. Everything was either white or grey, and that was also what Ulm stands for in the end. Now, the first year, you asked, everyone had to take that *Grundlehre* [basic course], and it was actually an interesting idea. The idea was, when people come from all kinds of areas, from art and design, from engineering and architecture, whatever, they have all their crazy preconceptions, and the idea was actually to break this down and build something new. So the first year, obligatory for everyone, was a course where every three weeks there was a new project by one of the professors. They asked them to develop something, and there were people invited from all kinds of areas, for example we had one, [Helene] Nonné-Schmidt, I remember. She was actually from the Bauhaus, a former teacher, and she taught color theory. And we had to paint with watercolors, systems of where overlapping colors create different kinds of colors, and I have one of these examples still. So that was one kind of three weeks. Then there was a famous guy named [Hermann Von] Baravalle who was interested in geometry and different kinds of—how different kinds of shapes come out of other shapes. So we had to draw fine lines and then getting hyperbolas, etc., etc. That was not for everyone. I remember there was one guy, he was really an artist artist, he had a [unclear] and to him drawing straight lines was already a violation of his feelings [laughs]. And

when you do one—and one of them is either crooked or not straight, the whole diagram is ruined.

But there were also a lot of very advanced projects. Recently I was reminded—and that was not in my *Grundlehre* [basic course]—but there was one guy talking about typography, and he said we have to develop a typography, a script computer-readable. Now at that time there were not computers, but he had already said that it should be mechanically readable. And that was one project to do. So, there were just these very advanced ideas and all of them had to do with becoming sensitive to different forms, different processes, systems, etc., etc. But there was also other lecturers. For example, we had one guy, cultural anthropologist—a sociologist, [Erich] Franzen. And I didn't know, I learned it later, he was one of them, and there were many of them. He was one of them who escaped Nazism to the United States and had come back. And he was teaching now sociology, and I was almost enthused with that. There were many of these people. One of them went to Sweden during the Nazi period and came back, and they came all to Ulm because that was kind of a magnet of something new happening.

At the same time there were also lectures of cutting-edge people from all over the world. Before my time, the year before, Norbert Wiener, the inventor of cybernetics, was invited and gave lectures at Ulm. I don't know how that connects with design, but they had simply a knack of what is important and so we were actually exposed, much as forced, in the first year, to do all this kind of exercises, but also to be exposed to different ways of thinking and new cutting-edge theories that were cooked up in the United States and everywhere, and then the immigrants from outside, they brought their view of Nazism. So it was an amazing place.

But now there is something that you mentioned, actually, that is, you said Hungary. In 1956—I started in 1956, so in the *Grundlehre* this was now after the first quarter actually. The then-director [Tomás] Maldonado gave us an exercise and it required painting small squares in a very systematic fashion—mixing colors—and that was a very tedious type of thing. And in October or something of 1956 the Russians invaded Hungary, who had a revolt of sorts, and there were numerous refugees from Hungary going to Austria. And that was really a big problem. Austria couldn't cope with that, had never done anything like this. And so come Christmas, or December, and it turns out to be now exactly 60 years ago almost to the day, I decided—and my brother went there and several other Wandervogel, all of them, they went there, and I tried to convince the members of the *Grundlehre* we should go there and help out for the Christmas vacation. So, and I had almost convinced quite a number when the administration found out that that is what I was doing, and they said, No, no you can't do this. And so we were—many of them were dissuaded to do so, but four of us, we went down anyway, you know. And so that was December 1956.

We went to Austria, to the border and one—there's one American who had a Volkswagen and the others were Germans and so we went there. And it was a very strange place. First of all Austria at that time, I mean, and also in the countryside it's just unheard of. Like at four o'clock in the morning they go drink their schnapps, and then they take their horses and do their work. So we went to the border and tried to help, but this was very unsuccessful. We met an amazing number of very interesting people: There was a Swiss cook who said goodbye to his hotel, and

he cooked for the refugees; there were teachers, and there were—I mean lots of people. They were all fascinating people that helped the refugees that came over. There were two Americans; they manned a boat over a small river, and shipped these refugees over, but they were caught because they didn't know that the river on both sides belongs to Hungary. So, and because of that the Austrians said, We have to be careful getting foreigners too much involved in that. There was a Catholic organization and they—I forgot now the name—but they had cars and they helped people to come from the border into the city. But also the refugees, many of them, they didn't know the area, and this related also to my—refugees from [the] East, they didn't know when they were in fact in Austria and so one had to catch them virtually and say, You are safe! And that was not easy.

But we felt under-utilized. We spent there two days helping in a big hall cleaning tables, and then they said, Well, in order to get really meaningful—go to Vienna and there is one person, a princess—a former princess—of Austria, and she's in charge of that, go to her. So we went to Vienna, and this was again, you know—it was kind of naïve, one could say, but it's an odd situation, no doubt. There come these somewhat art-related students without [laughs] really great competencies willing to do something, and we tried to get to this princess. Now she was in a ball in a big hotel, there was a ball of sorts. And so we were outside and we said—wanted to talk to her. Of course she was not available [laughs]. But this is Austria, first of all; the nobility played still a big role. And so it was evening, late, and then where to go? We didn't have any money.

Now, from my hitchhiking through Sweden we went several times to prisons—they let you—let us sleep there. So I had the idea, Why don't we go to prison? So we went to a police station and said we want to stay overnight in prison. Ah, they had not heard about this but they couldn't really deny that, so there was lots of formality, telephone calling, formalities, filling out things. And there was one interesting thing: The American among us, he made fun of a picture that was hanging there. What was this picture? It was Kaiser Franz Joseph of Austria. Now, I'm amazed that he still played a role but he made the comment and the officer was really upset. How could you? But it was also the American who had no sense of nobility, he could do that. Anyway, so we were going into the prison and there were really greeted like prisoners where they emptied our pockets in boxes, we had to—there were numbers and put in the place, and the whole process took a long time. By I think one o'clock in the morning we were finally in the cell. In the cell we were guided from one gate to another, key opened and then the next one [unclear], and then we got a room, and then we slept but only a few hours because then comes the routine afterwards. Prisoners came to clean, and they said, What did you do, why are you here [laughs]? So, we had no good answers but we were really prisoners. Then we got something to eat, and that consisted of coffee and bread, just bread sliced—that's it. And then we were finally released at maybe ten o'clock or eight o'clock, very late. I mean, we had hardly slept, we were released and then we drove back to Ulm and painted squares. But the thing is I think what it tells me about myself is that I think I—for me kind of bigger issues like the world is burning, and we paint squares. I solved in the direction of helping the world not to burn, so I think—and also the relationship with my fellow students, I later on became actually a representative of the student body, but that's what I was already then. I wouldn't say I was a

leader but I was always being interested in new things. Actually I didn't tell you about my engineering work. Do you want me to say?

Q: Yes, please do speak about—you're speaking of the engineering school at Hanover?

KRIPPENDORFF: Yeah, in Hanover everyone had to design something, you know, and I decided to design a steam motor for a car. And the traditional one also was with pistons and so on. I had the idea we should do that in a rotary fashion, and I in some sense invented the Wankel engine that came later. I'm not too sure whether my design worked but it was totally new, with wheels going in and cutting and the steam would just turn these wheels and turn the gears, and then turn also the wheels, and that was one of them, you know. And it was pretty innovative and everyone said this is innovative but whether it worked, I don't know whether it would work. But I used that—I submitted that also in Ulm in my application and it is now in the archives, so you can see it there [laughs]. So now where were we?

Q: Well, you were about to perhaps speak of the rest of the basic course year and your experience in that.

KRIPPENDORFF: —As I said it was eye-opening, and that was the whole idea, to break down prejudices and open new visions. And I think they succeeded in many ways and people had to design things or do things that they'd never even dreamt of, like I had never designed characters in typography, I had never made these shapes and so. But there was one interesting thing that I also did with [Hermann von] Baravalle, I mentioned him. He had a model and that was two circular plates with lots of strings attached, and you could project with a projector a line in there, and this line, if it changes a little bit then it becomes an ellipse. So a line becomes an ellipse with a cylinder. And then you project other things in there, and amazing new shapes that you've never seen before—and I made one of them for me to show my parents or my family, and I made it together with another one, [an] architect. We made two of these models, his survived, mine disappeared somehow, but his survived and he recently showed this to a department of architecture in Germany and there was a film made of it. I mean—this all comes from Ulm, you know? And the main idea to me is to open up new ways of vision. Actually we had recently, in the Annenberg School [University of Pennsylvania], a discussion on the requirements of the first year, and I brought that up because everyone realized that people come from so many different areas, there is a place to challenge them or channel them to what we as faculty think is important. I don't think we can accomplish something like this, but there is the idea of doing that, and that was I think, very instrumental.

Then after the first year there were these various departments, there was product design, there was visual communication, there was architecture, and then there was what they called information. So then we could specialize. But let me say one of the important influences, maybe two, but most important I think was Max Bense. Max Bense was a philosopher from Stuttgart, he came because he developed a—one can say a theory of aesthetics, which was based on [Claude] Shannon's information theory. And the idea was actually—in retrospect I realize that it was not really a theory of aesthetics but, let's say, the cultural reception of art. And he said that, first of all, that art needs to be innovative, meaning new information—something that you're not accustomed to before, and if it is not then it is not art. That was the

definition of it. But then when it's innovative it attracts only a certain number of people, and later on after it becomes widely known, distributed, it loses the information. That is information theory. Now, he didn't really know very much about the information theory but he had a sense of the philosophy behind there. So he got us actually to think along these lines and that was very productive.

Max Bill, he was at that point already on the way out, mainly because—it was a revolt of the people that he had hired against his, one could say, a bit authoritarian role. Now, I think he was authoritarian. I also think he was—he knew his judgement was good, and he was right most of the time but he was a Swiss, he was direct, and he shot everyone down if they had done something wrong and that was not socially very good [laughs]. So he was thrown out, one can say. He gave a good seminar on the 20th century Bauhaus thinking, and I learned a lot from the different kinds of schools, different kinds of movements, and in Germany, the Bauhaus which was said to be—or they took as a predecessor of Ulm. It had also the flavor of an avant-garde institution, it was moved—it started in Dessau, no in Weimar, as an arts—in the time of an arts and craft movement. [Walter] Gropius, who later came to the United States, he realized that it's not really the kind of environment and he found a place in Dessau. Dessau was an industrial city, and there the Bauhaus became famous, and it attracted avant-garde people–[Wassily] Kandinsky and [Paul] Klee and whatever—painters. There was a movement of arts, of performance, and there was a lot of communist influences, but in a very strange way, not in a Soviet sense, but the idea was that one should make products available to everyone—mass production, celebrative of mass production but doing with good products. That was kind of the motivation of Bauhaus and it entered also Ulm. Then later on the Bauhaus moved to Berlin and then it was completely eradicated and people went to Chicago, etc., etc. But I learned a lot about the history of these kind of ideas, of design, of architecture, etc.

So, Max Bill was one and the other was Max Bense, and Max Bense was I think—he was the intellectual, and he gave Ulm, I think, the intellectual status that others lacked because most of them didn't have academic degrees. When he—he stayed only one year after Bill left, and then he left. And then there was—because information was kind of the term that mobilized the whole department of information, as well as also our thinking, they said we have to have a replacement and they found an information theoretician, and that was Horst Rittel. And I remember the very first lecture, he didn't have a clue of what designers are like, he didn't have a clue of what the school was like, and he presented information theory starting with what is a probability and how one can account for that and he gave that. And people just—that was just too much. But Rittel was an amazing character, he was very adaptable, he saw very quickly what is design and what he could contribute, and he became, one could say, a theoretician of design, which he maintained for the rest of his life, and he pumped into our thinking so many new ideas—one of which is cybernetics—the idea of feedback; planning, the idea of making plans and realizing them; what it means to plan; competing plans; systems theory; thinking that you know when you design a gasoline station, you can't just design a gasoline station. You have to also see where all the other gasoline stations are—looking at systems not as a single product but a system of products—and so he was I think the intellectual engine that was critical to me. And I turned around these ideas in many ways.

There were of course others also. There were several Fulbright professors coming from the United States. One was actually from Ohio University on ergonomics. He could barely speak German, but he did and we learned a lot from him. He was a very advanced thinker on ergonomics—not that I liked the philosophy of it but still. Then the other one was Joe [Mervyn W.] Perrine. He had just graduated from Princeton University with a social psychology degree and he introduced the notion of social perception, which to me was very critical and, I mean, the examples from the studies were kind of minimal but, for example, I remember he talked always about a dollar note—a dollar coin is far bigger for a poor person than for a rich person. So that perception is tainted by your background and—even though he didn't do very much about design, but that's what I did later. But for me I think this was eye-opening, that even the notion of perception is determined by the social background of people. And you know that's artists and much of the design—they thought perception is simply registering what is there and all you have to do is present the form, and that shifted my whole perspective—that it is not the form that you make, rather than the perception of it, [that] is important. There was in Germany the word "Gestalt". Gestalt is also in the United States, Gestalt psychology, and Gestalt perception is very critical in matter of design. For example, the circle—when you make a circle and you make it not complete, it's still a circle, so that you complete this in order to have very simple forms. That's another part of perception issues, but what Perrine added is the social dimension, not just the geometric part. And so that was very important for me.

There were trios of the departmental work and well—I did a lot of products or things and I don't want to go into that, but I became also a representative of the product design department, and you mentioned earlier about the pipe. I was a representative and we had lots of struggles mainly because when [Max] Bill left, he left a schism between people that came actually to study with him and were disappointed, many Swiss, and others who were on the side of the administration and were opposing him. There were the Billists and the non-Billists. I didn't come for Bill, but I felt also that it is a bit unfortunate to weed out someone even though he was, as I said, a bit authoritarian. But he was still a very good teacher and mentor for lots of people, and he was very unconventional in many ways. So there were these discussion with the administration and I was a representative and someone said from my [fellow] students, Klaus, you act too fast, you have to take this pipe and light it and you answer only after you take a puff. And that's what I did, and I would say we won [laughs].

Now, whether we won because of that, is the question, but I continued to smoke for social reasons, just leisurely and without inhaling, up to 1972 or something like this and then I gave up. But I noticed also that the same type of strategy was given to Bertolt Brecht. Bertolt Brecht was one of my favorite poets and writers. He was a communist, he emigrated to the United States, and he was at some point cited in front of the House of Un-American Activity [House Un-American Activities Committee]. And there he was given the same advice. He was smoking a cigar, and they said, Don't answer until you have smoked a bit because that would give him time to think. And I have actually a record of this hearing and there was one question—there was, I think, a guy named [Roy] Cohn who was a lawyer for [Joseph] McCarthy. He read a poem to Brecht and it had something to do with the proletariat and whatever. It was clearly communist of sorts—inspired—but he was not really a communist communist. But he was—whatever. And there was no answer and it was said, Did you write this poem? No answer

on the record. And then he said, No, I wrote a German poem. So—he took advantage of a cigar, I took advantage of a pipe. That's one of the things.

Then I would say—well, as I said, I did a lot of minor innovations. I was actually crossing many departments. I took a lot of photography and became a very good photographer, and I went to the visual communication thing and I used typesetting. I did that and I participated in the information department in lectures over there. I didn't do very much in architecture but I was kind of overall, but my house was of course there.

Then came the issue of graduation and I had to do, the last year, two things. One is a practical work and the other one is a theoretical work. In the practical work I thought one should do something, not just another household gimmick or gadget. So I decided to do something that had also something to do with engineering and I designed a motor grader—one of those that does work on the street. And I went to a company not so far and got their drawings and talked to them and I did this. That was not a big show—that was not a big problem. I could do that.

But for the theoretical part I had during the time developed this interest in perception—and I was a little bit annoyed, one could say, because I was accepted as an engineer and several of the faculty wanted to become more engineering-oriented or scientific-oriented and so they thought—they had hoped that I would be someone who would contribute. But I had gone through the engineering practices and the idea, this determinism that engineers thrive on—this is precisely what I wanted to go away from when I went to Ulm. I wanted to have a more human-oriented—the complexity of humans are far more interesting than the determinism of engineering, designing bridges. So I was just opposed to this this kind of functionalism, and I wrote my theoretical work by saying that we should look at objects in terms of the signals or the signs they have in order to use it. So the object should not be the object, rather than the use. And that fueled, actually, much of my later work. It's surprising me.

Q: So could I jump in there? I mean, given the description I've read of this thesis work, it seems to be about the kind of communicative role of things in everyday life, and this would seem to be connected to your entire trajectory.

KRIPPENDORFF: Yes, in fact—one of the [unclear] also talked about communication—information, communication. And I framed the whole thing as communication. I had a bit of a limited idea, namely that objects should communicate something—and then I said, Well, designers should use objects to communicate with something and that fueled it. But now that wasn't the interesting development. The director of Ulm was [Tomás] Maldonado and he was also a cutting-edge painter, actually from Argentina. And he introduced the idea of semiotics into Ulm. But, anyway, that didn't gel with me. But since I was interested in this kind of thing, I went to him and said, That's what I wanted to do. And he said, Klaus, this is a categorical mistake. Objects are referents. Signs are what refers to the real world. And it was this traditional semiotic trajectory that there is a world of signs and a world of referents and you don't mix them. So I realized I couldn't work with him and I worked with [Horst] Rittel. And so that was, I think—that determined also my later trajectory. I think I have always been against this simplistic worldview of: Here are the symbols—knowledge, if you want—signs and there is the reality. That is, to me, connected by perception, by understanding, by lots of things. So I

wrote this and it was long. It was German. It was my first writing ever, so I don't really recommend it to anyone, even though it is now on the [University of Pennsylvania] Scholarly Commons and I get occasionally notices that someone read it, and I wouldn't say I'm embarrassed but I think I'm embarrassed now.[1] But at that time that was me [laughs]. So, then, after this, I stayed on—

Q: Could I just interject quickly, because I'm curious about the student culture at Ulm and you had mentioned in your memoir[2] a bit about adventures around the area and indeed going to this fortress with students—fellow students, and wandering around. You also mentioned an anecdote about a "red dot" controversy and I thought you could mention—

KRIPPENDORFF: It's not a controversy but the Höhle—that means a dungeon, no? That was a left over room underneath, through kind of a stairways, that was used sometimes as a storage place, but it was also used as a place to have parties. I have to also say something about the Ulm—you mentioned the climate and so on. Well, there was the city of Ulm, very traditional. There were some very avant-garde galleries that sympathized with Max Bill, with the Hochschule, and then there was the mountain Kuhberg and there was the Ulmer. So there was a split of sorts. But there was Carnival [festival] and, each year, the students in Ulm invited everyone—of course, girlfriends and so [on] from Ulm—to come there and celebrate Carnival. At some point that went almost out of control. For a month before that, the whole school was transformed into—you name it.

I remember one year someone had the idea of using [egg cartons]. So we got thousands of them, put them all in windows and everything and painted it. And so this was a big project. Everyone still talks about the fashion at Ulm. Many of the girls downtown, also men, they came there and had fun. And the Höhle was one of the things that one could explore for as a bar or something. And it was dark and dungy and we had, of course, red light or something red light Höhle. So that was it. But when Max Bill left—the last day before he left—there was a party in the Höhle and I was there. And I have to say, Max Bill was a big guy. But we had also one of the big students, who was also a big guy. He and another one from Holland whom I stayed in touch with, and I'm still in touch with—they decided to take Max Bill on their shoulders and show him—make a tour of his building that he had designed. So this was just fun, if you want. And then Max Bill took a piece of chalk out of his pocket and—over the Höhle, there was a grey cement wall and he signed "Max Bill." Well, I mean, this was it. And then, the next day, I thought—I talked to other people and said, This we should fix. So we went there with a chisel and hammer and a ladder and we chiseled that signature and it's still there. So that was the story about this.

But the student body, as I said, it was very divided because of Max Bill and later on because of Rittel not being a designer—being more like an intellectual. And he was kind of given a second-

[1] Krippendorff, Klaus, *Über den Zeichen– und Symbolcharakter von Gegenständen: Versuch zu einer Zeichentheorie für die Programmierung von Produktformen in sozialen Kommunikationsstrukturen* (Diplom Thesis, Hochschule für Gestaltung, Ulm, 1961), https://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/233/

[2] Krippendorff, Klaus, "Designing in Ulm and off Ulm," in *hfg, ulm: Die Abteilung Produktgestaltung: 39 Rückblicke*, ed. Karl A. Czemper (Dortmund, Germany: Verlag Dorothea Rohn, 2008), 55—72, http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/138

rate role in the school. He was at some point elected in the directorium, but later on they made a rule that only designers, professional designers, could be a part of it. So there was a lot of struggle and tension between the practitioners and the theoreticians, one could say. And there was another element that I always resented. Namely, the so-called practitioners, they had their studios and they could take jobs from industry and got money. They had, of course, to pay something to the school, but they were more interested in industrial jobs than in their students. And that was really offensive to me and there was one guy, [Hans] Gugelot in particular. He made major innovations and Brown Instruments—he made so many new things that the chairman, really—the face of the Hochschule as well as of modern design in the world—he was an amazing character. But he was not that open to—not interested in students. He was technically my advisor for my practical diploma work. I never met him. I mean, I showed him the model and that was it. So, I mean, he was not interested.

So the schism was not just theory versus practice, but also concern for people. And the so-called theoreticians—Rittel, etc.—they were of course teaching and they were really working with students and they were the ones that learned. The other ones stayed stable. So that was really the unfortunate tension that determined it. But still, I think the new ideas that came into Ulm through external lectures, through Horst Rittel, Max Bense, and lots of other people—that was truly amazing. And I actually, I had—I don't know if we should deviate from that. But I was recently in Basel, in a reunion of the former graduates. And the famous Hochschule für Gestaltung und Kunst in Basel invited us to be there and they wanted to show their—whatever. And I was so disappointed. They were so focused on shapes and colorful forms and gadgets and not on that what really mobilized me, what mobilized most others, namely the ideas. And I thought, Why don't, instead of making more exhibitions of the past, why don't we do something for the future? And I'd still like to do that: introduce the idea of a different kind of education system where you assist [unclear] of new ideas that haven't—may not be meaningful, but at least it gets you thinking in a different track. And that was, for me, Ulm in the end. And with these ideas, I could go almost anywhere and communication was one of them.

Q: Well, you said that you finished up your thesis at the same time you completed the motor grader project and that won an award. You decided, I think, to stay on for another year with the Research Center for Visual Perception, and can you say what that experience was like? It sounded as if maybe this tension you describe between the practitioners and the theoreticians kept plaguing that research center.

KRIPPENDORFF: Yes, exactly. That was Joe [Mervyn W.] Perrine, the American, and actually he was hired as a Fulbright Scholar to install in Ulm a system of demonstrations that were developed in Princeton [University] for perception. I don't know if you have ever heard about this? For example, there was a distorted room and when you take a picture, it looks like exactly a rectangular room. But if you walk in it from one side to the other, you become huge or very small. So this was [to] demonstrate the effects of perspective, and lots of things, on human perception. Now, a lot of other demonstrations—and they were installed there. He did this with the help of the workshops that were available in Ulm, and it was amazing. And then we developed or he developed this Institute [Research Center] for Visual Perception and we got

actually a big contract from Fraunhofer Society, which was actually connected with the military on issues of camouflage. And so we studied contrasts and so, for about a year, we did that. But we were the only kind of research institution in it [Ulm], and that created, as you suggested, tension between the practitioners and, well, researchers—whatever.

There was one guy, actually, he was very instrumental—he [Otl Aicher] was the husband of Inge Aicher-Scholl. He was a graphic artist and he was a very good artist. He changed the face of advertising in Ulm. In Ulm there were small columns this wide [gestures] for the latest information and he made the posters. He was an amazing character, and color was his metier. So he said, whatever colors, I'm the expert. Whatever you find is meaningless. Now with this attitude you can't survive very much because he was kind of in. And I suggested, I said, Well, you are a good artist but ordinary people—we study ordinary people in research and that is a different kind of thing and you could probably learn from that. But he didn't. So there was a lot of opposition to that and then I went to the United States and soon—and then there was, one could say, an administrative problem or—no, an administrative way of getting rid of it [the Research Center]. Namely, that asks the institute, the research institute, to pay a hundred percent of all the income to the Hochschule [Ulm], whereas the practitioner had only a small percentage. And that killed, in fact, the possibility of getting contracts, even though we were probably very cheap by comparison. But it faded away shortly after I went to the United States.

Q: One last question before we conclude, about that decision to move to the United States. And that is: You mentioned in this memoir about going to various factories for summer work or apprenticing. And one such summer, maybe it was 1959, you went to Oxford in the UK and you described a pair of experiences, at least, that were interesting to you—

KRIPPENDORFF: Well, as you said, we had the summer. There was the quarter system and the summer quarter was available to us. And, the first, I went back to my old engineering company, because I could make money. I had to support myself. And then I worked for another company. That was in Ulm. And I thought it would be good to have a different kind of experiences and that was very helpful. But then I decided I need to learn English because I had—my education was rather minimal. As I said, with 14 years I went out of school and became a practitioner, a craftsman. So my English was miserable. And I went to Oxford and, I mean, I knew a little bit but this was totally inadequate. And there I went to get a job at the refrigerator company, which, incidentally, was next to the production facility of the Mini, the British Mini, which is much smaller than the ones now produced. So I went to Oxford—the assembly line, I saw that. But this was more like a cultural experience. The work itself—actually I designed—and this was maybe the beginning also of my interest in communication. One of the things is—I saw problems with adjusting the temperature of refrigerators, so I designed a way to indicate whether cold or warm, etc., etc. And that's what I did. And whether it was produced, I don't know.

But I met there—that was interesting to me—I met there someone who was in the Bauhaus. And he was of course interested in finding out all about Ulm, and so we developed a very good relationship and he became kind of a mentor of mine. But I wanted to know more about the Bauhaus and he couldn't say very much. And I realized that, even with a good education, an

avant-garde education, you can become an ordinary draftsman, which he was. And I didn't want to do that [laughs], you know. But I lived actually in a, one could say, in a house that housed many workers—an Irish family—and that's what my English came from. The conversations with factory workers, which was not very good.

Oxford was of course a university town. And I roamed that town and I went among others to Blackwell, which is the famous publisher and original bookstore in Oxford. And I picked up two books. One is by Ross Ashby on cybernetics, which I heard of from Horst Rittel, and that was called the *[An] Introduction to Cybernetics*, published in 1956. And it was complicated because, as I said, my English wasn't that great. And the other one was [Ludwig] Wittgenstein's *Tractatus [Logico-Philosophicus]* [1921]. That was more easy because it was both in German and in English. That was really very instrumental. And I worked through that and that helped me a lot, thinking about it. And later on it turned out that both of these books were absolutely instrumental in my later preoccupation with communication. With Ashby because, when I went to the University of Illinois, or maybe I should—should I talk about that?

Q: You could mention it quickly—

Krippendorff: Well, I found him at the University of Illinois and I became a student of his. And later on I became—we organized an Ashby Club to digest all the ideas among the students, ourselves. So he became an important figure in my life. And then Wittgenstein of course, with his theory of language, that was also, to me, I think instrumental, even though, I mean—there was a later Wittgenstein that was far more important in the end, but he was the one who started questioning the issue of language, reality, etc., etc. So both of these books were instrumental. But then I went back to Ulm and then I wrote my work and then stayed for one more year, and during that time, actually, I applied—before I went to England—I applied for a Fulbright travel grant. And that was with the American embassy [Consulate] in Stuttgart. And I was interviewed, actually, much later and they agreed to finance it. So I got actually a fellowship that was totally new, [the] Ford [Foundation] International Fellowship. And the Ford Company wanted to support studies in the United States and I got that. And then the travel grant from Fulbright, and with that I came to the United States. But as I said, you know, earlier on, to me that was not such a big step because, as I said, I was so primed by my parents to come to the United States and see the adventures. And I wanted to see, actually, many of the adventures and many of them I didn't. So I had different adventures. But it was to me a very important target. Yeah, I have to also say, my brother, who became a political scientist, he got, the year before me, also a Fulbright grant to come to the United States. And he was here already and picked me up at the ship. So that's also the influence, I guess, of my parents.

Q: Well, that's a perfect place to conclude this first session, so thank you very much Klaus.

KRIPPENDORFF: Thank you for asking questions and giving me the opportunity.

## END OF SESSION ONE