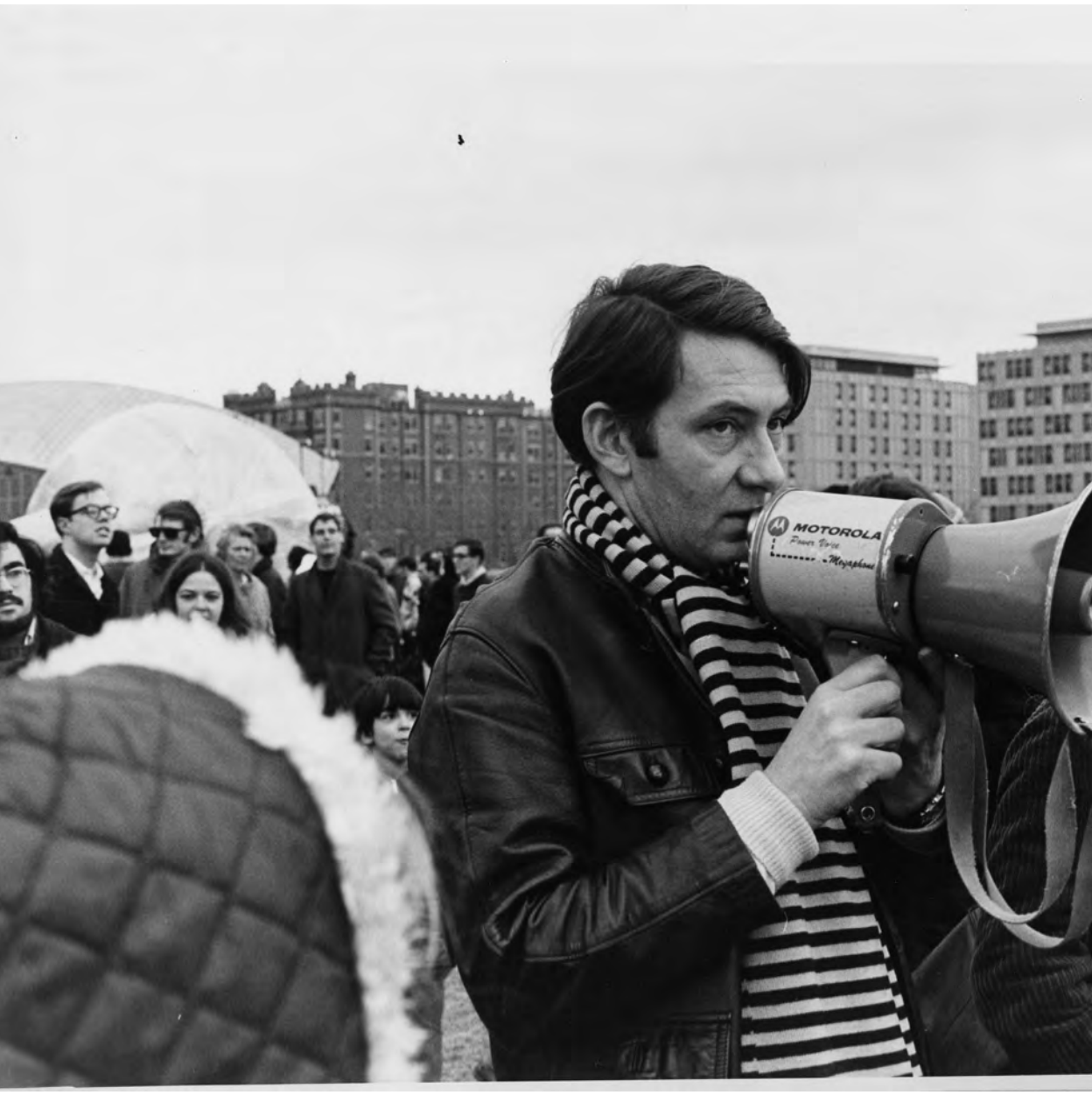
MATTHEW WISNIOSKI

Otto Piene On CAVS and MIT

This interview was conducted by Matthew Wisnioski on December 16, 2010 in the offices of the new Program in Art, Culture, and Technology, Wiesner Building, MIT.



Matthew Wisnioski: Let's start by going back to your arrival at MIT in 1968— "tumultuous" seems to be the word that describes that moment. Kepes has just gotten the Center started by talking about "universal harmony," while at the same time there is increasing anxiety and disunity around MIT's mission and the Vietnam War. Do you remember what it was like to enter into that environment?

Otto Piene: Well, it took a while. In 1965, I had my first one-man show in New York in the Howard Wise Gallery. And that also was the time when the famous/infamous 'blackout' happened in New York City. I was in the building then and people thought it was my fault, because I had light sculptures that consumed some power in my show. But I had nothing to do with the Blackout as it turned out. During my exhibition, three very little distinguished looking gentlemen walked into this exhibition, the title of which was Light Ballet. And of the three, one obviously was the "speaker" so to speak, and he introduced himself as Gyorgy Kepes, of whom I had heard quite a bit, but I hadn't met. He looked at the show, and said he was impressed, and would I have time to talk to him. During that appointment which was in part at MIT and in part at Kepes' house, he explained to me that he was about to form a Center for integrated efforts in art/science/technology, and it was not happening tomorrow, but was due to happen in the foreseeable future, and would I care to accept an invitation to be a Fellow at this new Center. All in all, it took another 2 years until the Center was really there, but I was very curious, and also interested. This was something new and I had hoped that indeed this hoped-for-union would happen. I was particularly interested if it happened at MIT, because I knew that MIT was a radiant place for the sciences and engineering . . .

Otto Piene, *Hot Air Sculpting*, MIT, 1969.

I arrived in Cambridge on something like the 5th of January 1968. And the Center was there. It was not a lavishly equipped place, but there was space, there were to be colleagues, and it was beautiful to have this nucleus…or be part of this nucleus of people interested in art/science/technology such as Stan VanDerBeek or Takis and Jack Burnham. And initially, we were five and then six, and that was it. The Center had five big studios for one artist each, and the biggest room in the Center was Kepes' studio office. So the energy came from Kepes to begin with, and then from the Fellows—grown people, grown artists so to speak, who were all interested in the Center at MIT. They were all confident that something could be done, although it was not clear what it would be, because Kepes's carrot for people to come here was that there was going to be the US Bicentennial to be celebrated in Boston.

MW: He had mentioned that to you prior to your arrival?

OP: Yes. And the other artists the same story. They came mostly intrigued by this grand plan of Kepes to be the major motor and the major drive in celebrating the US Bicentennial in 1976.

MW: So celebration was a theme of CAVS even before you became director in the 1970s?

OP: Yes. However, the site of the celebrations was moved to Washington, and it wasn't happening in Boston.

MW: When was this discovered?

OP: I think it was months after the Center was formed. And it was a great disappointment. It was like the air went out of the great balloon of expectations. However, the fellows met often, with Kepes, without Kepes. And a kind of small community, but an interesting and fairly strong and vibrant community, did form on from there.

MW: At CAVS' founding, if you look at the press that was produced, there was a lot of celebratory coverage, but there also was talk about a "shotgun wedding" with MIT buying off artists to make them "apologists for the system." Was there talk among the fellows about CAVS as a "Cold War" institution?

OP: That is a pretty bold concept! The Center is definitely…I mean…should I say, speaking out and trying to act in the name of the right values. That is, *love* and *peace*, and *interaction* among well-meaning creative people. Not only in the arts but also in the sciences, and among the engineers. I think that can be said fairly clearly. And these peace-loving people were not only among the artists, they were also among the

scientists, particularly among those at MIT who had been major players in World War II, such as those who were involved in the concept and development of nuclear bombs. Some of them had turned peace activists, and some of them had turned lovers of art. And had to develop a rather different profile from than they had been made to adhere to during the war when very very serious stuff was being developed at MIT. One of the most impressive people at MIT was the then Provost and later President of MIT, Jerome Wiesner. He developed or co-developed radar—it was one of the most crucial developments that happened at MIT in the name of the World War II.

MW: Were the scientists and engineers who were attracted to working with artists people who you would characterize as motivated by "love and peace"?

OP: Some were, some not. But the main interest was in developing the arts among the engineers, but particularly among the physicists. Physicists were always the most animated supporters of—not the fusion—but the mental union so to speak between the scientists, particularly the natural scientists, and the artists. Another one who was very strongly supporting the Center at MIT was Doc Edgerton who originally was an engineer, but increasingly was a scientist and physicist who did beautiful things. And was at the same time an artist—an artist of a calibre that was very rare among scientists and among artists. So, there were people here who attracted the alertness of the artists as they came into the MIT campus.

MW: On this subject, there were definite precursors to the sky art you did at MIT—in Group Zero, and even back to your experiences during World War II. But when you arrived at MIT, it seems that instantly there was a jump in scale and the crystallization of calling this work "Sky Art." Was that premeditated or was it something that emerged out of interactions when you arrived?

OP: It was premeditated. I came here in part to realize—to practically pursue—some of the work in the *name* of the ideas that had a lot to do with Sky Art, work that had a lot to do with art that *wasn't* being done among artists anywhere. There were

following page, Otto Pience, *A Field of Hot Air Sculptures Over Fire in the Snow,* MIT, 1969.

some people who dealt with attempts at flying objects and let's say a first tentative formulation of ideas that could lead to flying objects that would then later be subsumed as I inserted into the debate as well as into the work the words "Sky Art." It was clear what it meant, it was self-explanatory. And the Center with its six fellows initially—five plus Kepes—was an instant breeder of concepts. And, on the one hand, that was Kepes' "fault" so to speak! On the other hand, the reason I came here, I had founded in Germany years before I had founded Group Zero. Group Zero has very similar ideas and values as what Kepes pursued with his new Center for Advanced Visual Studies. Except that Kepes was at MIT!

MW: When you arrived did Kepes introduce you to Doc Edgerton and Walter Lewin?

OP: That's how he practiced his role as director of the Center. Kepes was very formal, but also a social creature. He was a gracious host of small dinner parties at his house and of meetings, conferences, and project building activities at the Center. Kepes also was a brilliant language artist. Maybe in part because of his upbringing in different countries. But his power of speech was mostly the power of metaphor.

MW: The first major work you did here was the "Light Line Experiment," which you collaborated with Walter Lewin?

OP: I met Walter *because* of the light line project. I put a sign outside the window of the MIT office. "I would love to invite scientists and students who are interested in an air and helium experiment to participate," and a day later, maybe on the same day, in walks this tall Dutch man and says, "What is this experiment with helium?" I said, "Well, it's me." And we became instant friends, and later on Walter worked with me with the Munich Olympics and lots of other things. And that is pretty much in the spirit of what Kepes had hoped for. That there would indeed be connections to personal sympathy, as I had said about for Group Zero. Group Zero was based on personal friendships. . . . The personal relationships were very important and were very productive.

MW: Where did you get the helium?

OP: Through MIT. My helium suppliers in the early days were the people in the cryogenic lab. And it was just a normal way of procuring materials needed for MIT projects.

MW: As the projects got bigger, did MIT remain the main source of materials? I ask because the actual making of sky art and other projects are elements that don't get enough attention. Where did the materials come from, how you do the managerial work, etc.?

OP: Yes. This is all stuff that developed. I had to learn how to do that, but it wasn't alien to me. My father was a physics teacher when he was alive. So these things were—I shouldn't say natural—but near to me. And MIT is a fantastic place. It is very inspiring to be inventive, to develop initiatives, to develop initiatives in groups. That was one of the major things that Kepes encouraged. And I came from there. I had worked with groups all my life. Hence Group Zero, which is still very much in existence. We have a Group Zero foundation in Düsseldorf, we have an institute, and so on and so forth. It's all been part of the threads of my life that we worked together with likeminded people. They didn't all have to do the same things. They didn't even have to do similar things, but the spirit was bringing people together.

MW: I think in many of your projects there is this definite air of looseness; letting people do what they want, creating points of contact. With bigger projects, I am thinking of the Munich Olympics and *Centerbeam*, in what ways did you need to become a manager?

OP: Well, if you a bad manager, don't do group work. It's really part of the fun of working together with people from other backgrounds, doing work together that's bigger than what one can do in a studio. Even the studios at CAVS were important because they were larger studios than what people had at home. The Center was smaller than other research centers at MIT, but it was *there* and it was the *only* one dedicated to what I call arts/science/technology together, and it remained the only one for the first 10 years or so. We were just quite alone in the field of integration in this sense.

MW: And yet there are a number of trends at MIT and beyond that touch upon what was going on at CAVS at that time; systems art, for example. I think you once put it as "people mean many different things when they talk about technology . . ."

OP: This came in part from the Center. I think the man who coined this phrase systems art was Jack Burnham. And Jack was an important fellow at the Center, and actually I knew him before I was at the Center and before he came to the Center. We were friends for quite a while, and Jack came to the Center, and he wrote most of his book

following page, Otto Piene, *Hot Air Sculpting*, MIT, 1969.

Beyond Modern Sculpture at the Center. We used to refer to him as the artist who introduced the use of the typewriter into the artist's studio.

MW: At the time did you think about these categories? Gene Youngblood, for example, called you a "design scientist," getting the term from Buckminster Fuller. Later Lawrence Alloway said you were a "post-technocratic artist." Did any of these come close to the mark?

OP: Well, a decent part. When other people look at what you are doing, and what's in your head, it's usually a little less narrow that what you are doing yourself, and you develop new things . . . these are fine people. I like Gene Youngblood too, but he was never at the Center. And to find likeminded people who I didn't know before, who kind of didn't exist before, is in a certain way very encouraging. A strong momentum came out of these sometimes chance meetings and sometimes meetings initiated more deliberately.

MW: You left CAVS after your Fellowship was done, and then you came back in 1974 to accept the directorship. How was your experience of MIT under those circumstances different than your arrival?

OP: In a sense I had never left, I was actually away from the Center only for six months because of the Olympics in Munich. Otherwise, I was here in one capacity or another. Since 1972, I was a visiting professor here, and Kepes had told me several times in the past that I was to be the next director of the Center. *Before* he said that, at some point, I said I was leaving. People at Stuttgart had offered me a full professorship with all the flags attached, and I was not that settled to make a living in Boston. Boston at that time was even less friendly to the arts than it is now. Now MIT is very open to the arts; at least it's part of MIT's declaration of values, so to speak. Boston is still not a major art city, but what's major is the impulse that draws arts/science/technology.

MW: When you became the director, it wasn't clear that MIT was enthusiastic about the arts.

OP: No. No. But, as I said, there were so many smart people, productive people at MIT that it had to come that way. They had to get involved in the arts, because the arts themselves moved towards science, towards technology, towards all these things that happened, are happening now, and happening more and more and more. It was only a. . it was not really a shotgun marriage! It was a shotgun love over time. And I think that's what counts.

MW: From an administrative point of view, however, there were a lot of changes when you took over. You expanded CAVS' mission to environmental art and media arts

and celebrations. If you move outside to other parts of MIT, you find people talking about transitions coming out of the push back against defense funding and the Instrumentation Lab. Do you think these projects were related?

OP: Increasing, they were related. And finally after ten years or so, other institutes, other people, other countries woke up to what's happening. Initially we had a lot of resistance in the art community. In many places they kept saying MIT is a war force. It's still not entirely removed from the dark corners of the studios in New York City, this thinking that MIT is just a warmonger. So that's in part what we were *against* in the art community initially. Now it's all changed . . . now we have ZKM Karlsruhe, which is modelled after our Center, we have KHM in Cologne, which is modelled after our Center. For the Cologne institute I was the "commissar" funded by the ministry of education in the state of Northern Westphalia. They had the first art/science/technology institute even before Karlsruhe, and something very similar happened in Karlsruhe. The man who founded the Karlsruhe institute, the then mayor of Karlsruhe, came to our Center to learn about *a* Center for Advanced Visual Studies. So the whole thing spread and expanded and the expanding is still going on . . . Initially we were one small institute, a very small one. And now there are hundreds and hundreds of them all over the world. Some are much bigger than this Center has ever dreamt of becoming. The people in Karlsruhe have so much money, maybe too much money. They are not the only ones who have too much money. There are other institutes that don't have enough money to go around. Some of them are the more creative ones.

MW: This begs the question of how CAVS was supported when you took over, because a significant part of the new Center was an educational program. Can you explain how the SMVisS program came to exist?

OP: Initially, I was asked by the Dean of the School of Architecture and Planning, who was otherwise not too active a supporter of the arts and certainly not a practicing artist himself. He said, "wouldn't you be interested in teaching what you are practicing? And hence when you have now become the director of the Center, would you be interested in developing an educational program?" I did that, and that program was immediately fairly successful because MIT students were just *starved* for musical values and practice—by musical I mean the muses. I realized very soon that my two friends who were also teaching the arts in a different way, meaning Nicholas Negroponte, who developed the computer interest in the Department of Architecture, and Richard Leacock, the filmmaker, we got together and said we've got to have a graduate program. We can get only go so far with what we have now, but the greater talent is with those who aspire to be graduate students and develop way beyond the college level. So, we drew up some kind of program for a graduate program to

be, and it passed the academic council at MIT. You cannot have a graduate program unless you are *blessed* into life by the academic council. And from then on we had our small but significant graduate program. And for a number of years, this backup of interests and ambitions that had accumulated at MIT and other places led to very bright people applying. And of course since this is MIT, we could not have the word "art" in the program, so it became the graduate program in "Visual Studies." We developed the degree of Master of Science in Visual Studies. Innocent sounding . . . and on from there.

MW: The other major development in this regard was the creation of the Council for the Arts. Was that on the whole a good thing for CAVS?

OP: It took a while until we kind of sorted each other out. But I think now it's probably working okay. And then of course after the graduate program, the most important thing was the founding of the Media Lab. That was Nicholas mostly, Nicholas and Jerry Wiesner. They toured the world for a little while to drum up the money, which they got. Whereas the Media Lab operated typically with a lot of money from the start, our Center for Advanced Visual Studies never had that much money, but we always had the money we thought we needed. That meant that people like my wife—who became our exhibitions and projects director—and I did a lot of fundraising . . . When it came to projects, we always learned how to have the money we needed, essentially from nothing.

MW: And Jerome Wiesner started as President almost the same time as you started as the Center's director. Was he supportive of CAVS in the early 1970s?

OP: He was initially mostly for the Media Lab. It was one of his chosen hatching projects. He changed in the course of his tenure and became fonder of the Center over time. I had great sympathy for him, and vice versa. He did good things for the Center as well. For example, we needed money for *Centerbeam*. We went to him and I said, "This a big project, and this is going to be in the books as MIT projects in art/science/

Otto Piene, CAVS, *Son of Balloon Carpet*, Lobby of Building 7, MIT, 1974. From *Technology Review*, 1974.

technology." We were in his office, he sat behind his desk, and picked up the phone and said into the telephone, "Hi Jim, how are you today. I have some people here who need some money. Can you give us some?" Just like that.

MW: When *Centerbeam* was happening, was there a sense that Media Lab was already in the works?

OP: That's a good question. It may be have been in the works, but it wasn't the same thing yet. Not what we see now…

MW: Part of the reason I ask is because Nicholas Negroponte in his recollections of Wiesner says that there was a meeting in August 1978 along the lines of: "I went into Jerry Wiesner's office and I said 'Here's what we are going to do.'" Were you still in conversation with Wiesner about how everybody was going to fit into this new space for the arts at MIT?

OP: There had been meetings for years about my role and my contributions, which went on all the time. One person who was in these meetings was our current boss for the arts, Phil Khoury. He was in these constituting meetings, intellectually constituting the role of the arts. And that included the role of the Media Lab and the role of the CAVS. Our Center increasingly concentrated on projects, always including students, including undergraduate students, including graduate students. The projects became my instruments to raise funds. Our Center lived for *years* off the projects that we developed. *Centerbeam* was one of them. And compared to the money that scientists raised and some projects that the Media Lab produced, our funds were modest but productive. So we could do, at least in my view, what we wanted to do, what we dreamed of doing. Our projects were artistic. We didn't build prototypes for industry or anything like that. Whereas the Media Lab moved increasing towards the industrial media and electronic broadcasting media. Ours were artistic. *Centerbeam* was an artistic project. It was a sculpture about communicating with the universe . . .

So in a certain way the roles of these carriers of the arts of MIT defined themselves were hardly competing. I've never had a really bad day with Negroponte. People always try to construe that we were enemies. Ah-ah. No such thing. It would have been just too interesting for some people for that to happen. No. First we had worked together to create the graduate program and then we kind of supported each other. Some of my students took Nicholas's classes and some of his students took my classes, in the spirit of collaboration, just as our relationship to Harvard was like that. There were times when I had more graduate students from Harvard in my classes than MIT students. But the spirit of collaboration was really alive, and well, and real.

And all these conflict theories was wishful thinking on the part of all the people who did not have it, and who didn't know it, and didn't understand how people could really productively work together despite occasional skirmishes, that's unavoidable. Essentially it worked really well.

MW: So there wasn't a tension in this split between the Media Lab and what CAVS was doing? It feels as if CAVS moved away from computer and electronic arts in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

OP: We had what we needed and what we needed turned out to be needs in context for specific projects such as the Sky Art Conference, which was a rather interesting animal. And it kind of migrated and migrated internationally and produced interesting things and it was also our connection into the sciences at MIT. So the split was about such things that I had refused to accept during my entire tenure at MIT—to accept defense money. No defense money. The Media Lab has been *rolling* in defense money. That's where people saw conflicts. "Okay, good luck!" We were just different.

MW: I might push this a little more, and you can say that you don't want to go in this direction. In a previous interview, you said, "Its fine that MIT has got a Media Lab, but I think the Media Lab is on the wrong track, essentially promoting what the mail has done forever."

OP: I am sure that's what I said [*Laughs*].

MW: Is this part of a broader tension between models based on Media Labs and models based on CAVS? That is, do new programs elsewhere wrestle with the question "are we principally an arts-oriented technology-influenced collaborative, or are we a market-oriented aesthetically-influenced collaborative?" Do you see that as a productive tension?

OP: I think the tension has been productive one way or another, whether it was sympathetic or not. As I said, in my view, in my experience, it was a mostly sympathetic working together. And we have done things together we couldn't have done alone. If you look at the institutes that came out of the Center and in part out of the Media Lab, there are the same differences there. The offspring of the Media Lab are Media Lab type things and the offspring of the Center are mostly artistic things. And thank goodness. We never considered ourselves part of MIT doing what other people at MIT are already doing very well…

Part of the way I understood my mission was to do what Kepes didn't do. Kepes wrote beautiful books, he had wonderful ideas, he expressed them very beautifully, and formulated them, and was obviously a teacher of very strong, deep impression—making deep impression on lots of people that had anything to do with him. And my relationship with Kepes from the start was very good and also very respectful mutually. And essentially, I did what I had to and Kepes did what he had to do. We both kept doing what we considered important. But there were certain differences there. And the differences were, for instance, my role in those meetings about the arts at MIT was that what MIT does not have and needs and will need in the future is "dirt" studios, otherwise MIT will become an intellectualizing art-teaching arm of MIT. And that's not why we are here. We are here to get our hands dirty on things that don't exist, and will exist because people get their hands dirty; meaning realization of ideas, materialization of concepts. That does not mean we don't like concepts and we don't like ideas before they get to be reality. But, unless all these beautiful concepts and all these beautiful ideas become part of the world, meaning reality, in one form or another, they essentially remain academic exercises. And that's only half the reality we are after.

MW: And you felt *Centerbeam* was an example of that coming together?

OP: Yes. We had very productive fellows. Somebody who had a very important role in the becoming of *Centerbeam* was Lowry Burgess. He had enough of realising force in him to develop things to the degree at which others could join and make them tangible. We have had other people like that at the Center too. So if you look at list of fellows over the years, there are different types of artists that have graced the Center. And it was good. It was very exciting to be here, and very interesting, and there was constant exchange among the people while they were working. And *Centerbeam* was one case, a rare case where the artist worked with scientists, and the scientist worked with artists and they enjoyed it. And some of them are still friends of ours like Walter Lewin and Harriet Casdin-Silver—certain art forms had to do with collaboration, had to do with sciences for the arts, holography for instance. Steve Benton, who was one of my successors, was an excellent scientist. He did important things in the development of holography, not at the Center, before he came to the Center, when he was working for Edwin Land. I think Steve was probably the only pure scientist who was a director of the Center . . .

MW: When *Centerbeam* was happening, what was the sense in MIT administration, the School of Architecture? Were they excited about this project?

OP: Sometimes things were good and sometimes they weren't. The School of Architecture has been a kind of mixed bag. Sometimes sympathy, sometimes collaboration, and sometimes lack of understanding, and also envy . . .

We could build things, and we *built* things. That was important. That's what the Center needed. That's what the Center got. For years. And we had people like Harriet Casdin-Silver, who was a very bright woman, and aggressive, productive, and all that. And she led holography to heights that it hadn't seen before. Initially by the way of Steve Benton. He initially came into the arts because he did things for Harriet while she was working with her holography at the Center. With Architecture, in a certain way, that is a matter for its own book. The relationship to architecture changed time and again. I've worked a lot with architecture, with architects. The problem is psychological. To this day, the architects think that they are the arts, and the arts should do what the architects tell the arts to do. That of course would be a mistake. With very few exceptions. Sometimes you have few people who are very good architects we have admired, like Louis Kahn who was the first genuine professor in the United States whom I met, because the first person I met at the University of Pennsylvania was Louis Kahn. That was my introduction to live American architects, and he happened to be the best. Etc., etc. So architecture has always been important at the Center, not just because Kepes started working very well with the architects in the past. During my day we had very strong relations to US architects. The man who did not become the director of the Center when I became the director was an architect, Friedrich St. Florian, he was Kepes's deputy for a number of years. So our relationship to architecture was long and complicated and complex, because the Dean was always an architect. And on the other hand, what we were thinking about architecture was sympathetic but not necessarily same. So there were some conflicts there.

MW: This is why CAVS reported to the Provost rather than the Dean of Architecture when you started?

OP: Yes. When I became the director, I brought it to the Provost. The Provost was my director, not commander, but academic authority. And that changed when one president of MIT, Paul Gray, a very well meaning, quiet man did not continue that format. He changed the administrative structure so that the Center directors—nowadays I think there are 45 research centers at MIT—would not respond to the Provost, but to the nearest dean.

This certainly was not inspired or influenced by the Center directors. It was something that Paul Gray decided was good for MIT. How the effects were, I can't judge.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MW: Was Bill Porter the Dean?

OP: No. Bill Porter was Dean when I became the director. Will Porter is the man who formally appointed me as Kepes's successor. And Will Porter had mixed qualities, but he certainly was sympathetic to the arts and the Center. I am fully convinced that he meant well.

MW: So when Gray made this decision, what was the consequence?

OP: That the Center directors had less direct contact with some vital respondents for the Center, such as fund raisers. I guess that was in part behind it. I've never seen *massive* negative consequences, except yes, fundraising at MIT always came first. It's not easy to raise funds for an institute that is not fully independent. Anyway, there are many ways to this. When I dealt with the Provost of MIT, during Jerry Wiesner's time the provost was Walter Rosenblith. Walter was a real character. He was very good as a Provost, but he never became MIT President. He was kind of a ruffian in the way he dealt with his subjects. But I got along very well with him really well, [*laughs*] because when he yelled at me, I yelled back.

MW: You just said when characterizing your work that essentially "we built things." There is a kind of engineer vs. scientist difference here that I want to use to take us back to *Centerbeam*. *Centerbeam* was clearly the biggest thing CAVS ever produced as a single project . . .

OP: We did it for the Documenta. *Centerbeam* was *built* for Documenta. I got the director of the Documenta—actually he was director twice—Manfred Schneckenburger, to invite us to make a project. That was the first time that any academic institution was invited to the Documenta, and also the first time that any students participated in a Documenta. The only thing I should say that was bigger than the *Centerbeam* was the Sky Art Conference. Except the Sky Art Conference was an organism, and it was not one but I think we ended up holding Sky Art Conferences, and being asked all

previous spread: Otto Piene, CAVS, *A Field of Hot Air Sculptures Over Fire in the Snow*, MIT, 1969.

left, Otto Piene, CAVS, *Hot Air Sculpting*, MIT, 1969.

following page, Otto Piene, CAVS, *Hot Air Sculpting*, MIT, 1969.

the time, "can we have another Sky Art Conference," and I am saying, I don't think we can because it's too complex to do if you don't have an administrative apparatus at hand to do it with. Anyway. But *Centerbeam's* good . . . And the documentation of Centerbeam altogether is good. The film that Ricky Leacock and Jon Rubin made with government money on *Centerbeam* is going to be run in the 150th. It *was* a fairly productive enterprise altogether.

MW: Was there ever an attempt to create a similar scale project?

OP: No. Except all the times the idea came up to do *Centerbeam* again.

MW: Does *Centerbeam* still exist?

OP: Portions of it. It's in our barn in Groton, MA, and it's been stored there for I don't know how many years, because MIT didn't have the storage space. Okay, whereas our farm, which is not quite as big as MIT—its only 30 acres—MIT probably has a few more. In order to have it *anywhere* I said, "okay, we'll put it in out barn. And see what that's good for." [*Laughs*] And now it turns out it's not all that useless, because it is going to be part of the 150th.

MW: Was there ever an effort between 1977 and 1980 to have it displayed at MIT?

OP: There was an effort, yes. But these things *don't* happen at MIT. MIT is so manically attached to the future. They are always working on the next project, and the next project, and the next after the dozen projects after the next project. To install something like this of that size of MIT, it gets in the way of "progress." And therefore storage becomes a problem. So the ideas, the attempts to install *Centerbeam* on campus have been doomed not to come to fruition. . . .

I would certainly appreciate if bigger things could happen at MIT in the arts out of whatever the successes of CAVS, if it could ever happen. Because dimensions are important. Not all art has to be immaterial to be mentally expansive and mentally productive—such as the pyramids.

MW: What are your thoughts on the future of this kind of "avant-garde" art at MIT?

OP: One major theme that needs to be emphasized is immateriality/materiality. To deal immateriality, for any artist, you have to know everything about materiality. And it was exciting to *do* all that stuff, to deal with all these materials, and media. But I don't have any maxims to dispense at the moment. If you want to hear about that, I am going to have to think about it some more . . .