



Smithsonian

Archives of American Art

A Finding Aid to the Elaine de Kooning papers,
circa 1959-1989, in the Archives of American Art

Harriet E. Shapiro and Erin Kinhart

2015 October 21

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Collection Overview

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| Repository: | Archives of American Art |
| Title: | Elaine de Kooning papers |
| Date: | circa 1959-2013 |
| Identifier: | AAA.dekoelas |
| Creator: | De Kooning, Elaine |
| Extent: | 1.1 Linear feet 0.003 Gigabytes |
| Language: | The collection is in English. |
| Summary: | <p>The scattered papers of Abstract Expressionist painter Elaine de Kooning are dated circa 1959-2013 and measure 1.1 linear feet and 0.003 GB. Found within the papers are letters, writings, a sketch of John F. Kennedy, notes, a sound recording, a few documents regarding Willem de Kooning, transcripts of interviews of de Kooning, transcripts of recorded conversations between de Kooning and others, and transcripts of lectures by de Kooning and others. There are a few photographs of de Kooning and of de Kooning with others, including John F. Kennedy, artist James Bohary, and Ad Reinhardt, and of artwork. Most of the transcripts and few photographs are digitized. Also found are printed materials and two scrapbooks containing a variety of documents about de Kooning's protest against the death penalty and efforts to save the life of convicted criminal Caryl Chessman.</p> |

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

The collection was donated to the Archives of American Art in 2003 by Denise Lassaw, de Kooning's goddaughter and her mother Ernestine Lassaw, and in 2013-2015 by Denise Lassaw. Interview transcripts and lectures were donated in 2015 by Doris Aach, a friend who transcribed them for de Kooning.

Related Materials

Among the holding of the Archives is an oral history interview conducted in 1981 by Phyllis Tuchman, for the Archives of American Art's Mark Rothko and His Times oral history project. Also found is a collection of Elaine and Willem de Kooning financial records.

Processing Information

The collection was processed to a minimal level and a finding aid prepared by Harriet E. Shapiro in 2013. Additional papers were processed in 2015 by Erin Kinhart. Born-digital material was processed by Kirsi Ritosalmi-Kisner in 2019 with funding provided by Smithsonian Collection Care and Preservation Fund.

Preferred Citation

Elaine de Kooning papers, circa 1959-1989. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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Biographical / Historical

Elaine de Kooning (1918-1989) was an Abstract Expressionist painter, teacher and writer who lived and worked in New York City and East Hampton, N.Y.

Born in Brooklyn, New York, de Kooning studied briefly at Hunter College before enrolling at the Leonardo da Vinci Art School in New York City. She had her first solo exhibition in 1952 at the Stable Gallery in New York and has paintings in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and other institutions. She taught at Yale University, Carnegie Mellon Institute, University of Pennsylvania and other colleges and art schools. Elaine de Kooning died of lung cancer in 1989 at Southampton Hospital in Southampton, New York. Willem de Kooning, her husband of 48 years, survived her.

Scope and Contents

The scattered papers of Abstract Expressionist painter Elaine de Kooning are dated circa 1959-2013 and measure 1.1 linear feet and 0.003 GB. Found within the papers are letters, writings, a sketch of John F. Kennedy, notes, a sound recording, a few documents regarding Willem de Kooning, transcripts of interviews of de Kooning, transcripts of recorded conversations between de Kooning and others, and transcripts of lectures by de Kooning and others. There are a few photographs of de Kooning and of de Kooning with others, including John F. Kennedy, artist James Bohary, and Ad Reinhardt, and of artwork. Most of the transcripts and few photographs are digitized. Also found are printed materials and two scrapbooks containing a variety of documents about de Kooning's protest against the death penalty and efforts to save the life of convicted criminal Caryl Chessman.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged as 5 series:

- Series 1: Personal Papers, circa 1960s-1989 (Boxes 1, 3; 0.2 linear feet)
- Series 2: Interviews, Conversations, and Lectures, 1978-1988 (Box 1, ER01; 0.3 linear feet, 0.001 GB)
- Series 3: Photographs, circa 1960s (Box 2, ER02; 4 folders, 0.002 GB)
- Series 4: Printed Material, 1961-1982 (Boxes 2-3; 5 folders)
- Series 5: Scrapbooks, circa 1959-1962 (Boxes 2-3: 0.3 linear ft.)

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

- Abstract expressionism
- Artists -- Political activity
- Capital punishment
- Women artists
- Women authors
- Women educators
- Women painters

Types of Materials:

- Interviews
- Photographs
- Scrapbooks
- Sound recordings
- Transcripts

Names:

- Chessman, Caryl, 1921-1960
- De Kooning, Willem, 1904-1997
- Kennedy, John F. (John Fitzgerald), 1917-1963

Occupations:

- Authors -- New York (State)
- Educators -- New York (State)
- Painters -- New York (State)

Container Listing

Series 1: Personal Papers, circa 1960s-1989

0.2 Linear feet (Boxes 1, 3)

Scope and Contents: Personal papers include letters, writings by de Kooning, one sketch, an exhibition price list, and a few documents regarding Willem de Kooning. Letters sent and received concern de Kooning's Kennedy portraits and her efforts to save the life of Caryl Chessman. Notes and writings are on general art topics. Documents regarding Willem de Kooning include writings and photocopies of letters by Mercedes Matter, Ernestine Lassaw, and others, as well as one sound disc recording of Willem de Kooning whistling. Also found are two wooden Easter eggs sent by the White House to de Kooning to be decorated and returned.

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| Box 1, Folder 1 | Documents Regarding Willem de Kooning, 1989 |
| Box 1, Folder 2 | Exhibition List, Graham Gallery, circa 1963 |
| Box 1, Folder 3 | Letters, 1960-1977 |
| Box 1, Folder 4 | Notes, circa 1960s |
| Box 1, Folder 5 | White House Easter Eggs and Letter, 1986 Notes: Oversized items housed in Box 3. |
| Box 1, Folder 6 | Writings, circa 1960s |
| Box 1, Folder 7 | Sketch of President John F. Kennedy, circa 1963 |
| Box 1, Folder 8 | Willem de Kooning Whistling, circa 1960s 1 Sound discs (lacquer) |
| Box 3, Folder 1 | Oversized Easter Eggs from Box 1, Folder 5, 1986 |

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Series 2: Interviews, Conversations, and Lectures, 1978-1988

0.3 Linear feet (Box 1)

Scope and Contents: Found here are transcripts of audio interviews of Elaine de Kooning; conversations between de Kooning and others; and lectures by de Kooning. Most of the interviews, conversations, and lectures were transcribed by Doris Aach for Elaine de Kooning, who planned to use them for a book. Majority of transcripts are digitized. Also found are program scripts and interview transcripts for three film projects produced by Cort Productions.

Folder ER01 Digital Copies of Transcripts, 2013
0.001 Gigabytes (16 computer files)

Box 1 Transcripts of Interviews of de Kooning

Box 1, Folder 10 Conducted by Amei Wallach, 1988

Box 1, Folder 11 Conducted by Lyn Kienholz, "Arts LA," KCRW, 1987

Box 1, Folder 12 Conducted by Charles Hayes, for his book Pearl in the Mud, 1988

Box 1, Folder 13 Conducted by Molly Barnes, KPFK News, 1988

Box 1 Transcripts of Recorded Conversations

Box 1, Folder 14 [Between de Kooning, Unidentified Person, and Ellen Auerbach, 1988](#)

Box 1, Folder 15 Between de Kooning and Koos Lassooy, 1988

Box 1, Folder 16 Between de Kooning and Minna Daniels, 1988

Box 1, Folder 17 Between de Kooning and Antonia Zara, 1988

Box 1, Folder 18 Between de Kooning, Michael and Mildred Loew, and Judith (last name unknown), undated

Box 1, Folder 19 Between Elaine de Kooning and Willem de Kooning, and Tully and Gladys Filmus, 1988

Box 1, Folder 20 Between de Kooning and Arthur Tobler, 1985

Box 1, Folder 21 Between de Kooning, Courtney Sale Ross, and Karen Lindsay regarding Horizon Magazine Article, 1984

Box 1, Folder 22 Transcript of Image Gallery Lecture on Willem de Kooning by Elaine de Kooning, 1978

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| Box 1, Folder 23 | Transcript of Lecture by de Kooning About Her Life and Work, C.F.S. Hancock Lecture, 1985 |
| Box 1, Folder 24 | Transcript of Lecture by de Kooning at Whitney Museum, 1984 |
| Box 1, Folder 25 | Film Project Notes and Transcripts, Cort Productions, Inc., circa 1981-1984 |

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Series 3: Photographs, circa 1960s, 2013

4 Folders (Box 2)

0.002 Gigabytes (ER02)

Scope and Contents: Photographs depict Elaine de Kooning working on the Kennedy portraits in her studio, John F. Kennedy, artist James Bohary, and de Kooning and Ad Reinhardt at a protest. Also found are photographs of de Kooning's Kennedy portraits and portraits of Kennedy by other artists, and de Kooning's sculpture.

Box 2, Folder 1 Elaine de Kooning and Friends, circa 1960s

Box 2, Folder 2 Drawings of President John F. Kennedy, Photographs, circa 1960s

Box 2, Folder 3 Drawings of President John F. Kennedy, Transparencies, circa 1960s

Box 2, Folder 4 Artwork by Others, circa 1960s

Folder ER02 Note to Doris Aach from Elaine de Kooning concerning her "first piece of sculpture" (1967) and an image of that sculpture, Digital Photographs, 2013
0.002 Gigabytes (2 computer files)

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Series 4: Printed Material, 1961-1982

5 Folders (Boxes 2-3)

Scope and Contents: Printed material primarily concerns the exhibition of de Kooning's John F. Kennedy portraits, including exhibition publications and posters, as well as many news clippings about the Kennedy family. Also found is a portfolio of published serigraphs from the California Institute of the Arts.

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| Box 2, Folder 5 | Exhibition Publications, circa 1965 |
| Box 2, Folder 6 | Galley Proofs, circa 1960s |
| Box 2, Folder 7 | News Clippings, 1961-1982 |
| Box 2, Folder 8 | Posters, circa 1963 |
| Box 3, Folder 2 | Portfolio, California Institute of the Arts, 1960s |

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Series 5: Scrapbooks, circa 1959-1962

0.3 Linear feet (Boxes 2-3)

Scope and Contents: Two scrapbooks, compiled by Elaine de Kooning, pertain to her effort to save the life of convicted criminal, Caryl Chessman, and her protest against the death penalty. Volume 1 contains clippings. Volume 2 includes a copy of Chessman's 16 page letter to Governor Edmund G. Brown, clippings concerning efforts to save Chessman, de Kooning's speech notes for political rallies, her correspondence with attorney Rosalie Asher, and photographs of members of the art community involved with this cause.

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| Box 2, Folder 9 | Scrapbook, Volume 1, "The Chessman Story", circa 1959-1962 |
| Box 2, Folder 10 | Scrapbook, Volume 1, "The Chessman Story", circa 1959-1962 |
| Box 3, Folder 3 | Scrapbook, Volume 2, "The Real Story of Caryl Chessman", circa 1960 |

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