Smithsonian
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Group interview with AfriCOBRA founders

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Transcript

Preface

The original format for this document is Microsoft Word 11.5.3. Some formatting has been lost in web presentation.

Speakers are indicated by their initials.

Interview

Group Interview Part 1

AFRICOBRA Interviews

Tape GR3

TV LAND

GROUP INTERVIEW: BARBARA JONES HOGU, NAPOLEON JONES HENDERSON, HOWARD MALLORY, CAROLYN LAWRENCE, MICHAEL HARRIS

Note: Question difficult to hear at times. Also has heavy accent.

BJH: I don't think (Laughter) ... I don't think the Wall of Respect motivated AFRICOBRA. The Wall of Respect started first, and it was only after that ended that Jeff called some of the artists together and ordered to start working on the idea of philosophy in terms of creating imagery. You know, recently I read an article that said that the AFRICOBRA started at the Wall of Respect and I'd ... it's just said that some of the artists that worked on the Wall of Respect became AFRICOBRA members. You know, but the conception of AFRICOBRA did not start at the Wall of Respect.

MH: How different was it than OBAC? What was going on in OBAC?

BJH: Well, OBAC is what created the Wall of Respect.

MH: Right.

Q: Right.

BJH: Yeah, that was dealing with culture.

MH: But in terms of the outlook of the artists and all of that, how different was OBAC's outlook than what came to be AFRICOBRA?

BJH: Well, OBAC didn't have a philosophy, per se.

M: No.

BJH: I mean, they were considering personalities. You know? Who are we respecting in our community? Who do we think are significant (sic)? You know, and to make public art was the other. That's why the mural was done, to create public art where anyone can see it. You know? Can come to the wall and not be in an institution or enclosed in some type of building.

NJH: Right. And OBAC also was somewhat like an umbrella for all of the different disciplines.

(Group agrees)

NJH: Because everyone was involved in it. Writers and poets and dancers and musicians. You know, everybody. Because they ...

BJH: (Overlap) Dancers?

NJH: ... seem them come out of OBAC. And really from OBAC, you really have two, if you will, institutions that came out of there, which are AFRICOBRA and the AACM. You know?

W: Mm-hmm.

BJH: The writer's group ... I still ... they still ...

NJH: (Overlap) Yeah, Kuumba right.

BJH: I think they still exist.

NJH: Yeah, Kuumba. They still exist. They're working ...

BJH: So yeah.

NJH: So primarily ... because the Wall of Respect was the outcome of OBAC in terms of an actual actualized presence of that whole discussion and the dialogue and those feelings around what art and culture ought to be about if it wasn't already about that.

BJH: It was about the visual art workshop that did the Wall of Respect. But there are other artists, as he stated, that worked on different elements in terms of black culture.

NJH: Because some of the writings and some of the writers in the writers' workshops was embedded onto that wall. The musicians were there. I mean, in a way of speaking, it was a performance piece actually, which included the community as well, because it was an active, ongoing process that everybody was involved with. You know?

M: Right.

NJH: It was sort of like a block party in a way of speaking. You know, you can use that kind of analogy, and that whole sense of collaboration was beginning to manifest itself in a manner that had not been actually experienced before, to be perfectly honest. You know? At least that's my feeling about it, that it hadn't been experienced before. And it was one of those pivotal points that sort of launched all of the various entities of not only the visual artists, but the musicians, the writers and all of that. Everybody was energized out of that project.

Q: What motivated for the Wall of Respect to take place? What was the motivation?

BJH: To create ...

Q: (Overlap) What did ... what made it so important? What was so ...

(Overlapping comments)

BJH: To create a public art ... art that could be appreciated by the community. To recognize persons that we felt were significant in different areas, political, sports, theatre, musicians, religion ...

M: (Overlap) Religion, right.

BJH: You know, all of those. Carolyn was a part of the Wall of Respect, also, so ... the two of us are from the Wall of Respect and became AFRICOBRA members.

Q: What was ... could you talk a little bit about the relationship between the Wall of Respect and even AFRICOBRA in ...

BJH: AFRICOBRA wasn't even on the horizon when the Wall of Respect was being created. AFRICOBRA came later, after the visual art workshop became defunct (Laughter), you know, based on the celebration. The initial celebration of the wall had a tendency to kind of like ...

(Background noise)

BJH: ... create our demise. Right? Would you say that, Carolyn? I want to hear your ...

(Overlapping comments)

CL: That was ... well ...

BJH: ... perspective, because to me (Laughter) ... I'll just say that to me, I did not realize the power of art until I saw people with guns down there thinking that we were going to start a revolution (Laughter) by having this wall ... this presentation (Laughter) at this wall.

M: What?

BJH: The power of art. I realized the power of art at that point.

Q: You talk about that ... I never heard that story. What is that? What is that?

BJH: What did you say?

CL: You go ahead.

BJH: No, because I want ...

CL: (Overlap) You're great with this.

BJH: ... I don't want to dominate this (Laughter). M: No, you're not dominating.

CL: Because you have a sense of the history of this.

BJH: Well ...

CL: I'll chime in. I promise not to ...

BJH: Okay (Laughter).

CL: ... just sit here and observe.

BJH: The day that were suppose ... we had the presentation of the wall ... the introduction of the wall of respect. You know, they were having a ... let's say a program and everything. You know, people came down there. But on the other side of the street (Laughter) at the top of the buildings, there were people with guns. Okay?

Q: People ...

BJH: All ...

Q: Like what kind of people?

BJH: We don't know.

M: Right.

BJH: They could have been the CIA, the FBI. They were not a part of us.

M: Right (Laughter).

BJH: That's the whole point.

M: It was (inaudible) ...

BJH: (Overlap) They were not a part of us. They were not a part ... there was nothing revolutionary ...

M: (Overlap) They weren't invited (Laughter). Let's put it that way. They were not invited.

BJH: ... about this event except that it was seen as a revolutionary event that needed to be controlled by guns in case that we started a riot. Why would start a riot in our community trying to dedicate a wall to respect those who we felt were significant.

Q: Why do you think they were afraid? Why do you think they were so afraid?

BJH: I don't really know. Everything that's different to the power structure, anything that does not sink, I think that it offers a threat.

Q: Were there anything in the ... I mean, anything that was in those pictures, in that wall ...

BJH: (Overlap) There was nothing in that wall that ...

Q: ... that could look threatening?

BJH: ... offered any type of revolutionary confrontational imagery.

Q: Right.

NJH: Well, it surely wasn't from the perspective that it should cause, if you will, the authorities to be at odds with that mural being there. But again, we have to understand the temper of the times. You have the panther party. You have the Fred Hampton, then the whole situation that's taking place here. We had images of Muhammad Ali, which individuals decided they wanted to continue to call him Cassius Clay, and when he clearly told them who he was.

And that wall was, in a way, another example of speaking about who one is and collectively who we are. And you had Elijah Muhammad and you had other ... Malcom X on that wall. So it necessarily didn't have to have revolution written in letters, but it clearly had self determination and a new sense of self that was made in visual form.

Q: Was there any relationship between what was going on in the Wall of Respect with black power of in any sense?

NJH Well, I would have to say that those images were nothing short of being a visual example of black power, because we took the power of presenting ourselves, our own images, those people who we felt were important to us. And so that in itself is an expression of black power. It doesn't have to be spoken auditorially and it doesn't have to be written. You just have to make an image. And those are powerful images.

(Overlapping comments)

MH: I wasn't here ...

BJH: Black power was not the concept behind the wall.

M: Right.

M: No.

BJH: No. Black power was not that ... wasn't that concept.

M: Uh uh.

BJH: The whole concept is that these are the individuals which we felt should be respected, that we wanted to recognize, you know, as our leaders. Not to have somebody outside of our group to tell us who our leaders were. I think that was ... may have been a threat. You know, it was not like someone selected someone and said, "This is your leader. We are going to look to that person to give directions."

Q: But isn't it interesting how they would be afraid of artists? I mean, doesn't that tell you that art is actually more powerful than ...

BJH: (Overlap) That's what I'm saying.

M: Mm-hmm.

BJH: That was a light bulb that went off in my head.

MH: Well, see I wasn't here ... you know, I'm a little bit younger. But as an intellectual, I would surmise that people connected that mural with the Mexican muralists and its role in instigating a lifting of consciousness and creating more collective energy in that earlier time, and perhaps they correctly saw this as the same kind of catalyst in the community. The match.

NJH: Well also, you have to understand too, that some of the central artists ... Margaret Burroughs being one of those individuals ... I mean, a number of Chicago artists who were at that point in time elders ... some of them have passed on ... did spend time in Mexico working with the muralists and you know ... and so the political activism of Chicago, generally of the black community, has always been a very active instrument here.

And so not unlike any other space in time in history, we know the artists are the first things that get clamped down on, whether they're understood or not, because the powers to be, unbeknownst to themselves or really not so much often admitted (sic) ... they win their offices by visual imagery. And that's a very important thing.

And when a set of people choose to make their own decision about what kind of ... and where that imagery should be ... is a political statement.

MH: And I think that historically, when you get authoritarian governments coming into power, they try to control the image making. They try to shut down the art. And a lot of people in this country don't associate that it does happen here. And it happened then. And didn't Bailey tear down the wall two years later or three years later?

And it happened with the Bauhaus. You know? And it happened when the conservative revolution took place in this country in the 80s. They went after the National Endowment to begin to control the kind of statements that come out in art, because art has power. More power than a lot of people realize.

M: Carter ...

(Overlapping comments)

Q: Can you talk a little bit about ... oh, sorry. Go ahead. Go ahead.

HM: A part of all of that is the ... Gerald Williams ... check it out ... when Gerald just purely wanted to call attention to the fact of the King Alfred plan ... many people don't understand what the King Alfred plan was about. But those who knew, knew what it was about, because they were preparing concentration camps for people.

And mere ... that wasn't a confrontation of things other than to become vigilant as it relates to what's happening. But that might have went fast forward, but you know, it reminds me of some of the beginning images that came out of early AFRICOBRA. You know? But as Barbara was saying, even the initial images that came out had nothing to do with revolution.

It had more to do with things that we need to concentrate our mentality and direction ... you know. Because the vigilance that really we all should have been about you know, was sort of like a ... Elijah Muhammad ... not Elijah ... yeah, it's Elijah Muhammad was saying people are being rocked back to sleep. You know, every time somebody raises up and says hey, be careful now. Watch what's going on ... something happens. And they say, oh, look at so and so and so and so. What's your problem?

NJH: You see and truly, we can't really see the Wall of Respect, OBAC or AFRICOBRA outside of the context of the times. And not only were we aware of what was taking place in our immediate community by extension of our national community and by further extension, our international community. And so as Howard was speaking about with the King Alfred plan ...

I mean, when people began to not only just read, write and make imagery, but all of those things worked in unison with not just the individuals who bring that forward, but with all of those who are the recipients of it. And so that in and of itself ... the term revolution and revolutionary I think is so misunderstood.

HM: Yes.

NJH: This culture takes words and uses them in such a way that the meanings become almost ephemeral. They just disappear and it gets used over and over again. But if you take the R-E off of it, you've got evolution. And what we really would ... had happening, which continues to this day, because it's not a was, it's an is ... is an evolution. Because the works continue to do that.

It continues to go forward. And that when you look at ... especially in Chicago, you've got ... that was the seat of the Nation of Islam. You had OBAC come into being. You had a long history of black political activism in the city. You've got a long history ... not to ... but to mention only one, the 1916 riot that took place here in Chicago. You've got the mind set of ... the political mind set of self determination in the sense of the major population of black people in this city ... came straight up out of Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas. And that was an expression ... that was a revolutionary act in and of itself.

And so our ... we being the children of that, we were brought up in those households, so you know, you couldn't expect anything different. It's just that again, what we did with the visual arts and the music and the writing and the drama and all the rest of that was nothing short of really, yes, revolutionary, but it wasn't revolutionary in the sense of putting together, if you will, some sort of Army to confront another Army.

Because see, we understood the Army and the weapon is spiritual and aesthetic and political all mixed together. And that was what was wrapped up in that Wall of Respect. You know?

MH: I'm kind of curious that a move toward self determination and self control is considered revolutionary. Usually, revolutionary means you're trying to take over something else. But when you start trying to take over yourself, that begins to be defined as revolutionary? Something ...

HM: The revolution was really talking back. You know?

M: Right.

HM: Talking back. You're bringing this, but we're talking back.

CL: Presenting alternatives.

HM: Yeah.

BJH: To what is.

MH: Which is just democracy.

BJH: Yeah, to what is.

(Overlapping comments)

Q: It could be because they control ... I mean, before this whole thing happened, they controlled how they wanted you to be perceived.

MH: Exactly.

Q: So you were taking something away from them, because the way your persona was owned by them, in a way.

M: Right.

Q: So that was revolutionary in a way.

MH: So speaking truth to power, resisting oppression becomes revolutionary? I think it's just democracy ... M: Absolutely.

MH: ... which begins to show the authoritarian quality of what has happened in the history of this country.

Q: So I'm going to put a little ... redirect a little bit this conversation. Maybe we can talk a little bit about Jeff Donaldson or your relationship with him, the first time you saw him. What was his importance to maybe both the Wall of Respect and maybe the creation of AFRICOBRA? Personally ... in your experience?

BJH: Well, I think Jeff Donaldson spearheaded the visual workshop in OBAC. He was the one that called artists together in order to have that meeting, in ... which was in Harper's Court where we may be going today. I don't know (Laughter). But he spearheaded it, and in that meeting there were people ... a lot of different artists that were at that meeting to decide on what we could do as artists to represent something significant about black art at the time.

It was Bill Walker who came up with the idea of doing the wall and making it public. And he is the one that actually got a proprietor to lend their building so that we could create a wall on that building. So Bill Walker and Jeff Donaldson spearheaded the Wall of Respect.

Q: How long did it take to do the Wall of Respect?

BJH: Oh, I don't know.

M: (Laughter) That's an interesting point.

BJH: It was over a summer. I know it was over a summer.

M: Yeah, it ...

(Overlapping comments)

BJH: It might be about a month or so?

CL: Mm-hmm.

BJH: We had someone who laid out a design ... a color design. I can't think of her name right now. I know she also went to IIT. She majored in design. But she laid out a color design and then everybody was assigned an area.

NJH: It might be Helen Joyner.

BJH: No, it was Helen Joyner. No. Abernathy was the last name. Abernathy.

CL: Sylvia.

BJH: Yeah, Sylvia Abernathy.

M: Yeah, yeah.

BJH: She was the one that laid out the design. She was a design student at IIT. I was also going to IIT at the same time, and so was Jeff Donaldson.

CL: And so was I.

BJH: Yeah, and so was Carolyn. So that becomes significant. And then, once they decided in terms of what groups were going to actually do ... and then the people who said yes, I wanted to work on the Wall of Respect, because in terms of the initial meeting, there were a lot of people there. But everybody did not want to work on the wall. You know? Or become a part of the group.

And those who did were given assignments in terms of what area you would work on. And I worked on the theatre area. So even at this point, I don't remember everybody I put in the theatre area (Laughter), but I did. I worked on the theatre area and Jeff Donaldson worked on the musician area, which is what was right before ... above my area.

Q: How was the experience of doing the Wall of Respect?

BJH: It was a good experience, because we didn't ... we were not a part of the community, and it was on 43rd and Langley. We were concerned in terms of ... it was in let's say, the inner city. And we were concerned about once we had primed this wall and everything, whether it was going to stay white (Laughter). Because we would have to leave and come back you know, to work on it.

But the people in the community protected the wall. You know? No one marked it up. Nobody put any graffiti on it or anything. They protected the walls until we ...

Q: (Overlap) Why do you think they took care of the wall so well?

BJH: I think that they also felt it was something significant, and they wanted to be a part of it. You know, it made something significant within the community, at least. So you know, I understand later, they were charging people to talk about the wall (Laughter). Or see the wall ... I don't ... you know, they used it. But they also protected the artists, because sometimes we would be up ... down there late working. You know, trying to complete it.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about the ... that first meeting that initiated that program?

BJH: Oh, well Jeff Donaldson again, decided to see if artists were interested in working on a philosophy ... on an aesthetic. And the first meeting was at Wadsworth Jarrell's, a studio that was on 61st Street. And I think he initially asked people that were a part of the Wall of Respect to come together and to discuss it.

And some people said yes, they wanted to be a part of it. And those who did want to be a part, what we did was to look at each artist's work. And out of each artist's work, we selected something that was significant that we felt that we wanted to use as the development ... in the development of our philosophy. So something was ... I think out of Wadsworth Jarrell was taking color, and out of mine, because he was very ... always a colorful artist in terms of a painter.

Out of my work came lettering, and I still use a lot of lettering in my work. Not all of it works, but ... but you know, out of each artist, there were different things that were seen as something significant that we could work on. And then, to try to build an aesthetic based on that, so people would have to say that they were willing to consider their imagery and utilize the philosophy within their work. I think that was the significant part of AFRICOBRA.

NJH: Right. And coupled with that, which was something that is ... can't be really overlooked, is the ability of the individuals not unlike in working on the wall, but the ability of the individual to sort of give up their I self (sic) ... me, I, and begin to move toward a we/us. And the ... which is a major component. And it's a very strong ... it takes a very strong person to do that, because the culture that we live in that teaches the I, me only.

And to be able to share in a collective consciousness in and of itself sort of allowed other people who to go back out of that conversation, which did not though, I don't ... I feel personally, did not ... they did not gain a lot from it, and partook of that and used it in their own personal ways. But in terms of the aspect of coalescing as an entity with a philosophy ... a common philosophy and a common sense of aesthetic required one to really submerge the I and me. You know, which is the thing that has bonded AFRICOBRA. You know? All those years.

BJH: All of the work was individualistic.

NJH: Right, yeah. Of course.

BJH: You know, even though we were working on a philosophy ...

NJH: Right, right.

BJH: ... the work wasn't basically similar.

M: No, we weren't ...

BJH: But the concepts in terms of creating the work was based on ...

NJH: Right, right. It was the concept.

(Overlapping comments)

BJH: ... the philosophy.

NJH: Yeah, we weren't cookie stamped (sic), but we were (Laughter) ... but within the context of seeing the body of work if it was brought together, one can find those aesthetic and otherwise threads that wove between everybody's work. You know, those things were apparent. So of course, you had each person's individual ... in the sense of what I mean by the I and me.

It's not that ... in the sense that I will not give up me to work with a group. But within the group, each of us were still our own individual selves, but within the context of a shared agenda we moved forward.

Q: Would it be incorrect to say if there's a relationship between that kind of sense of community ... between artists, visual artists and what you were getting out of maybe a performance from jazz musicians?

M: Absolutely.

Q: When you (inaudible) of music?

(Overlapping comments)

NJH: Yeah, absolutely. Because within the context of what we continue to do in AFRICOBRA, music is a very vital component of that. You know? And to the extent of looking at it from a point of view of visual music. You know?

BJH: I think it's more a part of ... I call it AFRICOBRA part two (Laughter).

M: Oh, AFRICOBRA (Laughter) ...

BJH: There was a part of AFRICOBRA part one (Laughter).

NJH: Well, true enough.

(Overlapping comments)

BJH: I don't think that ...

NJH: But when you think about Wadsworth's earlier works ... you know, and ... with the piece of ...

BJH: Wadsworth's work.

M: Right.

BJH: But it wasn't like everybody within the group.

NJH: (Overlap) No, no. I don't mean it in the context of that.

BJH: Because ... yeah, because Wadsworth always used musicians in his work. You know, that's why Lester Lashley, you know, has a painting he did of him, because he was always interested in musicians.

CL: Musicians would be a subject of ...

BJH: Yeah, the subject.

CL: But the rhythm and movement that you see in the art is visual music. You know?

BJH: But I don't think that we thought about it as visual music at that point as much as it is (inaudible) in the philosophy ...

(Announcement in background)

BJH: ... of AFRICOBRA now. That's what I'm saying.

M: Right.

CL: Mm-hmm.

BJH: Okay.

NJH: We're not in disagreement on that.

BJH: Okay.

NJH: No, you're right about that. Because your work, Carolyn, was very much a ... the one you had with the children and the drums and all of that, so within the context of the ... image objects that represent music ... the manner in which the color and the pattern and designs and all of that became resonant of the auditory music that we were engaged with all of the time.

(Overlapping comments)

NJH: So we had ... you know, with your work and with Wadsworth's work, very much that was present in the visual context of it.

CL: Mm-hmm.

(Background/off-mike)

Q: Could I ask a question to Carolyn?

(No response heard.)

Q: Could you talk a little bit about the name AFRICOBRA? Because I believe there's a little bit of interesting history also in the name itself. Can you talk a little bit about that to us? But pretend there's actually Michael that is asking you the questions (Laughter).

CL: I really don't know what I can say about it.

MH: Well, I heard that it ... the initial name was COBRA, but there ... but Jeff told me some Africans suggested that there was a group in Europe called COBRA ... Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam. And so it was changed to AFRICOBRA, and then the meaning was African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists. And it had been a ...

BJH: Revolutionary artists was a ...

M: (Overlap) Revolutionary. That's right.

BJH: ... at the beginning.

M: Right.

BJH: Yeah.

MH: Okay. So is that how you remember it?

CL: Yes. Uh-huh. That's how I remember it.

NJH: Well see, we were all ... at least all of us who had gone to formal schools of art education, were aware of COBRA, the group from the Netherlands and such. It was, I think, a simply coincidental to the alphabet (sic) spelled the same entity. COBRA, the European COBRA, was never ...

M: (Overlap) It was never a model.

M: ... even discussing.

(Overlapping comments)

NJH: It was never in the discussion.

M: Right, right.

M: You know, around that.

(Overlapping comments)

M: Just a coincidence.

M: But the element of ... just coincident.

MH: Right. Okay. So what did the original Cobra stand for, before it became AFRICOBRA?

NJH: Community ...

BJH: Coalition.

NJH: Yeah, Coalition of ...

BJH: (Overlap) Of Bad Relevant Art.

M: Black American Artists, was it?

BJH: Coalition of Black ...

M: Revolutionary artists?

BJH: Yeah.

NJH: No, no, no, no, no.

BJH: Yeah, it was Revolutionary Artists.

(Overlapping comments)

M: Yeah.

M: Right?

M: Was it relevant?

M: Right, right.

BJH: Revolutionary artists.

MH: And then it became African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists.

M: Bad Relevant Artists. Right.

BJH: Yes.

(Overlapping comments)

MH: So there was that shift.

BJH: Revolution was taken out.

M: Right.

BJH: Yeah, to relevant.

(Overlapping comments)

Q: Why bad? Why is it bad?

BJH: Because bad was a good word.

M: Right.

NJH: You know, I'm bad.

Q: (inaudible) not good.

(Overlapping comments/laughter)

NJH: I'm bad (Laughter). You know? And Michael Jackson and the Jackson Five ... that was what ... you know, it's all (inaudible) ...

BJH: (Overlap) It's like a slang.

M: Right.

BJH: You know, he's bad. You know?

M: Right.

BJH: So meaning a good thing. Not a bad thing, but a good thing (Laughter). With power. Assertiveness. Confidence. You know?

NJH: And the aspect of the change of the word from relevant ...

BJH: (Overlap) And I think you've got that in the music, too. I'm bad.

M: Right, right.

BJH: Isn't there a song like that?

M: That was Michael Jackson.

NJH: (Overlap) That's Michael. That's Michael Jackson.

BJH: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

NJH: That's one of his biggest pieces.

MH: (Overlap) (inaudible) thing like that. And I guess in another parlance, it would be the equivalent of ashe.

NJH: Oh, absolutely. You know. And then too, you know, when you change the word from ... see revolutionary again, goes back to your question about revolutionary and all of the misconceptions and the misuses of that word. Relevant became and represented more of what we were about than necessarily revolution. You know? We were revolutionary in our own presence by doing what we were doing.

But what was more important or very much a part of that was, was that ... was it relevant. And so relevancy became more important in terms of the word itself than revolutionary, because the whole concept and construct of AFRICOBRA is revolutionary.

Q: So going back to the relevant ... why do you think ... I know that it is an important part of the history of AFRICOBRA, how it kind of like was not interested in mainstream understanding of that in a very specific time, but did you guys ... kind of created a parallel way of communicating art through the society. That it was away from galleries and museums and everything sor of mainstream ...

MH: (Overlap) You know, what I hear from the art historical side is the double entendre in relevant that suggests that a lot of contemporary art is irrelevant. And when you get into these gallery and museum settings, a lot of that has a very small audience, and it doesn't have any kind of relevancy to the lives of the people in this community.

And I think perhaps what I hear from a distance is that the relevancy also implied that this art actually functioned. It worked in some way in people's lives, and touched them in a way that you know, minimalist art in a downtown gallery was an intellectual musing. But it really didn't have any relevance in the lives of people. And then in the African tradition, art worked in people's lives in some very important ways that you know, we can talk about philosophically and socially and otherwise.

BJH: Religiously, spiritually.

M: Right.

M: Yeah.

NJH: Yeah, because all of those were components. And then too, the element of ... at our first show at the Studio Museum, Ten in Search of a Nation, we had a questionnaire that we allowed the gallery viewers to take and make a selection. They would actually tick off a vote for which of any one of the works of all of the works that

we had in that exhibition that they wanted to see reproduced as a poster ... as an art poster.

Which the aspect of the relevancy then became something that we were being instructed by those who we wish to have consume our works. What was actually relevant ... because they understood the revolutionary aspect of it, because it was something that had not been before. But revolution also has to be relevant. And so the relevancy wasn't necessarily determined by ourselves, per se, but it was a community and a collaborative and a communal process, because their input was very critical to that ... to us making the decision on at least the first prints that we did.

CL: Well, I like that question, what were the people on the top of the roof afraid of? You know?

W: Yeah.

M: Right.

CL: Disturbed by. And it was not the imagery alone. It was the fact that artists, many of whom were trained you know, artists, had made some choices, had put them up there. But the group had a great deal of respect for the community. And really love for the community, to want to say to them that this is a different way of thinking about things. And that can be very intimidating to people who don't want things to change, is that people are allowed to change their outlook and their way of thinking and their way of thinking about not only what's out there, but themselves.

You know, that's very fearful. You can rise to a point in your life where you don't have to go hungry. You don't have to worry about where the rent is coming from. You as a woman, don't have to be dependent upon a man coming in and taking care of you ... implied in all the lives of those people on the wall were good decisions. You know, you can make good decisions. You don't have to go over and over and over again in your life being regretful, or being ashamed.

NJH: Or being ashamed. Right.

CL: Being ashamed. And being proud of who you are, and that you are important. You are important, not only to your families, but you're important to other people. And there's so many people ... let's say everywhere, but 43rd and Langley didn't realize that they're important to a lot of other people.

NJH: Right. Yeah, and most importantly to themselves, and what ... again, reflecting back on the Wall of Respect itself. It had a visual representation of a myriad number of ideologies, philosophies, religious and spiritual belief systems. All of this was in there. You know?

M: Mm-hmm.

NJH: So that became almost an encyclopedic experience in the sense of not just the artists, but the community. The children coming through the neighborhood, going home and just playing, what have you, were being educated. And education is a very revolutionary act. You know?

BJH: Mm-hmm.

NJH: And so not only is it and was it done with visual images in terms of the particular individuals chosen to be portrayed up there ...

(Phone ringing in background)

NJH: ... but the fact that it reflected in those young minds that they didn't necessarily have to become an adult to make a decision through circumstance ... that they can think for themselves and see themselves. But they saw that immediately in their neighborhood all day as they were growing up. So you know, planting their seed at an early age means they become very easily self directed and move forward.

MH: Floyd Coleman told me something years after that, but ... that kind of supports what you're saying. He was going back home ... I think he had gone to Atlanta or somewhere, and he was going back to Alabama. And he stopped in Talladega ... and this was in the early 50s, to see the Amistad murals that Hale Woodruff had done.

And he said that was the first time he'd ever seen an image of a black man winning. And so that imagery in the Wall of Respect might have been the first time people had really seen something positive ... you know, something like this is what it looks like ... success looks like. And that can be very powerful in ways that we don't even understand.

NJH: And it was also about demystifying this whole mystery around what "fine art" or art is. You know?

M: Mm-hmm.

NJH: And what the museum or what the gallery is. This thing was right smack dab in the middle. You know?

MH: Right.

BJH: Right.

NJH: And so there's no way that ... there's nothing mysterious about it, because they saw the people who were doing it. They participated in it. I mean, they asked questions. They got involved in one kind of way or another. So it was a kind of experiential exercise that ... to go back to your question, Carolyn, again, in retrospect, I can understand why they would have people on the rooftops across the way.

Because we were firing bullets at a nature (sic) that they could not ... no one could stop. We had armed a wall and a community in a manner that guns or anything else cannot put a stop to.

MH: Leroi Jones wrote a poem about that.

M: Yeah.

MH: Let our poems be bombed.

M: That's right.

MH: (Laughter) And there was a call in response in that process, too. You know?

NJH: Absolutely.

MH: Jeff always talked about that. It was pretty wonderful.

CL: Even a child can see and feel the difference between going to bed one night and then waking up several nights later. It's the spiritual, you know, end of things that was addressed in the young people in that community. Adults, as well.

NJH: Oh, absolutely.

CL: You could ... that wall had so much energy. I have never experienced that kind of energy. You know, I talked about adults ... the artists, people connected with the artists having many different responsibilities, family and otherwise. But when I was out there, and every day, I felt like that was all that was going on. You know? I felt invigorated by everybody and everything that was happening.

HM: To springboard off of what I just came in and was hearing, it was ... I developed my own wall (Laughs) called the Freedom Train on the rear of my studio. And the interesting thing that was happening, because these were not anatomical images ... these were images made from found material. And my neighbors said, you think that the kids are going to let that stay up there (Laughter).

I mean, there was stuff like chair legs, stove parts, axel carbons and other kind of debris that I picked up and incorporated and told the design (sic). It's been up there for four and a half years. And the weather takes its toll. A piece might fall off of it, but no child has ever touched anything. Half of the garages in the community write all kind of graffiti on it. No graffiti ever appeared ... showed up on it.

And every time a child is walking the alley, and he said, "Mr. Mallory, what's that all about?" I said, "That's the Freedom Train. It's engined by Harriet Tubman, and we have representations of Huey P. Newton, Marcus Garvey, Martin Luther King." And I had my son, who is also an artist, write each person ... each image's name on there, and nothing had ever happened to it other than something falls off of there, and it gives me something else to do the next year. And I keep on working on it.

But my neighbors could not believe that the kids would not damage it. But a friend of mine came in. She said, "Howard, the reason why they're not doing anything ... the people ... those children know who those people are. You know?" And that was warming ... it warmed my soul because of the fact that I felt like ... that I was making an impact in the community. And that the youngsters was coming along and beginning to get a history lesson that they didn't get in school.

NJH: And that ... you know, again, when you become a part of ... when you are a part of the community, when you act like you're a part of the community, what you do as an image maker is a shared experience, and the ownership is not you, but the community. And when that kind of relationship is cultivated in that process, that's the last thing that will happen, is some sort of vandalism or destruction of that.

What you have, more often that not expressed is complete love. You know? Because people will invariably walk by and say, well, look at this work that's here. This is ours. And you'll even see people talking about what ... if they recognize anybody in there to have these discussions, because I've seen it over the years in looking at many of the other murals around the city.

Q: You've also touched a little bit ... in what you're saying ... and what I think that may be related to the fact that AFRICOBRA took a part of ... I mean, in the Wall of Respect. Not falling into victimism that was going on maybe in prior art ... black art, but it was just published more in the pride and the positive aspect of who you guys were. Can you talk a little bit about that?

NJH: Yeah. Well, that's one of the tenets of the AFRICOBRA philosophy is to project positive imagery. And so positive imagery is not a romantic notion. And it comes from the reality of one's life. And those positive images necessarily don't mean (sic) people who have name notoriety. They are the people who live in that community. The people who ... my aunt, my uncle, my mother, my father, my sister and my brother. Those cousins who are cousins, and we all know who ... we all have more cousins than we have actual cousins.

MH: Right.

NJH: If you understand what I'm saying with that.

M: Right.

NJH: And so that manifestation is the positive image. The positive image is the self. When I look in that mirror, I am elevated and I'm at spiritual and emotional ease. Because when I look ... and what I see reflected back at me, I'm comfortable with that, you know, as opposed to looking and having this subconscious questioning about whether what I'm seeing as a reflection is something that I ought to be comfortable with.

Q: And you ... do you think that was better than or more important? Because the way you maybe saw yourself prior to that was different or…portrayed of black Americans that was ...

NJH: Absolutely. That's the undergirding(?) element of all of it, is the re-orientation of our own psyche, and the reorganization of our own visual image. The two of those are not disconnected.

MH: Right. Because using the metaphor of the mirror, when you see something that is supposed to mirror you that is disfigured, it gets to be confusing and problematic. That's what the whole DeBois double consciousness thing was about. So this was that corrective. And for me, a lot of it has to do with the images of who we are. A lot of artists today are responding to images of who we aren't.

But I just think that all you have to do is put out there who you are. You know? And who you can be in the art. And then I think people respond to that very powerfully. Particularly in the context ... historical context of all the distorted images that were out there. All the disfigured images. All the emasculated images and all of that that were out there.

Q: But also the ... (inaudible)

BJH: You know, I saw "Avatar." I've seen it twice (Laughter) thus far. And one of the things ... do you see me? Do you see me?

MH: Exactly.

BJH: And I see you. It's very a part of the consciousness that I think was in our work. Do you see us?

M: Right.

BJH: Do you know what we're into?

M: Exactly.

BJH: Do you know what our experience is?

M: Right.

BJH: Do you see me?

M: Right.

CL: Mm-hmm.

M: Right.

CL: Yeah.

BJH: And I see you.

(Overlapping comments)

M: Beautiful.

NJH: And it comes out of ... I mean, when you think about those elements of Kool-Aid color and shine and awesome ... you know, and the frontality. I mean, the aspect of projecting the human form in the work as a frontal perspective is not only reflective, but it's in one sense confrontational. You know?

BJH: Mm-hmm.

NJH: You know, not just confrontational to some "other image," but confrontation to your own psychological understanding of who you are. You know?

MH: Right.

NJH: And taking the palette of color as we dealt with creating the complexion, and the whole aspect of just the manner in which we organized our life around color and rhythm and pattern. You know, that those colors, rhythms and patterns are natural.

(Overlapping comments)

HM:Well, Lester and I, about what ... maybe about ten or 15 years ago, I guess, decided that it was very important for us to incorporate mirrors in our work. And mainly, because of the fact that we would have to be confronted ... you know, you know who you are and you see who you are. And you can appreciate you are, especially when you're confronted with our work, because you can always see yourself in the picture. You're part of it.

And consequently, it becomes an impact on you. You know? And I guess we've been doing it, I guess maybe about 16 or 17 years. I can't hardly do a work without a piece of mirror being some part of the incorporated design, because we ... I see that it's necessary for us to be confronted with who we are.

CL: I just thought it was so interesting, in working on the mural out there, we would be out there late at night. You know?

M: Yes.

W: Yes.

(Overlapping comments)

CL: And that area, I wouldn't have naturally felt safe just walking through myself late at night. But I felt very comfortable out there. You know? I've worked with William Walker, Bill Walker on the section showing the Muslims, showing the Muslim favor. And then I started working on the newspaper stand, which I thought was a lot of fun. A man would come out and look around at night. (Laughter) See what I was doing.

But I never felt threatened or unsafe. I felt at home right there. And I know that we were considered the community.

NJH: Right. You had been adopted as a cousin.

CL: Yes (Laughter).

NJH: Cousin Carolyn over there painting on that wall (Laughter). So yeah, those are the elements. And the sense of community is continued in our small nucleus of AFRICOBRA as a body of individuals working together and by extension, the larger community as a whole. So it was ... it's like an accordion. It was back and forth.

Q: Could we talk a little bit about the trans African aspect of AFRICOBRA's movement? What was important about Africa as a culture to look back or reflect or get inspiration, for instance that was the case?

NJH: Well, you can start with Egypt. The pyramids, I should say. I'll take that as a jumping point. Everybody knows it ... then you can come fast forward to Nkrumah and Patrice Lumumba and Julius Nyerere and you can go on and on and on. Those individuals, their presence in our lives through the relationships they had with say,

Richard Wright and Countee Cullen and all these others that had the opportunity to see these individuals and to engage them through the international platform of World War I and World War II.

A lot of Africans ended up interfacing with African Americans and reversal through those situations. And that particular consciousness in ... you take it in fast forward to the 60s and look at Malcolm and look at Dr. King as two figures ... and not ... clearly not taking out of the picture Paul Robeson in his charge at the United Nations about the human rights abuse of African Americans. And Malcolm's understanding of that and his movement from understanding that it was a local issue to an international issue of human rights.

And taking that ... Dr. King's position which was more local in terms of the continental United States ... and you take Malcolm's view which becomes ... reaches to the larger pan African and ... situations. Or you deal with all of those elements, and those elements just simply become identified in the context of a construct called trans Africa.

And so you can see within ... we look at the works that were being done by groups of artists like the Oshogbo School of Artists in Nigeria, and you look at our relationship with FROMAJE the group we met in Martinique, which we're very much a part of the whole aspect of negritude... and all of these elements become a part of what one can see as trans African in the context that they're all a part of one whole. And you see these things being reflected in the works, even though the individuals may not be aware of each other.

M: Right.

M: But the energy is there.

(Overlapping comments)

Q: But that was in itself, also, a big change ... there's a lot of ... most of the American art was mostly influenced by European art. So those big changes in a way, are something ...

MH: I think that some of it comes from the fact that there's a link between the civil rights movement, the black power movement and the liberation of African colonies into nations. These things are going on. There's a dialogue among people that helps that happen. And we began to, as a community, see our existence as going beyond the Atlantic.

You know, we didn't begin as slaves, but ever group sees themselves at creation. And the only way that African Americans, Africans in the Diaspora can see themselves in creation was to go back across the Atlantic and go back into those deeper, longer histories. Jeff defined trans African art as having something that is consistent in African art and art of the African Diaspora that shows up with local variation. But there's certain continuities that show up.

And I think that it's worth talking about, the shift from Pan Africanism to an idea of the trans African. I think there's a shift there that's worth discussing, and maybe we haven't talked about a lot. But I know it's reflected in the history of this group.

Q: So you think that maybe part of the reason why AFRICOBRA's work was so original is because you guys looked to the origin of where everything came from somehow?

BJH: Origin? Our origin? You know, you look at us and you say, well where do your forefathers (sic) came from (Laughter)? And you know they didn't come from America (Laughter). So they had to come from Africa.

M: Right.

NJH: Yeah, right. And the element that Barbara mentioned earlier on about the context of the presence of the brother from the continent making the observation of Africa as a part of the name of the group as ... not just Cobra, but AFRICOBRA and A-F-R-I, AFRICOBRA. And that element was present ... you know, that whole trans Africa, that's an element and an example of trans Africanist right there, in the sense that we are bound by that physical presence.

But we've got these different experiences, but we have those shared experiences. And so it ... again, you know, for me, evolution is always a part of ... we are an entity in progress always. And I think that's beyond just as Africans of the Diaspora or Africans on ... but it's the whole of humanity is an evolution. It's an ongoing process.

Q: Is there any ... I mean, I may be just saying something silly, but is there any relationship or any kind of like ... something going on ... I mean, 20, 30 years earlier than AFRICOBRA, or maybe European artists were looking at African art for inspiration, like (inaudible), Pablo Picasso ...

NJH: (Overlap) We know that because (Laughter) ...

(Overlapping comments)

Q: (inaudible)

MH: Yeah, well (inaudible) formally.

BJH: Yeah.

MH: They got it formally. But it's ... Sorrels-Adewali talked about getting behind the mask. And that's the difference. Knowing what motivates. You know, where the mask comes from. Why you make it. And the context that generates it. That is not formal. And that ... I think when black artists started going to Africa, they began to discover those things, as well as see things that were familiar to them. At least that was my experience. I saw things that were familiar to me in my life here, there. I saw differences. But those familiarities to me just talked about what was still living in my community.

NJH: And I mean, that's wherever we go in the black world. You know?

MH: Yeah.

NJH: I've not been anywhere in the black world ... and when I say black world, I'm talking about the Caribbean, South America, the continent of Africa, all over Europe and all over the United States, all over Canada and all over the planet. Because you know, wherever there is more than one black person, you've got a black community. You know, that's my definition.

Now, some people may argue with that (Laughter), but then all of that ... all of that is inconsequential as far as I'm concerned. But wherever I have been, the recognition of those samenesses are always visible. And it's unspoken whether you can communicate language wise or not, that spiritual element of connection is always there. And so the comfortability level and the anxiety that one might feel being in a new and unfamiliar place is settled out when you meet that other self. You know? And you see that self as being ... you know, you're looking at your own self in the mirror. You know?

MH: And it's happening in the way the music dialogues and joins all over the planet. Whether it's African music that's influencing people here, but Fela was influenced by Coltrane and James Brown and you know, the rap and going into the Caribbean and ska coming up out of R&B. You know?

NJH: Yeah, because as soon as we landed in Nigeria in 1977 for FESTAC, you know, all we could hear was James Brown (Laughter). You know, James Brown. I thought I had ... somebody had dropped me back on 47th Street (Laughter). It was James Brown (inaudible) ... but again, it's the ... that same rhythm.

I mean, one would assume ... erroneously, but it depends on what ... your grounding, that the rhythms of Nigeria wouldn't be consistent with the rhythm of James Brown. But conversely, it was ...

(Overlapping comments)

NJH: ... absolutely the other way around. And you know, again, if people haven't seen it, they need to go see this play in New York, "Fela."

(Overlapping comments)

BJH: Yes.

MH: Yeah, I was in Bridgetown, Barbados last February, walking in the street ... you know, where all the shops were?

M: Mm-hmm.

(Background/off-mike)

MH: And I hear the O'jays coming out of the shop. I was just like ... the O'jays in Barbados (Laughter)?

NJH: Yeah, and that was in ... yeah, in Barbados.

M: Right (Laughter).

(Bells in background)

M: That's truly (Laughter) ...

(Bells continue)

NJH: And that's all the ... those are the manifestations of trans Africa. You know, and trans African really is evidenced as an organic thing. Pan Africanism, black power, you know, those sorts of identities can be very localized. But when you say "trans," you're speaking about the element of motion, of time, space and travel.

And this brings me right back to good old Chicago and you know, Sun Ra. Space is a place. And so we ... it's always that. You know? And so the spiritual level of connection is a transitional thing. It's transitional. It's transpitory and it's transporting. And so the TRANS is just one of those (Laughter) prefixes that can move you from one place to another, consciously or unconsciously.

Q: Let's take a little break. Let's listen to our (inaudible) ...

(Background/off-mike)

(END OF TAPE)

Group Interview Part 2

AFRICOBRA Interviews

Tape MHGR

TV LAND

GROUP INTERVIEW: BARBARA JONES HOGU, NAPOLEON JONES HENDERSON, HOWARD MALLORY, CAROLYN LAWRENCE, MICHAEL HARRIS

NOTE: Speakers are mostly unidentified.

(Background Conversation)

Q: So, Michael's going to start talking about AFRICOBRA now. Why did he join AFRICOBRA, and what was his perception of AFRICOBRA when he did?

MH: Yeah. You know, this whole experience is very gratifying for me, because I was not here. I guess I've been the youngest member of the group for a long time, until we just added Kevin Cole. And so, I'm learning about this experience.

I remember, when I was young, I was excited by the group. I was excited by the artists in the group. And the philosophy was something that was very ... I don't know, very gratifying, and felt very good to me, because I was looking for something like this. You know, being a student when we had the Black Arts Movement, and Black Power. And, you know, fighting these battles. And this gave me a way of putting it into my art, and expressing visually what I was trying to understand politically.

And I remember meeting Jeff at Howard, and, you know, when I was young, I was excited by, you know, Motherwell, and Wayne Thiebaud, and, you know, Abstract Expressionists and other kinds of artists. But, it didn't relate to me, and where I was coming from, and my community and my desire to have this activism in, around where I could do what I wanted to do.

So, meeting you all has given me more of a sense of where this came from, even though I've studied it and talked about it. And, AFRICOBRA now has moved away from some of the formal things that invigorated the group when you were young. But, for me ... and I'd like to get your feedback about this ... there's a certain spirit of being a part of, a certain communal consciousness, that is still a part of the group. And, instead of having the formal characteristics, I think we've kind of established that, on a large scale.

And now, some of the thematic and philosophical ideas are at the root of work that takes different forms. You know, so, we're trying to continue the tradition, but let it evolve.

Now, how do you all think about the evolution and where we might go, how it can function in this context, given that we have a black president? We have visibility that we didn't have when the Wall of Respect came out. You know, these people who are on that wall are in the public mind, and are in the history, and they're in the videos and all of that. So, how do we function now? What do we do as artists now? What do we pick up and run with?

BJH: I think the group, you know, needs to really decide in terms of what their focus will be.

M: Mm-hm.

BJH: Because I've looked at some of the images that have come from what I'm going to call AFRICOBRA II, Part II. (Laughter). You know, and they deal with a lot of rhythm pattern, design. You know, dealing with the concept of music, rhythmnistic, you know, in terms of their philosophy.

I don't think the pattern designs actually specifically speak to the people. I think that it has an emotionalism and spiritualism and energy, you know, within a bloodline, you know, that's coming through the work. And, the group needs to decide, you know, what focus that they want to take at this point.

I don't think I should put any direction on it, because I'm not ... (Laughs).

NJH: Well, to pick up on your phrase, which I think is quite appropriate, bloodline.

BJH: Yeah, bloodline.

NJH: As I was saying, once AFRICOBRA, always AFRICOBRA. So, whether you're on ...

BJH: Yeah.

NJH: ... I or II, you're still in it.

BJH: (Laughs).

M: In the bloodline. But, see ...

BJH: Well, you're Part I and Part II, so ...

NJH: Right. Hey, what can I tell you? You know? (Laughs). This is the trans-AFRICOBRA.

MH: Yeah. Well, he's older than I am, so ... (Laughs).

BJH: Yeah.

MH: You know, I don't know how long Michael's going to keep running with this, "I'm the young one" stuff here, you know? (Laughter). Somebody brought that up to me. One point, it was in '99, we were planning an NCA(?) meeting. And, you know, every year, we always had this, you know, dedication to the elders. And, we were trying to plot this out, and he says, "What the hell are you talking about? Hell, you're elder." You know, so, thinking about it from the point of view of that.

But, to pick up on the bloodline piece, and elements of formalism. We still have, on the landscape ... even though Barack and Michelle are sitting in the Black House, we still have Rush Limbaugh, Cheney, the Bushes. They haven't gone anywhere. And so, still, those foundational nuggets, which we were dealing with then, they're still here.

W: Yeah.

NJH: So, in a sense, for me, it's sort of like going back for family reunion. You know, you still have to go back every so often to re-energize, re-invigorate, and to reassess. And so, in the reassessing of whatever that is, you don't necessarily not continue with what was foundational. You know?

So, I'm not anxious or any way, you know, sort of thinking that it has to be some very frontal assessment, per se, without looking at how the track is still, you know, evolving along. And, yes, it does require the elimination of some things, because they've served their time, their purpose. But then, there are other things that remain. Like the reptile, you know? Until the sun hits it, it's laying sort of dormant, but it's still alive. And, I think we still have to keep kicking it in that kind of way.

And again, it's an issue I think each of us, you know, individually, has to struggle with all along, in our individual work and in our collective work. So ...

BJH: I would just like to ask the question whether the AFRICOBRA members at this point really critique and discuss the work, and operate on a philosophy?

MH: Yes.

NJH: Yeah.

MH: Yes.

NJH: We don't do it every two weeks like we used to do when we were all in Chicago, but ... (Laughter). No, we still get together, and we throw down in the same manner of that ...

MH: Mm-hm.

NJH: ... very lively and lovingly confrontational and aggressive manner of ...

BJH: (Laughs).

NJH: ... you know, dialogue. You know, it's still there. Yeah. That's there, because it still comes from the same philosophy, the same base. It's just that, we don't have the opportunity to do it as regularly as we did when we were all here in Chicago. So, of course. Yeah.

M: What's ...

NJH: That's the bedrock.

MH: What's interesting to me, in my 30 years in the group ...

BJH: You've been in the group 30 years?

MH: '79.

BJH: Oh, really? That's an accomplishment. (Laughter). (Inaudible), that's an accomplishment.

NJH: I know. You know, what can I say? What's this, 42 years now?

BJH: Most groups break up, you know?

NJH: Hey ...

MH: Right.

M: Of course.

M: Well ...

BJH: No, that's an accomplishment within itself.

NJH: Oh, well, AFRICOBRA actually, as far as my knowledge of the history, is the only longest existing artists group in the continental United States.

BJH: Really?

NJH: So, that says a hell of a lot for a whole lot.

NJH: Yes, it does.

MH: Yeah, this is unique in the history of Western art.

NJH: Right.

MH: Many groups come together, but for a group to come together consciously, and, you know, with collegiality, and something based on more than style, I think is important.

But then, now that we have matured as a group, you know, we have a Part I and a Part II, and we've moved from a Chicago communal basis to something that's more ...

NJH: Trans-African, yeah.

MH: Trans-something.

BJH: Yeah, trans.

MH: Because, you know, the group doesn't live in the same place. And, as artists, instead of you all being very young artists, with the energy that formed this group, we are mature artists. And the context has changed. So, we have all of these complexities now to consider.

BJH: Yes.

MH: That you don't have when you're first starting out. Just like, when hip-hop starts, you know, it's just new, it's fresh. But then, when you reach a maturity, and you have to consider other things that you didn't consider at the beginning.

NJH: True. Because, in that maturity, your aim is much sharper.

MH: Right.

NJH: So, in your enthusiasm as a youth, you shoot at what you think is the adversary, and you don't take as close an aim as you do when you are mature.

MH: Right.

NJH: So ...

MH: And your virtuosity has improved, and your understanding has matured. And, you know, you have reflection, so you can grow in your mistakes. And, but certain things ... I think when Howard was talking about his mural, on the back of the studio wall, and this communal response, that is something that hasn't changed. That relationship with the people. And, the benefits of that. When you lose sight of that, something happens. When you keep that in sight, something seems to happen.

NJH: Yeah. Because I know, we had a mural, so to speak ... not in a formal context of mural, but we had a mural that was a couple of abandoned buildings around the corner from my house in Roxbury. And, starting in 1982, Ibn Corey Pitts and I used to have our Juneteenth celebration. And we did that all the way up to 2002.

And each year, we would refurbish and refresh ... there were 12 four-by-eight plywood boards that fenced off these abandoned buildings. And each year, at the Juneteenth celebration, what we would do, Ibn would come in with his three or four suitcases of Xeroxed copies of this, that and the other. And we would have, the kids in the community and everybody would work with us, as one of the projects for that whole weekend's Juneteenth celebration, to refurbish that mural.

And, to my surprise, looking back at some archival photographs from an organization in Boston called Discover Roxbury, that mural is present in quite a number of those images. And the thing about it is that it lasted for 20 years, and never, ever was there any defacing or any marks on it whatsoever. You know? And, occasionally, someone would come along, during the course of the year, and make their own additions to it. But they weren't defacements. They were enhancements to what was always there.

So, in line with what Mallory was saying, going back to the Wall of Respect. When it is embedded in the community, and belonging to the community, then it's an ongoing, living entity, actually. You know.

MH: How does AFRICOBRA's presence in your past live today in your work, and in your outlook in your work?

BJH: Well, recently, last year, the UofC had an exhibit of some work that I did from '68. And, I was re-energized, (Laughter), to start a series of prints. I was taking a class in Photoshop, so I used my family. I called my series "My Holy Family and Me." (Laughs). And I dealt with old photographs in an artistic way. So, presently, I have, like, 35 prints in that particular series. So, I haven't completely finished all of them. They're at different stages or whatever.

I did use lettering in all of them. I did. Because I thought that one of the things that I was focused on was the message, a positive message, to the viewer. And even though it's about my family, it can be any family. Okay?

MH: Mm-hm. Even your play(?) family, huh? (Laughs).

BJH: Yeah. (Laughs). I mean, and some of the things that were going on in their life. You know, their thoughts. And so, it's like a personal project, in the process of learning Photoshop, (Laughs), at the same time. So.

But the technique I used was very similar to silkscreen, you know, in terms of the stencil method of the application of color and everything. Was similar to that.

Q: Sorry to interrupt, but the, just with the spirit that you were saying about critiquing, would it be okay if, like, each of you just choose, like, one piece that you can recognize on the wall, and just say something about it? I mean, for example, we could maybe start with ...

NJH: Oh, with Angela?

Q: Yeah.

MH: Wadsworth Jarrell's piece, yes. (Laughs).

W: (Overlap/Inaudible).

Q: Yeah. Who wants to start?

NJH: Well, I guess in one sense ... well, for me, now that you've asked that question, it's a very interesting idea I have thought about for quite a while, when the last Bush team was in office, ensconced in D.C. Condoleezza Rice actually is from Birmingham, Alabama. Her and Angela are about the same age. Well, roughly. She's a little younger than Angela. But, it's rather interesting that you would have such different temperaments, of two black women coming out of Birmingham, Alabama, not forgetting the 16th Street Baptist Church.

MH: And a third one.

NJH: Who?

MH: Kathleen Cleaver.

NJH: Yeah, Kathleen Cleaver, right. But I like to leave her out of that one, because of her other entity, but it's interesting to see the dialectic between those two.

MH: Right.

NJH: But this piece, you know, is one of those, I think, signature, for me ... signature, hallmark AFRICOBRA pieces, in a number of ways, because it fully encapsulates the aspect of positive imagery, the choice of who that image is, what that image actually means to not us as a group, but to us as a people, nationally and internationally. Because, Angela clearly became an international icon that dealt with oppression and colonialism. Her signature, her image, represented a confrontation toward that particular system of dehumanization.

And, the use of the B is clearly, and the language being infused in the total composition ... I mean, it's actually a piece that explodes off of the surface. I mean, it's coming out at you, and it's also doing that other aspect of drawing you into it. Sucking you in like a vacuum. And, for me, that is one of our ... and I say "our" because of the fact of how we function as a group ... one of our, you know, signature thesis, you know.

M: Mm-hm.

NJH: Along with, of course, Barbara's "Nation Time."

BJH: It deals with AFRICOBRA philosophy, in terms of the use of KoolAid colors.

M: Mm-hm.

BJH: The raspberry, the orange, the grape. (Laughs). You know, in terms of coloration. It deals with the lettering. The idea of using lettering, and not only in terms of a message, but also in terms of design and pattern. It radiates around her head. And so, everything is radiating from her. So, it has a tendency to be very, very strong, you know, and direct, in terms of its message.

The idea of the bullet. (Laughs). The bullets on there as a connection in terms of the jacket, you know, which speaks of her as a revolutionary. You know ...

W: Right.

BJH: ... at that particular period of time. I think it's very unique in the fact that he developed a total figure with the lettering. You know, I don't think everybody in the group did that at that time, but he did. And, you know, it's very strong.

And, even though it's not, we've dealt with the idea of frontality. You know ...

M: Right.

BJH: ... that she's not completely frontal.

M: Right.

BJH: But I think frontality, in terms of her as a character ...

M: And (Overlap/Inaudible).

BJH: ... is frontal, to the existence of those who are looking at it. You know, the idea ...

Q: It's not ...

BJH: ... of it. And it's more revolutionary, you know?

NJH: Right.

BJH: You could call it a revolutionary piece.

NJH: Absolutely.

BJH: You know, in terms of the subject matter. You know. And, that idea of radiation, and she's speaking at the same time. You know, I'm sending this out in energy waves ...

M: And ...

NJH: ... in terms of what is being said, is encapsulated in terms of the pattern and the design ...

M: And also ...

BJH: ... of how they're arranged.

NJH: And the circularity of sort of the halo format that you mentioned around her head really projects the other aspect of the sacred and the spiritual element that's there, because we also understand, out of one of those iconic forms out of Western art, and generally out of many cultures of art, that it represents a holiness, a sacred and special place. So, that is clearly, you know, manifest in this piece.

BJH: And it uses the idea we use, in terms of lost and found line.

M: Right.

BJH: Lost and found not being totally direct, although mine, they're more direct, (Laughs), than many of the others. That, you know, you have to really stand there and look and see what his message is in there. You have to involve yourself in some time. It's not a piece ... if you're interested in what's being said in the lettering, you need to look at it and focus on it, and try to see what is being stated in those letters. You know, because at first, when you see it, it just looks like pattern and design. But he has messages in there.

NJH: Oh, no. That's deep. And, taking the one just next to it, "The Wives of Shango."

W: Yeah.

NJH: You have the left wife, very much is in pretty much the three-quarter posture of Angela, in Wadsworth's piece there. And you have the center wife being frontal, and the other on the other side having the more traditional African mask, you know, as that depiction. So you have, again, the Holy Trinity, so to speak. So, you really find, in a very subliminal kind of way, that other spiritual, religious aspect, you know, fully, in those works. You know.

And, as we look around at, really, a lot of the works, as I more closely look at them now, those elements were always there.

MH: What's also interesting to me about this is, this work speaks to a black audience. If you think about David Hammond's Body Prints in the same time, they began to protest to the larger society.

BJH: Yeah.

MH: This is not a protest to that external power, but it's an invigoration for people in the community. It's a message directly for that audience.

And, I think that audience factor is very important in the history of AFRICOBRA. Because so many artists are speaking, asking for entre into the larger society. So, it begins to be a plea at the gate.

W: Mm-hm.

MH: And, AFRICOBRA just said, no, we're going to talk to ourselves, about ourselves, and who we are ...

W: That's right.

MH: ... what we want to do.

W: Well, we were ...

MH: And this work shows that.

NJH: Right. Well, it was about affirmation. You know.

MH: Exactly.

NJH: We were affirming our presence, not to anyone else but to ourselves. And ...

MH: We see each other. We see ourselves.

M: Right. You are ...

(Overlap/Inaudible)

MH: Not only do I see you ...

M: Right. (Laughs).

MH: ... but I see us, and me.

M: Yeah.

Q: So, one question. What's up with women and guns? What's going on there?

M: (Laughs).

Q: Because (Overlap/Inaudible).

M: Oh, you mean the bullet?

Q: (Inaudible). (Laughs).

NJH: Well, actually, you know, the bullet belt is really more of a fashion element, and represents symbolically the aspect of revolutionary with a weapon, the weapon being a gun. But then, she clearly has a microphone in her hand, and her weapon is her words and her ideology, and her sense of self.

So, the bullet belt simply is a more everyday, pejorative representation of what a revolutionary does with a weapon. You fire a bullet. And her weapon of choice is her intellect and her sense of self.

BJH: And it's communication.

M: And ... right.

BJH: You know, piercing. A bullet pierces.

M: Right.

BJH: It puts a hole in something. It goes into it.

M: Right.

BJH: You know, and so, therefore, it becomes significant.

MH: What's also significant, I think, from a feminist point of view, is that these two works begin to suggest a partnership in the struggle.

BJH: Yeah.

NJH: Oh that's very clear.

BJH: And a power.

NJH: Right.

BJH: You know, I recently read it ...

MH: And that was not widespread at that time.

BJH: Yeah.

MH: In '72, '73.

BJH: Oh, yeah.

MH: That was not a widespread idea.

BJH: I recently read an article, you know, why there are not a lot of powerful women, African-American women, in movies and everything. You know, in terms of them being the aggressor. You know? There are not that many. But, in these two, you see that women have power. You know.

M: Well, you have to go ...

BJH: And I think from internally ... I mean within the community ... you know, that they have power. And they have power for even those that are outside, if they listen.

Q: Can we move to another painting? Can we talk a little bit about your piece? I believe it's called "Unite"? And this ...

BJH: Yeah. I don't think it's up.

(Background Conversation)

Q: Can you just talk a little bit about that piece, in particular?

BJH: Well, in that particular piece, it's a piece about Black Power. It was based on the fact that, in 1968, I was in Mexico. I did not see the gains at that particular time. But I did visit Elizabeth Catlett. Someone asked me whether Elizabeth Catlett was working on a sculpture of a figure, in terms of an upraised arm. You know, in terms of Black Power. And ...

(Background Conversation)

BJH: What, black power? (Laughter). And so, in terms of the fact that I wanted to do a piece. But I thought, in terms of Black Power, that we all had to come together and be united, you know? I think that's what the sports figures were doing. The athletes were saying that, we need to unite. So, I wanted to put a visual message to that, that we had to unite as a community.

And so, in my figures ... someone recently asked me about it, in terms of the fact that there are women and men there, collaborating to unite. And, I think that I wasn't thinking about that. I was thinking about, in a community, you have men and women. They have to come together. You know, you see that in a lot of my pieces that references there, you know, that we have to be together to protect our community. (Overlap/Inaudible) one way.

Q: So, is that what the closed fist represents?

BJH: Yep. It means Black Power. Yes, it does. You know, it means that we need to come together. Together, we have power. You know, separately, can, you know, not have the energy and the force of everybody behind a goal.

NJH: That was also our first collective print of the print series, right?

BJH: Yeah. This ... yeah.

NJH: Yeah. That one, yeah.

BJH: This, because I had printed, this was a part of my thesis for IIT. I mean, it was probably the last print that I made there, and therefore, when everybody was talking about prints, I says, "Well, I already have a print. You know." And so, therefore, the AFRICOBRA prints have the Bakota sculpture head on it that says AFRICOBRA on that print, to separate it from prints that I had done of that image previously.

MH: Let me ask you. When you mention this Bakota head, Jeff was studying African art.

BJH: Yes.

MH: Did he introduce ...

BJH: Yes, he did.

MH: ... a lot of that African ...

BJH: Yes, he did.

MH: Okay. What ...

BJH: Because he was up at Northwestern, and he had taken, I think, Frank Willett(?)?

M: Right.

M: Yeah. Yeah.

BJH: Yeah, Frank Willett's African. I went up there and took his course, too, one summer, in terms of him speaking about African art. And so, Jeff was very influenced ...

NJH: Well, we needed to make one small ...

BJH: ... you know, by that.

NJH: That was a Gala Day(?) mask, not Bakota.

BJH: Okay, a Gala Day. Okay.

NJH: Right. Right. Because the piece now is presently in the collection at Howard University.

BJH: Okay. It is there?

MH: Mm-hm.

NJH: Mm-hm.

BJH: Oh, okay.

MH: And that's interesting, because a Gala Day mask is one that ...

BJH: It's honoring women.

MH: ... honors the power of women.

BJH: Yeah. Of women, yeah.

MH: Right.

BJH: Yeah.

NJH: So, you see, women had a very frontal posture in AFRICOBRA, always have. You know, that was never an issue, you know?

MH: Right. Okay.

NJH: Whether you were male or female. The issue was whether you were about the business of projecting positive, forward-moving imagery. You know, that helped to uplift and to move the community ... the community locally, and the community internationally ... forward. You know.

MH: Mm-hm. And one thing about the critiques. When I came in the group, they were always about work that was unfinished, so that people could give you some feedback in case you could use it.

BJH: Mm-hm.

MH: Finished work was finished.

BJH: Yeah.

MH: Right. Was that the way it was in the early days?

NJH: Yeah. Yeah. Because we were meeting almost every other week.

MH: Mm-hm.

NJH: And so, the works were always in process. So, it was ...

MH: Right.

NJH: ... just a regular dialogue. You know.

MH: But one thing that I heard a lot was that, (Laughs), Jeff would talk about how we need to go, at a certain point, let's say, and take the brush out of Nelson's hands. Like, it's done. Leave it alone. (Laughter).

NJH: Oh, yeah. Oh, no, no, no. We tell each other very clearly when we thought they were finished. And we also told people when we thought, look. Nix it. Start over. You know. (Laughter). It didn't make it. Get back to it. (Laughter). You know. And we did that, you know. Which is the strength of AFRICOBRA. I mean, you know.

MH: Right. When I became a member, I felt like my work just grew by a couple of leaps. By not only being critiqued, but by observing the critique, and looking at the work. You know, and just seeing. It just gave me so many ideas. Because working in isolation just ...

BJH: Yeah.

MH: ... won't do that. And for me, at that time, working in a ... I went to a predominantly white undergrad institution. And so, the feedback I got didn't feed into the things I got from AFRICOBRA. And it just helped so much, for me personally, as a young artist, coming in.

BJH: It helps to establish you. I think that my work also grew, in terms of being a part of the group.

M: Mm-hm.

BJH: Because, previous to the group, I was doing things on what I call my American series, (Laughter), in terms of being basically criticizing what was happening to us as a people within America.

M: Mm-hm.

BJH: You know, and I think that with AFRICOBRA I took a more positive approach.

M: Right.

BJH: Left that behind, and dealt with it from a positive standpoint, in terms of, to me, positive messages that we should have as a people. You know.

Q: How did this affect you, Carolyn?

CL: Well, I was thinking, when you talked about not working in isolation, that that's what I appreciated most about being a part of AFRICOBRA. Also, the people that were in the group at that time were just so knowledgeable, and had very good insight. And, they could tell you what needed to be done, particularly Nap. (Laughter). And, your feelings were never hurt. You know, you never took it personally. That it was really about the art, and how color or form or texture was interacting.

And, oh, I greatly appreciated that and miss it. So, even though I have not been producing on my own, I've just mainly been doing things to kind of keep me sharp, skill-wise, I can't wait, you know, to get to a point where I can really begin to produce again.

NJH: Yeah. Well, you know, I think that was just one of those sort of unspoken things, that we all personally recognized our individual growth by this process. And, it was just, you know, the natural evolution of our being with each other as much as we were with each other.

Because, the benefit of what Chicago had for us was that we lived in the same neighborhood, so to speak. When I say same neighborhood, I'm talking about the South Side, and that general context. And, we were always interfacing with each other throughout that space between the meetings anyway. And so, it was more of a family than it was a collective, in the sense of the word "collective," or anything like that. Because we were always engaged with each other in different kinds of ways, through other openings or visiting other people's studios, visiting each other.

And all kinds of events, going out to 63rd Street Beach and listening to The Pharaohs out there, or any number of different things. Looking at Darlene Blackman and her dance group, or going down to Kuumba workshop, or any

of the things that the poets or writers were doing. So, we were all intermixed all the time.

So, you know, in the context of how we dealt with, if you will, the back and forth ... because it wasn't really criticism. It was really just a discussion amongst, you know ...

M: Right.

NJH: ... folks who had a love for each other. And a passion about what it was we were doing. So, it was a very unconscious ... it was like growing up in your own family. You know.

BJH: It was a focus. We had a focus point.

M: Right.

BJH: Someplace that we wanted to go.

M: (Overlap/Inaudible).

BJH: Something that we wanted to do. You know, and we were all going there together. (Laughs). You know, into that point together.

MH: It was funny. Murray DePillar's wife, Mary, came to an AFRICOBRA meeting one time in Washington. (Laughter). And, you know, we meet for hours, and hours, and hours. And she said that she really enjoyed it. She didn't mind staying, because it was like going to a master class. You know. With the knowledge that was in that room.

And by that time, all this experience that had come up from your origins there, you know, 20 years later. And it is. You know, when I'm there, I'm just listening to so much, so many decades of experience and knowledge and exposure and conversations.

BJH: Yes.

MH: And I don't know anywhere in the world where you could get that. You can get it from an individual, but where you could get it from five, six, eight people, at once, who all are on that same level?

W: Mm-hm.

NJH: Yeah. And then, too, some of the other things ... which we still do now, occasionally, but what we did occasionally even then ... there were other artists who were not a part of AFRICOBRA, who were at these discussions and dialogues with us from time to time.

MH: Right.

NJH: So, it was a larger community than the group, per se, but there were just the members of AFRICOBRA, and then the extended family, so to speak. You know, of the other artists who were operating in the city at the time. You know, so ... lively, lively meetings. I'll tell you.

MH: And sometimes funny. (Laughs).

NJH: Oh, always funny. (Laughter).

MH: Because the meeting when people fell out?

NJH: Oh yeah. Well ...

MH: (Laughs).

NJH: ... we only fell out for a moment. You know, that all ...

MH: No, I don't mean fighting.

NJH: Oh, the ... no, no.

MH: Fell off the chair. (Laughs).

M: I don't mean ... yeah. I mean that same thing. It was only for a moment.

MH: (Laughs).

NJH: Then you had to regroup yourself. But yeah, those were the special things that actually contributed to our growing. Because, we came with no ego.

MH: Mm-hm.

NJH: Although, we all had an ego. Have an ego.

MH: Mm-hm.

NJH: But it did not, you know ...

MH: Left it at the door.

NJH: ... preempt. No, we didn't leave it at the door. Just, you know, nobody got bent out of shape because their ego got stepped on, so to speak, when somebody told you that what you were doing might need to be ... didn't necessarily say needed to, but you might want to consider, you know, moving it this way, moving it that way. You might want to mix that color a little differently, or you might stop using that other color.

And so, I think we ended up, actually, with a collective ego, actually, when you think about it. Because I'm thinking of something Ed Spriggs said about the show we did at the Studio Museum, the first one AFRICOBRA, Ten in Search of a Nation. Was that, we had a sense of an aesthetic, and collaboration that he felt, as the director, at that time, of the Studio Museum, needed to be shared by the rest of the nation. You know. And, saw that as a part of Studio Museum's mission, was to spread that message. You know.

(Background Conversation)

Q: Could we talk a little bit about education? I mean, some of you are professors in universities, et cetera. Is that reflective of the fact that you're doing your art for the people, that you're actually just trying to have this translate and be relevant through teaching, in some way? Or ... I'm just making this up.

BJH: Well, we all have been teachers, and I think our careers was based on teaching. So, even Howard, even though he wasn't teaching at the college level, he taught classes in ceramics and different things. And sculpture. So, we've all been teachers, working with students and working with those.

I don't think that I ever tried to impose my philosophy on my students, in terms of their work, you know? In terms of what they were doing. I was always trying to encourage them to create that which they saw that they needed to do or they wanted to do. So.

NJH: And that was just the natural extension, I think, of what we were doing as young people growing into adulthood. Education was a part of the process. We came through a system of family structure that, it wasn't, were you going to go on to college? It was, you were going to go. And many of us represent first generation.

BJH: Mm-hm.

NJH: And, the ethos of AFRICOBRA, in terms of sharing, is critical to what we were just naturally doing anyway, by the route that we were taking in terms of our education.

Q: What I want to do, though, what I want to touch ... and maybe you can help me a little bit, rephrase it in a better way ... is the fact that mainstream was misconstructed the meaning of AFRICOBRA in your own way. And, by maybe considering some of the members of AFRICOBRA radicals, which was totally wrong. And I think that also gets clearly demonstrated through the fact that most of the members are educated, and educators, and however. So if we can maybe touch that. How would you rephrase it, Michael? I read about that in your book.

(Background Conversation)

MH: I'm not sure. But, my thought is, first of all, the social-political economic reality is that most African-American artists have to make a living doing something other than just making art. Because, this apparatus that buys art, and elevates the prices, doesn't necessarily buy art that addresses our audience, and reflects our concerns. Which is a part of that control issue we talked about earlier. When we start stepping outside that box, it doesn't sell as well.

So, most African-American artists have to make a living doing something else, and teaching often gives you a way of staying involved with the art, as well as a way of making a living. That's what I find. And ...

BJH: I think, you know, at the beginning, even though we did the prints and everything, the prints wasn't really based on profit.

NJH: Right.

BJH: Based on selling. Because, we sold a lot of prints very cheaply. (Laughter). It was basically trying to get a message out, you know?

NJH: Right.

MH: Right.

BJH: And, creating the imagery. I don't think that we really thought ... our whole idea was to not think about the upper. (Laughs). Or, those who were outside. I mean, we were thinking about what we wanted to do ...

MH: Right.

BJH: ... and how we wanted to do it. And we weren't really considering whether they were critiquing us or not, you know? Whether they were accepting us or not.

NJH: Right.

BJH: You know, because we were ...

M: Mm-hm.

BJH: ... doing what we wanted to do. And we were ...

HM: We did what we wanted to do.

BJH: And we were developing it the way that we wanted ...

M: Right.

BJH: ... to develop it, and we were showing it the way that we wanted to show it, and we were not considering. It's like generating energy within a nucleus that is not depending upon the outer shell to nourish it.

M: Right.

M: Right.

Q: So, how important was for you the critics? If any, if at all.

BJH: We weren't even considering critics.

NJH: We ...

M: (Laughs).

BJH: That's the whole idea.

NJH: Yeah.

BJH: We critiqued our work.

NJH: Right. Our ...

BJH: That's our whole idea. We critiqued our work ...

NJH: Right.

BJH: ... and we weren't looking for somebody else to critique our work for us.

NJH: Yeah. Our critics were our community.

BJH: (Laughs).

NJH: Those were the critics. Those were the people that we were concerned about, at the forefront of what we were doing.

And really, by extension, in terms of all of us teaching, it was still the element, the core nucleus element of AFRICOBRA, of sharing. Because, what better way to continue what we started with the Wall of Respect, and

continue on in teaching by disseminating that information through teaching?

MH: Mm-hm.

NJH: And so, we may not have formally been, if you will ... teaching our students by way of our philosophy of AFRICOBRA. We lived our philosophy. And by the ... either you call it osmosis, or by absorption, they learned that. They ingested it. And it came out in their works. We can see it in many of the artists that are now practicing, that have come under our teachings.

And so, what we actually, I guess, really ... without any planning of our own, we did more with what we were trying to do in our actual teaching than we were doing with our prints, in the sense of being able to touch more of our larger trans-African community. Because we see it as we travel outside of the United States, in reference to many of the other artists that we've run into who've said that they were aware of AFRICOBRA, and AFRICOBRA has had some influence on how they see their work and their circumstance, and the place where they are.

And even for me, another, more significant point. We chose not to use the term "artist." We were image-makers. And that's an entirely different set of criteria from which you start to making images. Because, as an image-maker and as an artist, to continue the term of artist was basically asking for admittance to the outside structure. You know.

BJH: Mm. Because I think our art was really for the people, you know?

M: Right.

BJH: We were really focusing on communicating visually to the viewer, and the viewer that we were looking at looked like us.

M: Right.

BJH: You know, to our people. So, I think that that's the underlining score of all of the work that came out. You know, specifically.

NJH: Yeah.

BJH: You know, even in Part II.

M: Right.

BJH: Because it's dealing with our ...

NJH: Oh, it's still the same thing.

BJH: Yeah. It's dealing with African, I see a lot of African design and Afrocentric elements within it. So, it's dealing with speaking to the people. Our people. Not all people. But all people are welcome to view it, appreciate it, (Laughter), buy it, and let it hang in their house. (Laughter).

M: (Overlap/Inaudible).

M: All right now. (Laughter)

HM: It was very, very important. One of the things I got early, it was very important ... and sometimes it was a controversy in the group, about actually writing in the messages that we wanted to be understood from the aesthetic work that we did. It was very important.

And, many times, it was like a little discussion about, well, why do I have to do this? (Laughs). You know. But, the element of writing left no mistake about what we were trying to project.

BJH: And communicate. Right.

M: And communicate, right.

W: Project and communicate.

M: Right, (Overlap/Inaudible).

M: Right.

BJH: These were visual communications.

W: Absolutely.

M: That's right.

W: Okay.

NJH: Based on a particular ...

W: Yep.

NJH: ... a very specified set of principles and a sense of aesthetics.

W: That's right.

BJH: Visual communications to the people.

NJH: Absolutely.

Q: So, Barbara, does that explain the importance of the writing and the lettering? You think, just to make it, no mistake?

BJH: Because the lettering is a definite statement. When you read it, you know exactly what it means.

M: That's correct.

BJH: You know, so, if it's missed visually, you can't miss it when you read it. (Laughs).

Q: So, there are some words that are ...

BJH: The words state what is being emphasized.

Q: So, can you maybe repeat some of the words that I've seen, like, used? Like, many times, in some of the works, and why are they important? Like the word, I don't know, "Unite." Or ...

BJH: Okay, I'm looking at one that I did. It says, "Black Men, We Need You." "We Need You." And I have included that in a new piece. Black Men, We Need You. You know, you need to think about your relationships, and how you relate to the community. You know. So, it's very direct.

Q: And ...

BJH: We ...

HM: There was no mistake about it. (Laughter).

BJH: And that's, we ...

HM: There was no mistake about it.

BJH: ... we, in terms of women and children.

M: Yeah, right. (Laughs).

BJH: Need you. I mean, I think that ...

M: No mistake about it.

BJH: ... that's still a problem, you know. (Laughter). Even in this day and age, you know.

M: Hey.

BJH: The message is still clear, and relevant, (Laughs), to this period of time. Even though that was done, what, 40 years ago.

HM: Exactly. (Inaudible).

NJH: You know, because that particular piece came out of one of our themes, which is the Black Family.

BJH: Yeah.

NJH: You know, so Unite was one theme. Black Family was another. And so, Carolyn, your particular painting, in terms of the children and the drums and all the rest of that, you know. So, uniting was not just something that we ourselves did as a group of image-makers. But it was something that we knew systemically needed to be communicated to the larger community. Because, Unite meant not just in political terms, so to speak, only. But it also meant uniting in terms of spiritual and familial situations as well. So, it was an all-inclusive, you know, sensibility that had to be communicated.

And so, writing was very critical to that, because surely some of the academic and formal approaches to making paintings, or works of art, may not be understood by the larger public. But surely, people know how to read and write. And so, in reading, it was very clear.

And through the reading of the message, the other education and the other sharing and the other communicating was given in terms of the aesthetic process. You know, that demystification of, you know, what is so unique, if you will, about art. And you had to be so this or so that in order to understand art, but that the art was a common, everyday experience. And, we were just simply the individuals who took that message that was communicated to us, and then we gave it back in another form.

Q: Napoleon, is there a specific word for the kids in your art, that you may want to, like, mention that?

NJH: Well, there were terms that we all shared back and forth. Holy. Unite.

BJH: Freedom.

NJH: Freedom. Uhuru. Well, Nelson's piece in particular, where we began to ... very early on, trans-African piece, in the sense of taking the Swahili word.

Q: What is the meaning of the word?

NJH: Uhuru means freedom. And, putting that, infusing it into one of our pieces was actually another level of education, in the sense of moving Black Power in English vernacular across to the continent, and bringing in the language from there. So, we get this from (Inaudible) ...

BJH: Identify the continent, because I think that's important, to the African continent. (Laughs).

NJH: Right. Right, right. Yeah. Well, for me, when I say "continent," that's the one, because Europe isn't a continent.

BJH: Some people may not think about that.

M: Right. (Overlap/Inaudible).

NJH: Well, okay. I grant you that. You're right about that.

BJH: Europe is a continent. (Laughs).

NJH: And, the element of, at the same time, we were dealing with ...

M: (Overlap/Inaudible) mistake. (Laughs).

W: Yes.

NJH: We were dealing with the birth of Kwanzaa, and the Nguzo Saba And so, the doublespeak, so to speak, of Swahili and English ...

BJH: Yeah.

NJH: ... was fluent within the larger black community. And so, using that language in our work, along with the imagery, was just another further extension of our concept of projecting positive images. And positive images necessarily do not always have to be communicated language-wise in English.

MH: Now, in Part II, (Laughs), we started using less language. And, the work began to be more symbolic.

W: Mm.

MH: And, incorporating more African imagery in a symbolic way, assuming that there was a level of understanding that had increased. And you see that a lot in James Phillips' work today.

W: Mm-hm.

Q: Carolyn, there is words used in the piece that we have here, from you. Can you just take us through some of those words, and the meaning that it represents for you, and the ...

CL: Which piece are you talking about?

Q: The piece back in the corner, the first one there. I don't know whether you see it, next to the window.

CL: Okay.

BJH: Your piece.

CL: It's my print. Mm-hm.

(Background Conversation)

Q: "Uphold Your Man."

CL: Oh, yeah. "Uphold Your Man," and again, "Unify Your Families." You know, that was the focus for me. And I thought that we all ... well, in our community, we have family problems. And some struggles. And, some of them come from females being, you know, alone, and not with men, and with children. And the men have gone elsewhere, have left their families.

And it's so easy, out of their frustration, for the women to beat their husbands down, because they have left. And, I'm just saying that there must be a way to talk to the children about the husband, or the friend, that has left them, without such negative and destructive words and attitudes. So that the children can maintain a whole sense of themselves. That was my thinking about that. I don't know if you understand that, Barbara.

BJH: Yeah. I think that's very important. I think it's very important, and even today. You know, I was looking at one of those talk shows, and the man, he was going to commit a robbery, and this lady talked to him, you know? And one of the things that came out is that he had lost his job and his wife was criticizing him all the time about the fact that he was not helping the family.

CL: Mm-hm.

BJH: That he had taken a negative approach to try to get money, you know, where she wasn't really giving him the support that he needed, you know, at this time of struggle, the fact that he couldn't find a job. So, upholding your men becomes very significant. You know, do not break them down.

W: Right. Right.

BJH: You know, help them. You know. Be that catalyst that helps them get over whatever problems that they're having, so that they can be more positive within the family.

CL: And it will help the children, ultimately ...

BJH: Yeah. And it will help the ... yeah.

CL: ... to become ...

BJH: It will help them (Overlap/Inaudible) the children, if ...

CL: Yeah. It will help the whole family. Mm-hm.

BJH: Yeah. Whole family relationship.

CL: That works on a child's psyche.

BJH: Yeah. It does.

CL: You know? It works ... very badly.

MH: What kind of ink did you use?

BJH: Since it was done in my studio ... (Laughter). Those are all silkscreen inks. They were made by Advance company that was here in the city of Chicago. They no longer exist. They're opaque, oil-based.

MH: Right. Oil-based. Right.

BJH: Silkscreen inks, yeah.

MH: Right. Because those colors are really popping.

M: Oh yeah.

W: Yeah, they do.

MH: Really popping.

NJH: I still have a little of that Advance ink.

BJH: Do you really?

NJH: I'm still using it gingerly. (Laughter). I hate to use it, because I know it's going to run out, but I'm still ...

W: Yeah.

MH: Well, you've got to get water-based ink.

W: And there's ...

NJH: Hey ... no, I don't like water-based.

MH: Yeah, I don't either.

W: Yeah.

M: Doesn't (Overlap/Inaudible).

W: Water-based doesn't give you ...

M: Right.

BJH: Another reason I stopped printing is because, you know, my son would get ill when he went to the studio with me. And so, I didn't really have anyone to keep him, and I just stopped, you know.

M: Yeah.

BJH: Because water-based just didn't give you the same ...

CL: You know, this was the first print, if I'm not mistaken. And no one wanted to go up to Northern, where ...

NJH: Where Nelson was.

CL: ... Nelson was.

M: Right.

CL: So, my husband and my son and I went up there, and we spent the weekend pulling that print.

MH: So you pulled it yourself.

CL: Yes, we ...

NJH: Yeah, all of them.

W: (Overlap/Inaudible). Mm-hm.

NJH: All of those prints, we all pulled them ourselves, and ...

W: Mm-hm.

M: Mm-hm.

NJH: It was a process.

W: Mm-hm.

MH: Yes, it was. (Laughs).

CL: Yeah. It was a process.

M: Right.

(Background Conversation)

(END OF TAPE)