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Interview with Wadsworth Jarrell

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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

Wadsworth Jarrell Part 1

Tape J1

TV LAND

WJ: My name is Wadsworth Jarrell. I'm a founding member of AFRICOBRA.

Q: Great. Can you talk maybe about you as an artist, prior to AFRICOBRA and the Wall of Respect? What were you doing? And give us a brief history of what was happening to you as an artist, prior to 1967.

WJ: I worked in advertising as a day job, and I painted nights, weekends, vacations. And I exhibited in local galleries, basically, around Chicago. And a couple of mainstream galleries ... like Main Street Gallery was a mainstream gallery on upper Michigan. But most of them was neighborhood galleries. You know, storefront galleries or art fairs, which was at Lake Meadows, in and around Chicago, even out into Indiana and Ohio. This is what I did. They was always on a weekend. But I always had the advertising job.

Q: Do you remember the first attraction that you had of art or becoming an artist? Do you remember why and (Overlap)

WJ: Why I became an artist? (Laughs)

Q: Was it coming from someone in your family, or you realized that you had the talent or the ...

WJ: Well, it was sort of written in stone that I was going to be an artist, between me and my mother. Because this is what I did as a child. As far as back as I can remember, I was drawing. In the beginning, it was just copying from the funny paper. And then I started making my own comic strips. And at school I was always their artist, and I did the backdrops for the plays, decorated the boards for Christmas and Thanksgiving, and even some of the instructors had me making sketches of them while they was teaching classes. And one instructor made a easel for me. So while, you know, I was not doing ... I had ... I wasn't out of class. Because this was like a one-room school. And, you know, you had a class over here, a class over here. He'd just move around and teach different classes. So I would do water colors on the easel he made. And he taught me how to make water color out of plants, which we used beets for red; indigo plant, we boiled them, boiled indigo plants for red ... I mean for blue; and onions for yellow. And I did a lot of water colors like that, mostly landscapes and things. And I moved up to high school, I was using oil paints about then, and I was the advertising manager for the school paper, The Highlight. And I also did cartoons for the ... for the paper, which mostly was athletic activities. You know, football games, basketball games. And then I got drafted. After I got out of school, I got drafted into the military. And after four months in the military, we moved to a brand-new outfit that didn't have anything, any signs that they needed to represent each company. So, since they knew I could draw, they asked me could I make letters. And they said if I could, I wouldn't have to do duty. So I didn't have a clue about type faces. I didn't know one type face from another. But I was ... I was smart enough not to let this job get away. So I went to the library and got me some books on lettering, and then I instantly became the battery artist. I was exempt of duty, and I just sat in the day room and made signs. Like each company had an identifying sign. Like I was in the field artillery, and I was in C Company. So we had Headquarters, A, B, and C Company, and I made signs that, you know, would sit out front, near the road, for all of the ... all of the companies. And the charts for the day ... for the office, for the head office. So it was day to day operations. So they could put the day to day operation on them. So. And, in between, I did paintings I wanted to do. Even one ... made a portrait of the first sergeant. So. But I ... my company shipped to Germany, and nobody wanted me in the outfit, because they said they wanted a guy that's going to soldier; I don't want a guy that's going to be an artist. You know, I look around, he'll be sitting in the day room, making paintings. So they shipped me out to a replacement outfit. And just checking in, you have to get new clothes and stuff. So the guy saw my drawings, in my foot locker, and he said, wow, the first sergeant will love you, we need some guy to do this. So I'm in this outfit. And two days I'm in there, I'm doing ... doing the same thing.

Q: In Germany?

WJ: No, no. This is still (Overlap) This is still in Louisiana. This is at (inaudible) Louisiana. So ... and I did that about maybe a month or so. So they shipped us all out to Far East, to Korea. To Japan and Korea. Where I no longer did artwork. I had ... I was in combat. But they did ask me ... I don't know how the word traveled this far ... they asked me could I make fire ... fire bells they had. They wanted me to paint something on them. Some lettering on them. And I told them, if I'm exempt of duty, I'll ... I'll do it. And he said, I can't do that, and I told

him I can't paint them. So I just did regular duty, which I was ... worked on a gun crew.

Q: And that was for how long?

WJ: Two years. Well, that was ... in Korea, I was only there six months.

Q: Did (Overlap)

WJ: But I was in the military for two years.

Q: Were you sort of at that time influenced in the work that came after?

WJ: Beg pardon?

Q: Would you say that that experience of two years influenced in the work that you did that came after?

WJ: No, the work I did in the military was ... it was mostly lettering. But the paintings, I didn't know how to paint.

Q: I mean what you experienced, those two years in the military, did that influence in some of the subject matter or the way you were ...

WJ: No, I only did one painting, really, related to areas I had been, like Japan. No.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about the moment that preceded the creation of The Wall of Respect? What were you doing professionally and as an artist, and what was going on around, in your world?

WJ: I mentioned before I was working a gig in commercial art. Nine to five. And I was painting and exhibiting in art fairs and small galleries.

Q: What was going on politically and in that moment? I know there were some events that kind of preceded The Wall of Respect that made The Wall of Respect very relevant. Can you talk a little bit about that?

WJ: Yeah. Every since Martin Luther King integrated the bus line in Montgomery, then that sort of started, kicked off the civil rights in cities all over the country. And, you know, that was shops jumping up. All kinds of African American shops. And people was changing their uniforms, their clothing, you know, to African-influenced clothing. But there was a lot of ... because they brought it to Chicago, really. There was people laying in the middle of Randolph Street, during rush hour. You know, they was blocking traffic. And ... and people all in your neighborhood, asking you to come and march. But that's not my ... that's not my stick, marching, and ...

Q: What neighborhood was that in Chicago?

WJ: It's where my studio was, on 61st and Harper, in Chicago, right off of Stony Island. There was a guy in there, recruiting you to come and join the Martin Luther King lay-ins and sit-ins. But I'm not the kind of guy that can take punishment, so I wouldn't ... I wouldn't be a good fit for them. Because if someone had hit me, I would have to hit them back. You know. I'd have to ... I'd have to throw down and be ready to give up my life, you know. So I'm not the guy. And I told him, I'm an artist, I'm ... have to do it some other way. So this is how The Wall of Respect came about. So we were doing things, artistically, related to the movement.

Q: So can you talk a little bit about how the whole idea of doing The Wall of Respect happened? And if you can mention maybe some of the artists that participated in doing it. Just the event itself, if you can tell me the story of The Wall of Respect.

WJ: Okay. The ... the whole thing came out of the group called OBAC, which is American ... OBAC ... well, it came out of the OBAC group. I'll think of the name, the real name, in a minute. That's just a acronym. They had a group that had ... writers started it. Writers and poets started the group. And Jeff Donaldson was the odd man, sort of. He was over visual arts. So then he started having meetings of ... talking about doing a project. And we had not a clue what we was going to do. So we would start meeting in different places. And we started meeting at a studio that ... two women had a gallery. A storefront gallery. And I think they also lived there. Her name was Myrna Weaver, who also working on the wall. And the thing started when Bill Walker told us that he had a wall he was going to paint, and if we wanted to, we could come in to, you know, help him paint it. So this is how we got the wall. He already had permission to paint on this vacant ... it wasn't really vacant, just the top floors was vacant. The bottom floors had a bar and a radio shop in it. So we all went down and looked at it, and then we started ... took him up on it, and we hired someone ... we rented scaffolding. We hired someone to paint it white for us. And then we started painting. But, before that, we assigned sections to each artist. And the earliest in The Wall of Respect was Billy Abernathy, Sylvia Abernathy, Jeff Donaldson, Barbara Jones, myself, Norman Parrish, Ed Christmas. And then we had photographers. Like Billy Abernathy was a photographer. And

Roy Lewis was a photographer. He was also part of it. And Darryll Cowherd was a photographer. So we was assigned different sections. And, you know, you throw up your hand ... they threw out the section, and you'd throw up your hand and say I want this section. You know. And then sometimes you had a little arbitration. Someone else wanted it and then ... you know, so we worked all of that out. But we had ... Sylvia was a designer, Sylvia Abernathy. So she laid out the whole Wall of Respect on paper, just in colors. You know, just little strips of colors. And she assigned each person a section, and dictated how many colors you can use in your section. Some of them was full color. Some was limited color. So we had sections. The first section was ... at the top of the painting was Statesmen, which Norman Parrish had, in the beginning. The next one was Sports, which Myrna Weaver did. And the next one was jazz, which Jeff Donaldson had. And he also brought in ... a guy name Elliot Hunter helped him worked on some of his. So, at the bottom left was Rhythm and Blues. This was my section. And which was one of the best sections, because it was tin. It was a huge window, like ten by twelve, that they had put a piece of tin over it, rather than brick. Most of the thing, people had to paint on, deal with the brick. So next to that was ... Bill Walker had a piece called Religion. And we had ... Ed Christmas did Literature, which, you know, they put in people ... writers like Killens ... Killens and Baldwin and Gwen Brooks and Baraka. All of these people was chosen. So in the Statesmen was Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell, Rev Brown, and ... I can't remember who else. And the Boxers and the Sports, there was people like Muhammad Ali, Wilt Chamberlain, Abdul Jabar. In Rhythm and Blues, I had all of the blues ... some of the blues people.

(Background/Off-Mike)

(END OF TAPE)

Wadsworth Jarrell Part 2

Tape J2

TV LAND

(Background/Off-Mike)

WJ: I was talking about the sections for The Wall of Respect. Barbara did ... Barbara Jones did Theatre. And she had people like James Earl Jones, Ruby Dee, and Ossie Davis, and just several actors. African American actors. And while ... after we started, Carolyn Lawrence came down, and she did Dance, but it was on the newsstand. The newsstand was on the edge of the curb. Curb. So she did dance for us, from images in dance. And when we was doing it, it was ... before we went, it was a gang area. It was the Blackstone Rangers area. And a little graffiti was on the wall. That's all that was on it when we went there, and we painted it out. But they never did destory the wall, or deface it, or anything. They more or less protected it for us, you know. And this is how we did it. And we had ... we had more plainclothes policemen than we had spectators, watching us work, you know. But, you know, we were just artists, making ... making a mural, and ...

Q: Do you feel people were afraid of what was going on in there? I mean, I heard there was people with guns, as well.

WJ: On ... on the rooftops, yeah. At one point, they had ... had people with guns, you know. I mean, law enforcement people with guns, you know. And some of us was oblivious of it, you know. But that was also rumors which some of us didn't really grasp, like COINTELPRO was infiltrating, and you could just see them all over, you know, but ... and, you know, it's just later that some of figured out, you know, some of the things that was said was right, you know, so. But I never did understand why they had guns or why they was watching us. We was just a bunch of artists, making a mural.

Q: Can you talk about the name, The Wall of Respect?

WJ: The Wall of Respect.

Q: Why was it called The Wall of Respect?

WJ: Hmm. Someone just gave it that name. (Laughs) Someone suggested it. If I'm not mistaken, Myrna Weaver suggested it. And we said good. You know.

Q: It was appropriate, because it was like paying respect to specific figures on the black community?

WJ: (Overlap) Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Right. Right. And there was some ... it wasn't as if ... some of the things that have been written is not quite true, that we consulted the people in the neighborhood. Some input was given, but mostly we ... you know, it's like writing a book. You don't ask 30 people to help you write a book. You'll never write it. You know, you have different views on it. So there was some input on some of the things. I

remember I changed one group and put The Marvelettes in, who I didn't even know them, you know, because I'm into jazz. I didn't really know them. So I put them in, at the ... some of the community women suggested. Oh, well, The Supremes. I had The Supremes in, at first. So I took them out and put The Marvelettes in.

Q: But you didn't know ... it was ultimately your decision of what to put there. Would you feel that your work was influenced or energized by the community, what was going on around you?

WJ: (Overlap) Oh, sure. Sure. Sure. And we only put people that had sort of a militant stance, take a stand, on the wall, regardless whether they was poets, musicians, or whatever. You know. And this was discussed in depth, you know, about who we was going to put on the wall.

Q: Will you talk to us a little bit about ... I believe there was a discussion about putting Martin Luther King in or not. Can you talk a little bit about that, the decision of not?

WJ: Yeah, because we would take Malcolm over Martin Luther King, because he had a more of a militant stand. And Martin Luther King had ... I wouldn't say a soft stand, but he had ... you know, he had a non-violent kind of movement. And we didn't believe in the non-violent stuff. So this is why we didn't put him on. And we didn't put other guys on, for several reasons. There was guys that was dating other races that we decided we wouldn't put on. So that came up. Even guys that wasn't even married to a certain race, especially white race, and so I was putting B.B. King on, and we had the discussion, oh, he's like ... he goes with white women. So Baraka was married to one. So I said, well, what about Baraka? They said, well, we're going to get rid of him, as soon as we find someone to replace him. (Laughs) But he was such a big image, we couldn't find anybody to replace him. You know. And, I mean, we wasn't thinking about replacing him, I'm sure. But we just sort of forgot about that part, you know. But he was ... he was a big figure, you know.

Q: When the wall was finished, did you think that it was going to be that relevant as it turned out being?

WJ: Not as nationally and internationally. No. But we knew it was ... it was relevant for us, and it was relevant to this community, which was only the important thing to us. You know, the other stuff was just sort of like icing on the cake or ... you know, that we hadn't planned on. But it ... you know, it was all good.

Q: What did The Wall of Respect did in the black art movement? In black art? Did it trigger something? Did it ...

WJ: It influenced the mural movement in the country and in other countries. This was the first mural done on the face of a building, in years, in North America. So it started the whole mural movement. And even in other countries started it, you know.

Q: Could you talk to us a little bit about the AFRICOBRA. Beginning of AFRICOBRA as a movement? I mean, if you can just take us from Wall of Respect ... some of the members see The Wall of Respect, and how that (Inaudible) the program.

WJ: Okay. It was only four members that worked on The Wall of Respect that ultimately was in AFRICOBRA. That was Jeff Donaldson, myself, Barbara Jones and Carolyn Lawrence. Jeff and I was going ... we used to get in these art fairs on the weekend. And we started talking about doing something relevant, because The Wall of Respect was just a group of artists. We were not cohesive, like a group. We didn't have a philosophy. We was just individual artists, making a project. So we had started talking about making an artists' movement, like moving towards a school of thought. And so we talked about it awhile, and then we had a meeting in my studio, at the WJ Studios and Gallery, on East 21st Street. I mean, East 61st Street. And the beginning members that was there in the beginning, the founding members was the first five people that met at my studio. That was Jeff Donaldson, Jae Jarrell, myself, Barbara Jones, and Gerald Williams. Those are the founding members. And we talked about making a pro-black group that would work towards a school of thought. And we was trying to bring other people in, also. So there was people that came. Robert Page was one of them. He was a fabric designer, who's now living in New York. He came to early meetings, but his ideas was ... didn't quite jibe with ours. And ... because he was more interested in doing something like The Bauhaus was doing, where artists do everything. You know, advertising, paintings, all kinds of things, you know. So. But we were only interested in fine art movement. So he didn't say, but he did give us one interesting thing before he left. An important thing. He gave us the name coolade colors, before he left, you know. And that means ... that's one of our principles. That means the bright colors that the African Americans ... not just African Americans ... that black people was wearing in the sixties. You know, whether they was in Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, Philadelphia, or Dakar or Port au Prince. You know, wherever black people were, they was wearing bright colors. So the people called them Kool-Aid colors. So this is how we got this principle. You know, it sound ... it sounds sort of street, and then it sounded real great, so we took it. Took it. Adopted it as one of our principles.

Q: Would you say that it was important, in that moment in time in America, for the black community to define certain like visual aspects, create a collective of black artists?

WJ: Yes. That's the reason why groups sprung up all over. You know, there were groups in New York that sprung up. And this is the reason people just wanted to work in a collective. And the reason we did it was because we had ... The Wall of Respect sort of showed us that we could do this, you know. But we did not have a philosophy, but we still was a group of artists who worked together. So, within AFRICOBRA, we decided ... we started off as COBRA. Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists. And later we added African. And then we became African COBRA. But we were interested in forming a tight knit group that had a philosophy, but yet you could still a work within the framework, as an individual. As long as you adhere to some of the principles, you know. We had maybe ten or 12 principles you had to adhere to, at least use a couple of them in your paintings, or maybe if you wanted to use them all, that's fine. And the first founding members crafted the ... the dialogue for ... for the AFRICOBRA. Determined what we was going to be and the direction we wanted to go.

Q: Could you mention some of those specific aspects (Inaudible) AFRICOBRA?

WJ: What?

Q: Could you mention some of those specific characteristics that would make an artwork ... an AFRICOBRA artwork?

WJ: Yeah. We had ... I told you about the coolade colors. We had arbitrary use of light and line, where you don't necessarily ... light doesn't come from one direction, like Rembrandt light. So we refuted that, and we had ... lost-and-found line was part of it. And we had open color, where, at some part of your painting, the background merges with the form itself. And it all becomes one. And we had free symmetry, like rhythmic African music. We had ... these are principles, I'm talking about, we adopted. And we had mimesis at midpoint, which is where the real and the unreal meet. And this is the point between absolute abstraction and absolute realism. And this is where we wanted to go. This was our ultimate goal that ... and some ... and we achieved that goal.

Q: Can you repeat (Inaudible) maybe talk about that painting of the black family?

(Background/Off-Mike)

(END OF TAPE)

Wadsworth Jarrell Part 3

AFRICOBRA Interviews

Tape WJ

TV LAND

(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: So we left it that you were going to take us through the first painting, that you had figured out all the different characteristics of AFRICOBRA. That kind of was the first (Inaudible)

WJ: Yeah. Okay. We decided to make an assignment for the whole group. A group assignment. And we chose black family to show the black community some kind of positive stand, with a father and a mother with children. You know. So we ... the first, all the founding members did this particular assignment. And there was one other guy that was not a founding member did one, Phil Salters, but he dropped out early in AFRICOBRA. So this painting, I'm trying to get away from the European influence I had been painting with ... I'm a product of the school of the Art Institute of Chicago, where all of the influence was European. I didn't even know African American artists exist at that school. I knew they exist, but, as far as the school was concerned, they didn't exist. So it was only European artists you studied about. You name them, the Impressionists, the extrac... Cubistic ... Cubist people. So, anyway, you didn't ... I was trying to regurgitate some of the learning I'd had and trying to get into some kind of ... create something that was ours, that was ... as a group, you know. So I started off with the B Zone, then. There's a lot of B Zone there. So the rhetoric of the day then was black is beautiful. So I'm using the B's as black is beautiful. And I'm not really constructing the figures out of the B's yet, but I'm using them in there for that reason. And I'm using open color on it. You might notice the top of the guy's head, where the background is synonymous with the (Inaudible) itself. And I'm using a lot of the principles on there, and a lot of the Kool-Aid colors in all of this.

Q: What's the subject matter of the painting? Part of the characteristics of the (Inaudible) as well? Some of the themes?

WJ: Some of the?

Q: Themes. Like is it (Inaudible) on the black family, certain things were important, I believe, in AFRICOBRA artwork.

WJ: The important thing was we wanted frontal images in the beginning, because they present a powerful image, a frontal image. So we wanted positive and frontal image. And you notice the first painting ... the first two paintings we did, they were frontal images. All the people was facing front on. You know. So we did the second assignment that some people didn't use ... there was some strong language in it, and I don't know whether I should say it on ...

Q: You can say it (Inaudible)

WJ: You can bleep it out if you want to. But we did a painting. The second assignment was "I'm better than those motherfuckers and they know it." You know. So this was comparing some African American with some white American, usually. And, in my case, I did musicians, you know. I had The Beatles in the background, and I had somebody like a musician in the front ... an African American musician in the front. Somebody like Wilson Pickett or somebody like that. And with the same area of B's and different things in it. I'm still trying to work out a way I want to say this. And I was using also wax on the first two paintings. Like the family has wax in it. Underneath it, you know. And you get a lot of translucencies and transparencies this way. And I dropped the wax, because it doesn't ... it's not permanent. And just the two paintings I used the wax on. And it's still on there, but it's not permanent. If you scrape it against something, you pull off the whole painting, you know. So (Inaudible)

Q: Can you talk to us about the importance of music in your work? Not only as a theme, but also were you listening to music? In a way, is some of your work musical (Overlap)

WJ: You mean myself or AFRICOBRA as a group?

Q: Both. Starting with AFRICOBRA.

WJ: Yeah. We all listened to music. And some of us was jazz aficionados, like myself, and probably Jeff was. And we listened to music, but not in the meeting. We had to cut the music off. It's just breaks we listened to the music, or before the meeting start. You know. Because I had a collection, a great collection of records, so I would be playing records. But when the meeting start, we didn't play the music. But when I'm painting, I play music a lot of time. Most of the times.

Q: For example?

WJ: Yeah, but it's not ... it's not really ... I do a lot of jazz musicians. I do a lot of musicians, period, which is ... you know, so-called country blues musicians, like Ray Waters, Howlin' Wolf. But the music is not really the influence. It's I like to hear it. You know. It's just I'm playing it while I'm working. But it's not really the influence on my work, you know. And I'm not trying to paint to music. I'm really trying to paint the feeling one gets when listening to the music. You know, that's my take on it.

Q: Can you talk especially about the painting, I believe it's called The Revolutionary.

WJ: Revolutionary started with ... it was a commission. That and Malcolm X was a commission. And Martin Luther King. I did the whole three ... painted all the same size. They're all like 44 by 66 inches. And Barbara Sizemore, who was the ... who is a ... who is an educator in Chica... she was in Chicago then, commissioned me to do these three pieces. At the time, she was the head of WESP, the Woodlawn Experimental School Project. And I was working in the project. Jae and I was working in the project, which we taught night classes at the Wadsworth Upper Grade Center, up ... you know, it's a school that has lower school and upper school. So she commissioned me to do those, and I used the famous photograph of Angela, for Revolutionary, from the Life magazine. I can't remember the photographer who shot it. But I did that one, and I did one of Martin, and I did Malcolm. But, this time, I had started organizing the B's on there. The letters was organized. I started trimming the form with the letters. That was suggested to me. Actually, Nelson Stevens suggested that, you know, you just laying them along flat. And so I started to trimming the form with them so that's how that got started. And the suit she has on is a replica of the suit Jae has in the back. The revolutionary suit. The Bullet Belt suit.

Q: When you were working on those pieces and others ones from AFRICOBRA, would you say that it would be wrong to say that that was your way of dealing with the struggle?

WJ: Yes. Of course. See, she was ... at the time, she was incarcerated for a year, when I did the painting. She was in jail. Yeah, that was my way of dealing with it. Because even some of the other artists did some things on that incident, with the shootout at the ... at the courthouse, you know. I think Jeff's got a piece he did on that. But that was part of my way of doing ... you know, saying something about the struggle.

Q: Would it be wrong to say there was so much horrible things going on in that period of time, in the mid-sixties ... in '68, '67 ... in America ... the violence, riots, important people get assassinated ... would you say that the AFRICOBRA decision of like focusing the positive, would that be like a reaction to the negativity that was coming out?

WJ: No. We was far from reactionary artists. You know. We didn't consider our protest art. Our work was pro-black art. You know. We wanted to do positive images, have a positive influence, what we did. And it wasn't reaction, but it was related to the times. And you'd have to understand the times. This was the 1960s, where they had road m... I mean, marches, boycotts; the rhetoric of the day was "seize the time"; "black is beautiful"; going "right on." Raised, clenched fists. We were enhancing ... capturing some of this. Our mission, as AfriCOBRA artists, was to confirm our continuity with Africa, and capture lifestyles and attitudes of African Americans in the USA, at the same time. So we had ... the ultimate goal, as I said before, was to free the black aesthetic and a school of thought.

Q: In that period of time, even now, an artist is a very individualistic being. I mean, it works on its own and it's just thinking about (Inaudible) creating something that is (Inaudible) But AFRICOBRA was more eclectic. Can you talk about that idea of (Inaudible) working on your own thing, but the fact that you were looking in the collective, and also the social responsibility that really was an important factor.

WJ: I didn't quite understand you.

Q: Could you talk a little about the idea of the collective, of the social responsibility of AFRICOBRA? If you agree that there was one.

WJ: Yeah. Uhm. You know, we adhered to a lot of the philosophies of people like Malcolm X or Senghor; even Cesaire of Martinique. We adhered to a lot of their kind of philosophy. Any of the revolutionaries like that. And we was in step with the Black Panthers. Not that we was Black Panthers, but we was in step with them. So some of the things that they was doing. And especially the patrol things they was doing in the neighborhoods. You know, the police patrol things. And the breakfast programs they had. Those kind of things influenced us more than the music. People think music influenced us, but those kind of things influenced us. The times influenced us more than anything. This couldn't have been done any ... nowadays. The same thing could not have been done. Because it would be less important. But, at the time, it was important, because America was in turmoil. You know. So this was the proper time. And we seized the opportunity to introduce an experimental art. And our art, we was able to work out ideas that were uniquely ours.

Q: I believe there is ... correct me if I'm wrong, but there is a clear ... it's being considered that the AfriCOBRA movement was transAfrican. And the fact that you guys were more focused in art that came from Africa than maybe art coming from Europe. Can you talk a little bit about that, the influence of (Inaudible)

WJ: Yeah. See, in the beginning ...

(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: So let's (Inaudible) do the trans-African aspect of AFRICOBRA. And then Kenny is going to ask you a little bit more. So whenever you want.

WJ: Okay. In the beginning, there was little or no African influence in the work we did. You're looking at pieces now, the black family and Malcolm, and this one over here called Homage to a Giant ... there's no real African influence in those pieces. But this was for AFRICOBRA One. For AFRICOBRA Two, the same thing. By AFRICOBRA Three, the African influence had started coming in my work. Jeff Donaldson was the only person, really, that had a lot of knowledge about Africa, because he was studying African art history when ... and he was also a collector of African art. Because he was working out of Northwestern. So I had moved to D.C. Jae and I moved to D.C. And things really were in high gear. And we started using African influence because we had African instructors there. We had African museums there. So we started. And had a big congregation of Africans at Howard. You know, from Nigeria, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, just different places in Africa. So this sort of started the trend. And for the Black Panthers, the one I have downstairs ... I don't have it up here ... but that's the first one I used African influence in. So, at one point, we all started using a lot of influence. And James Phillips came into the group, who was very much African influenced by all of his work. So he was a big ... he had a big impact on AFRICOBRA. And he was the biggest influence, as far as painters, in the whole group. So everyone was using African patterns and all of this. And of course we visited Africa for FESTAC in the seventies, and you got a chance to see people from all over the country, all over the nation, come to Lagos you know, as dancers and entertainers, all kinds of things. Poets or whatever. They came from several countries in Africa, and from several amer... they came from America, they came from Australia. The aboriginals was there. Just everybody that was associated with being black was there, you know. And the country paid for them to come. Gave them a plane to come. Paid their fare. So this was a big argument we had in going to FESTAC. So, at one point. the State Department gave us a plane. So we was 254 people on the plane. We was all African American;

we was all artists. You know. So, you know, the flight over and back was paid by the State Department. And once we got to Africa, they had new ... new houses they was building, new apartments. And they was free. Africa picked up the tab. Housing was free. The meals was free, once we got there. And you not only had a meal ticket, a book of meal tickets, you could go out in the city, anywhere they had the red tents up, you could eat there for ... you know, it could be an upscale restaurant, but if they had the red tents out there to let you know you could use your meal tickets to eat there. So it was great. All the transportation and everything. You didn't need a nickel. You didn't spend a dime, you know. So.

Q: How long did that run?

WJ: One month. But they had ... people would go to one half and then some would go to the other half. Because I went to the second half. I stayed two weeks. So that influenced the work even more, once we went to Africa.

(Background/Off-Mike)

W: The intention wasn't to go along with the struggle in a weighted way, but just to accentuate the positive. And then a lot of that is with the human figure being more frontal, and how being positive is the direct way of kind of reaching the community.

Q: I think there was a lot of (Inaudible) in the subject matter of some of the artists, prior to AFRICOBRA. I mean (Overlap)

WJ: Even during AFRICOBRA. We were the only really pro-black group that was not reactionary, and we were proficient artists, on top of that. There are a lot of artists that had ideas, but they couldn't put it together. You know, once they put it together, the paintings and the work fell apart, almost, because they didn't have the skills to do it with. There was a lot of ... everybody did stuff, during the sixties. You know. And everybody thinks they can be an artist. You know. Even today everybody thinks they can be a visual artist, anyway. They don't think they can be a musician, because you've got to know music to play that. But they think they can pick up a brush and just start painting. But that's not true. It's a language, like anything else. Like studying French or English or anything else. You know. But with regards to your question, AFRICOBRA was ... we were thinking of ourselves as being cutting-edge artists. Artists are never ahead of their time, but they're always doing things during their time. During ... you know, the struggle was going on when we formed AFRICOBRA. So we were not ahead of our time. We was right on time with what was happening. But we was putting a positive spin. We didn't do images of downtrodden people. We didn't do ... we had, you know, the foresight not to glorify the so-called black memorabilia they make, which is ... has nothing to do with black people. It's only for white people's interests. Like the Sambo interests, like Aunt Jemima, Amos and Andy, or Uncle Ben, you know, none of that stuff we did. We didn't glorify any of that. So we put a militant spin on our stuff. We put bandoliers or bullets on our paintings for one reason. We looked at the struggle as a continuous fight, and we didn't dictate to people, but we suggested what they should be doing. So if you go into a gun fight, we suggested that you take something to this gun fight other than a prayer, a song, and the bible. So this is why we did the bandoliers and stuff, you know. So this is America, this is Second Amendment, the right to bear arms. And we emphasized that on a lot of our pieces. Early pieces. This one here. This is Huey Newton, the Black Panther, with the bandolier going across, and the rifle he's carrying.

(Background/Off-Mike)

WJ: AFRICOBRA was ... we was painters. We was artists. Not just painters; we was artists. And artists always have good ideas because they are right on time. With the times. And they project a lot of ideas. And our ideas ... at AFRICOBRA, we didn't adhere to non-violence movements. Like I mentioned before, we adhered to more of the militant movements. Militant figures, like Malcolm X, or even James Baldwin, who was ... who was not violent. But if you read his book, he got some ... he's got some stuff in there. But we were not associated with any of the militant groups like I've been asked whether we was associated with the Panthers. I did paintings of the Panthers. And I know guys, myself, who was burning buildings. We didn't do that. We was artists, you know. So. And we all was ... had probably something to lose. I had a business. Jae and I had a business, and most people had jobs at a university or something. So we was just ... we were more educators than anything. You know. So.

Q: Can you talk to us about Ten In Search of Nation? That first exhibit of AFRICOBRA in Harlem.

WJ: Okay. We would meet at my studio. For the first three years, all of the meetings was at my studio, basically. I would say 99 percent of them was at the WJ Studios and Gallery. And different people came down. Like Edward Spriggs was a director of the Studio Museum in Harlem. And Barry Gaither was a director ... he still is director of the Afro-American Center in Boston. So they would come to meetings, and they invited us to exhibit. So the first exhibit was ... went to Studio Museum first, and then it traveled to the Boston, to the Afro Center. We for the poster ... we made a poster ... for the poster, I did all the photography for the poster. Shot

the pictures, did the high contrast, and laid out the whole poster, in terms of how it was going to look. And the Studio Museum printed it. So, anyway, they had us come up and show. And we all had a certain number of pieces that we show in it. The pieces was all hung together. Right? I had a section. Everybody had sort of a section. That's the way we always exhibited. It was never interspersed with different people. Just this person, then this person, then that person. And the show was really a big hit, a big jump off for us. It jump-started AFRICOBRA. And I'm told by Edward Spriggs it jump-started the Studio Museum, which no one is admitting now, but this is the first major show that the Studio Museum had ever had. So we got a lot of press with it. We had magazines from France and everything. There was a lot of write-ups about the show. A lot of positive press. And we influenced a lot of the New York artists. You know, we brought the ... what do you call it? The greatest show in town. We were. Greatest show on earth. We brought it to New York, and we influenced a lot of the New York artists. Even some of the Weusi artists was there. So.

Q: Can you talk to us a little bit about Jeff Donaldson as a figure? Your relation with him and his role in AFRICOBRA.

WJ: Well, I'll say one thing about him. He's the only person I've ever seen could walk into a room and change the whole shape of the room. And I don't care what they was talking about, he's in there five minutes, and everybody's catering to him, and they're talking about what he wants to talk about. So this is the kind of influence he had. He was very influential. Probably one of the biggest influential people in African American art that was ... as of today. You know. And a lot of people was influenced by him and don't even realize they was influenced by him. But he was ... he had not just a big vocabulary, but he could ... but he didn't really use a big vocabulary when he talked, but he was forceful. But he could deliver. The way he would deliver it would intimidate most people. So he was ... he was a leader, you know. He wasn't ... he was an educator, also. He was a great educator. But he was a leader in certain things, too, you know. So ...

(Background/Off-Mike)

WJ: Jeff was very influential, and he was possibly the biggest African American influence in terms of African American art as of today. And a lot of people was influenced by him, and some that won't even admit it, and some people don't even know they was influenced by him. But this is the kind of guy he was. And he was sort of this unofficial spokesman for AFRICOBRA, because he had the gab. He had the talk. He had the words. You know, he's a wordsmith. And also he was going to the University of ... going to Northwestern. And he was using this as part of his study, too. So. And, you know, we all jumped aboard. And so we let him do most of the talking. And a lot of the interviews it was done by him, you know, because he had the wherewithal to do it.

Q: He had also like the physical appearance.

WJ: Huh?

Q: Physically he was also like ...

WJ: (Overlap) Yeah, he was six-feet-six. And 200 pounds. So you know. And he had that piercing eyes, and he had ... he had the talk. He's a great orator, you know. He's a great orator.

Q: Were you very close to Jeff? Friendly?

WJ: At one time. I knew Jeff. Jeff was a person you know. Jeff is a person you don't get close to. He's a person you know. And people respect him. Those that respect him for his ability. And then there are those who respect him for his ability, but those respect him because they was afraid of him. You know, afraid he would recoil, you know. But I knew him from the fifties, when I was in art ... we was in an art fair together. The first art fair I got in, when I got out of school, in '58. That's where I first met him. And then the next year we was living a couple of doors from each other, in Hyde Park. And I would go down to his house, and he'd come by mine, and different things like that. And then he lived in Hyde Park, later, where I moved to my studio in Hyde Park. The WJ Studios. I would see him pretty often. We had a mutual friend that I met him from, and we all would get together. And, you know, we'd go to parties together. But he was never what you would call my close friend. But once I started working at Howard, he got married. And we got to be pretty close. Jae and I and his wife would all ... we'd go out together. And him and I used to go to lunch together, lots, when I was at Howard. That's as close as I got to him. We were pretty close, at that time, you know.

Q: Would you suggest that he influenced art by his art or by his ideas?

WJ: His ideas. By his ideas, more than anything. He was like E.F. Hutton. When Jeff speak, everybody listen. No one hardly challenged him, you know. But he had good ideas. You know, he had a lot of the good ideas of AFRICOBRA, really. You know, some of the ... you know, we didn't sort of go for the name, in the beginning, because he had created the name before AFRICOBRA. There was a march on something to do with ... a college in Chicago was doing something on black studies and different things. And the main thing, they didn't include

him. I mean, he never said that. That was never said, but ... and he ran a picket. He got a group of artists to go picket it. And they named themselves Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists. So, anyway, we adopted the name, once we formed AFRICOBRA. But it sound like ... it was ... a question came about the Cobra artists in Brussels. And so we did some research on them. But they had a philoso... they had a manifesto, and also they had no reason to protest like we did. The only thing they was protesting about was their art. They was protesting about people like Mondrian, because they said we're surrounded by squares. And they wanted to break out and create some kind of chaos, you know. So they had a different perspective than us. We were African Americans, living in a country where we couldn't even vote, in some states. There are places we couldn't go in. The hotels we couldn't to. So we had a reason for what we did. We had a whole 'nother different reason than the Cobra artists. And our philosophy. They didn't have the philosophy we had. We had a philosophy. So that was the difference between ... between the Cobra artists and AFRICOBRA artists.

Q: Can I ask you, you were the only one of the members that was married to another member of AFRICOBRA, Jae, your wife. Is that (Inaudible) by that?

WJ: This? Yeah. Uh-huh. Right.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about how it is to live with another artist, and how you guys might bounce ideas, if you do, and how do you influence each other?

WJ: It's been 42 years. There's no point in stopping now. (Laughs) But I will say this, even before the art stuff, she's the smartest woman I've ever met. I've met a lot of women; this is the smartest woman I've ever met. But we always got along well. And she used to come by my studio and do some of her ... when we was dating, she'd bring her work over. She had a shop called Jae of Hyde Park, which was a woman's boutique. And she would bring some things over and cut them, and she would ask me different things about color and different things. But we always was on the same page. And so much on the same page, sometimes we'd say the same thing at the same time. You know. But it's great working with her. It's no problem. You know. Because we interchange with each other, on a regular basis.

Q: That's great.

WJ: And we're best friends. You know, we're husband and wife; we're lovers, best friends, and all those things. You know. All those things wrapped in one.

Q: (Inaudible) both of you sharing the same studio.

WJ: Yeah. Yeah. We have ... we did this ... let's see, it was ... well, we was in the studio in Chicago, the same way. And when we moved to D.C., my studio was different than hers, because we didn't have ... the space wasn't conducive to it. So my studio was up on the second floor, in D.C., and hers was like in the basement and on the first floor. So we moved to Atlanta. And, again, my studio was different from hers. My studio was ... actually it was in ... the first place we moved in, it was a three-car garage. It was in the garage. And hers was like upstairs. But once the kids went away to school, we moved into a warehouse, to try to replicate what we had ... the studio in Chicago. So, again, we had this big, open space, like 1,500 square feet, all open. You know, it had ... a photographer had been in there, so he had a darkroom in there. He had put in a dishwasher, and cabinets all around the wall. Nothing was cluttering up the space. It was all open. So we just took ... she took one part and I took another part. And we would work and carry on conversations, stop for lunch, and all those kind of things. Maybe go out for lunch, you know. So. We still do the same kind of things.

(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: A minute ago, you were talking about the influence of Jeff Donaldson. And I was telling you that everybody I've met he's had a lot of (Inaudible) But I'm curious, because you all came to the group, the group formed ... it's most curious, like the Big Bang, you know, formed out of what. But it formed because you were all experiencing the same (Inaudible) You were all artists, and had all of these things in common. I asked you about Jeff. Was it ideas or was it his art. You say it was his ideas, but you guys had ideas, as well. And I'm just curious about how all that ... just think back.

WJ: Well, you had ideas, but you didn't ... you know, I was painting. My paintings was more Parisian kind of painting. Semi-abstract stuff that was influenced by European artists, you know, like Cezanne and stuff. Before Jeff. And Jeff came in with the idea that we should use some African influence. My work was three-dimensional. Everything was going back on a diagonal. And when Jeff came in, I remember doing one painting. He came over. This was before AFRICOBRA. It was flat. It was two-dimensional. And he said, wow, he's painting across now, rather than going back in. So once he came in, we started working two-dimensional, with basic, intuitive space, like overlaps. Rather than deep space, which was created, you know, like Cubists did. So but he brought us over to his side. He brought me over to his side, his way of thinking, because I didn't think of ... I didn't think about ... I painted a lot of subject matter. You know. I didn't paint all black people. I painted people, you know,

when I was ... before Jeff. And he brought this influence that what you should be doing.

Q: So then he influenced you as an artist.

WJ: Yeah.

Q: But then how did the idea of taking control of the message (Inaudible) I mean, as it grew, in terms of breaking out.

WJ: It was ... you have to understand the times. It was the 1960s.

Q: But was it spontaneous combustion? I'm talking about the actual inner workings of the group.

WJ: That's what I mean. It was ... the influence was brought. Actually, the Wall of Respect brought some of it. Some of the ideas, you know, that here's what you should be doing. We felt like we should be doing something other than making these paintings of horse races and bar scenes, like I was doing. We should be doing something significant. Something significant to the times and what happening now.

W: Significant in what way? To contribute what?

WJ: To contribute some art. We was working for ... making a ... creating a language. Creating a school of thought.

Q: For yourself?

WJ: No. We was creating it for posterity, like all artists do. The Fauves didn't create this just for themselves. They wanted this to go down in history. The Impressionists didn't create this just for themselves.

Q: For posterity, but also to influence the times, perhaps.

WJ: That's the point. For posterity to influence generations and generations to come. You know. Our generation and generations in the future. After we're dead, to still be influencing people. This was the idea. This is what ... that was the glue that brought us together.

Q: And to influence in a positive way?

WJ: Exactly.

Q: (Inaudible)

WJ: Well, the whole thing was working out of a school of thought, which most artist groups didn't even have that in their perspective. Most artist groups just got together and met and did paintings. But we wanted to leave something for posterity, like a school of thought. Just like the Fauves. Just like the Impressionists. If I'm making sense.

Q: No, you're making total (Overlap)

WJ: Just like the Cobra artists in Brussels. You know. It will always be there, you know. AFRICOBRA will always be there. You know, you talk about the paintings of the Impressionists, you talk about the paintings of the Fauves, then you talk about the Abstract Expressionists, and you talk about the paintings of AFRICOBRA. In the same breath. Am I making sense?

(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: On that point, why a group? Why not form these ideas and then go off and do your own thing?

WJ: You can't ... individuals can't have the impact that the group has. It's ... you know, this is individual artists. You know. And if you get ... we had ten people for the first show. If you've got ten people, on the same page, thinking alike, that's powerful. that's very powerful. You know, it's like an army. It's like the Marines. You know. (Laughs) So. You're on the same page. So. And individual ... individual artists do a lot of things, you know. You know, crazy things, all kinds of ideas. But it doesn't have the impact as a group.

(Background/Off-Mike)

W: ... The idea of reaching people by making the artwork accessible, cost-wise, too (Inaudible) to the reach of it. Can you talk about the decision to do that?

WJ: Yeah. That was one of the things we first started out, we named our art, so that other people wouldn't put it

in the category and name it for us. So we named it poster art and we named it black art. But the poster part was that we reproduced our art and so it could be bought, especially by African Americans, at a reasonable price. And one of the ideas which never really worked was killing the idea of an original. You know, art is one of a kind. A painting is one of a kind. A piece of sculpture is one of a kind. We was talking about reproducing it. And making it less an idea of one of a kind. But that never really took hold, I don't think, you know, as we envisioned it. But ... and so, instead of ... a lot of artists was making prints in the sixties. Reproductions. Which is not worth the paper the print is printed on. The paper is worth more than the picture, in a reproduction. But we decided, since Barbara was a printmaker, she suggested that we do hand pulled silk screen prints, which has a value. But you couldn't sell them at the ridiculous prices, that we started out selling them for ten bucks a print. You can't do that unless you just got some money you want to give away, and some time you want to give away. So that wasn't the greatest idea, but it worked, you know, for awhile. You know.

Q: Wasn't the intention to get it to more people, to make it more accessible?

WJ: Yeah. Yeah. And making it affordable for the common man. People that don't necessarily collect art. People who don't even go to galleries. People that have an ordinary job that maybe they can't afford paintings. But they could afford a ten-dollar print or whatever you charge for it.

Q: But this wasn't about aesthetics. This wasn't about art. Art for art's sake. It was about projecting an image back into the community (Overlap) a certain power.

WJ: Right. Right.

Q: Or get it out to them. It wouldn't have done any good to have a collector come in and take your painting and put it in his house.

WJ: That's right.

Q: Which I think is the purpose.

WJ: Right. Right. Right. But they did come and buy up a lot of those ten-dollar prints. And, later, they sold them for some real money. (Laughs) You can never get rid of that, you know. So. You know.

Q: (Inaudible)

WJ: I beg your pardon?

Q: It wasn't the best of ideas, but the intent was good.

WJ: Intent was great. Intent was great. It was ... it worked for them for, you know ... for many. But there was no real money to be made. It was more of a humanitarian thing than profit.

Q: (Overlap) We're assuming it is ... AFRICOBRA is still relevant today ... and if so, why?

WJ: I don't know why, because I'm not in it.

Q: Right. But the ideals that first formed AFRICOBRA (Inaudible)

WJ: Do I think it's ...

Q: Those ideas are still relevant today. Are they still ...

WJ: Oh, sure. All of those ... when we first started painting, even later years, we put statements on our paintings. Some of them was strong statements. And no one can deny, today, that those conditions have been corrected. (sic) That's today. In African Americans. You know, we're still experiencing the same things we did in the forties, in the thirties, in the twenties. Right today. Which is racism. On a big scale. You know. On all levels. Institutional racism. You can come from any angle. And we're the people who built this country, on our backs, for free. But we're the people that get it ... we can bring in Dominicans, anybody want to come in this country. They can get ... I'm listening ... I'm jumping around, but I want to say this. I'm looking at the Haitians, right now. I wouldn't have known about this ... well, I sort of know that they can't come into the country. They deport them a lot. Illegally. So they're going to hold up deporting the illegal Haitians, in Miami, because of the earthquake. But I saw Mexicans picketing on the air, saying we are citizens, we are citizens. And they are illegally here. And they're going to let them stay. Congress don't know what to do. They're going to let them stay. But the Haitians are black. They're not going to let them stay. They're going to deport them back to Haiti, as quick as they can.

Q: Yeah.

WJ: You know. And these are the people that built your country for you.

Q: Yeah. It's amazing (Overlap)

WJ: You know. Took care of your kids. Washed your clothes. Cleaned the poop out of the toilets and ... you know. (Laughs) And still doing it, some of them. If you're in New York, they're a lot of baby-pushers up and down the street, now. They're doing the same thing. A lot of Haitians, there, working as domestics, you know. What's the deal?

Q: So AFRICOBRA is as relevant today as it was in the 1960s?

WJ: (Overlap) Yeah. And probably will be a hundred years from now. I don't see this change coming in this country a hundred years from now. People say, well, we've got a black president. Yeah, right. But it doesn't change the dynamics of things. There are some things ... institutional racism is already put in place. And when a black man gets that position, he's running for whatever office he's taking, but there are some things he's not running. The institutional racism just keeps going on. It's like ... it's almost like a little disease, because hook onto you in a little virus, you know, that hooks onto you. And I remember, in Atlanta, Maynard Jackson was mayor. And there was people that do the boilers, you know. They was all white guys. They'd been doing it for years. And it ain't going to change. So if they're training their son, their brothers, or their cousin to do it. But this is institutional racism. And one guy didn't even realize this. I was having a show at the gallery where the ... called ... the east part of the mayor's office. And one of the guys who worked there, an African American guy, he was really upset when he found out what these enginieers was making. And he said, they won't even allow me in the room, in the boiler room. I can come in and look, but they won't let me touch nothing. 'Cause they're afraid he'll learn something.

Q: Right.

WJ: So this is what I mean. This is not going to change. Soon.

Q: I wouldn't be putting words in your mouth to say that AFRICOBRA is relevant now (Inaudible)

WJ: Yeah.

Q: If you say that (Overlap)

WJ: The idea, the whole philosophy of AFRICOBRA, is as relevant today as it was in the sixties. Yes.

(Background/Off-Mike)

WJ: About the AFRICOBRA artists. People that got in the group, a lot of us had established careers in art. And we sacrificed these careers to adhere to a single philosophy. And we marched in cadence, and we wrote on the plane, on our paintings, which, you know, we wrote statements on the plane. Which put us in step with the black poets of the day, because we understood the power of the written word. And we created ... we were successful from creating a black aesthetic. The AFRICOBRA artists was successful for creating a black aesthetic. And we laid everything out, everything out there for the world to see. We created art for world art, not just for America. But we created art to be on the world scene. And we laid everything out, and we created a black aesthetic. We created a school of thought. It was all made in Chicago. And one thing I want to say is AFRICOBRA is the only group of artists that ever used ... captured the ethos of black people, used African influence. No one has done that more elegantly than AFRICOBRA artists. And, in my estimation, the AFRICOBRA artists are visionaries. They are the most innovative and the damn boldest artists that America ever had to offer up.

(Background/Off-Mike)

(END OF TAPE)