

A TEI Project

Interview of Noah Purifoy

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1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE (SEPTEMBER 8, 1990)

MASON

The first question we always ask is, when and where were you born?

PURIFOY

A little town twenty miles from Selma [Alabama] called Snow Hill. It was a little town of-- I don't know how many people, but not very many. It was a farm town.

MASON

What year was that?

PURIFOY

In 1917.

MASON

Who are your parents?

PURIFOY

George [Purifoy] and —

MASON

I have Mims here.

PURIFOY

Yeah, that was my mother's maiden name.

MASON

Georgia Mims [Purifoy] . Do you know much about each of their families, where your father's family was from and your mother's family was from? Anything about that background?

PURIFOY

No. Because of the French name Purifoy, I guess the family eventually came from Louisiana, probably. But I have no recollection of that. Nobody ever told me actually where we came from or where my parents were born. I never thought to ask.

MASON

When did your parents pass?

PURIFOY

My mother died around 1940, and my father died around 1943.

MASON

What was their educational level?

PURIFOY

They were farmers, sharecroppers, as the case was. If I can recollect well, my mother went to the eighth grade, but my father had little or no education whatsoever. I think my mother taught school in the summertime in Selma. That was twenty miles, as I said, from where I was born.

MASON

Do you have any brothers and sisters?

PURIFOY

Yeah. There were thirteen of us. I only remember eight, two brothers and six sisters. Among the six sisters there were twins. We were a rather close-knit family from the time I can remember. I was looking over some old stuff I wrote some time ago, and I started to write my life story. I didn't get very far on it, but I wondered if you'd be interested in me reading that into the machine in our spare-- You know, maybe tonight or sometime.

MASON

Okay.

PURIFOY

It's rather lengthy. I would like for you to thumb through the material and see if you think it's the right quality for what you want. I wasn't sure.

MASON

Well, it's not just what we want. It's also what you want or what you think is important. What you would like the world to know about you.

PURIFOY

It's mostly about me and my relationship in the family unit, my early childhood experiences in school and my relationship to the community.

MASON

Well, those are some of the things that we want to talk about today. After this first session, we can stop and look through it and maybe if there are some other things that you want to add we can add that in later. [tape recorder off] You were talking about your family, and you said that you were a pretty close family. Was there any one or another person with whom you were particularly close? A brother or sister? Was there any extended family living with you, or it was just your parents and your brothers and sisters?

PURIFOY

No, it was just immediate family. I was first attached to the twins, but since--

MASON

You should give us their names too, as you remember .

PURIFOY

Mary [Purifoy] and Rose [Purifoy] were their names. And my youngest sister [Esther Purifoy], who is younger than I am--in fact she's the last one of us--I became attached to later more than the twins because I felt I had to protect her, being male and all, in addition to the fact that I had to take her to school for quite a while.

MASON

Where did you fall within the order?

PURIFOY

I was the second to the last one. Actually, I was the third to the last one, because I remember my mother had one child who died. So I was the third to the last. My kid sister was the second to the last, and the one who died was the last one of us. That's the line in which the eight living sisters and brothers now take place. The others I don't quite remember, except my two brothers, which makes ten of us, I guess. No, six sisters and myself makes seven, and my two brothers makes nine, and the one who died makes ten. They are the ones who I remember best. And there was probably one other who died at the age of eleven or twelve, which I don't recall very clearly. So it was ten members of the family that I have recollection of , and the other three I do not .

MASON

What about the community in Snow Hill? What was the community like? What were the people like? What kinds of things did you do? I'm sure you had a lot of work to do around the farm, but also what--?

PURIFOY

Well, I was under three years old when we moved to the city, Birmingham, Alabama. I don't remember too much what happened in the country except picking cotton. I trailed behind the family as they picked cotton. I got in the way for the most part and was often sent home on a blind mule and had to wait

at the door until somebody came to get me off. But I don't have very many recollections of what was taking place in the country.

MASON

As a child, do you remember it as a particularly hard life?

PURIFOY

Well, life was hard, but I had no consciousness of that. In reflection, I can sense that we were extremely poor, but it wasn't emphasized. It was obvious, but we weren't denied the things that the family could afford to provide for us. So therefore, and for many other reasons, I had little or no knowledge of absolute poverty. I mean, that's what we were living in, but I had little or no knowledge of that. I recall once we moved to the city and being three or four years old-- My mother worked for some white folks two or three streets over from where we lived. I remember she brought food home from the white folks' kitchen. But my father was always working at something or other, and he was a fairly good provider.

MASON

So you moved to the city because your father found another job there? Or your mother? Do you remember?

PURIFOY

Well, I think it was my father and my brother [Clarence Purifoy] who came to town first, to the city first, and they found work and sent for us.

MASON

What other memories do you have about the time? Because I'm just thinking that around this time the Depression struck, in '29, and what was that like for your family, which was already fairly poor? And also the fact that around the thirties, the mid- thirties, during the WPA [Works Progress Administration] , all these artists had to get fellowships and things to go South, to places like Alabama, because they wanted to study black folk culture or whatever. Is there anything that you remember about so- called folk culture in the South then or anything that you remember that you tend to deal with in your art at all today? Nothing really? No quilting bees or Sunday sermons or anything like that that black folklorists usually write about?

PURIFOY

Well, when you mention church, we were encouraged to go to church, but we weren't required to go.

MASON

What denomination?

PURIFOY

Baptist. Oh, no, Methodist I think. Methodist, yeah. However, my mother prayed constantly in a singsong fashion as she went about her work. I was highly influenced by that, although it wasn't particularly meant for us, for me,

or the children. It meant that she was a quite religious person. I think she practiced her religion more than the average person. That is to say, she was an extremely kind, generous, gentle person, in direct contrast to my father, who paid little or no attention to the management of the family as such. It was my mother who managed the family. I experienced a strong female influence as a child, both having six sisters, as well as a strong mother. So those things influenced me a great deal, probably shaped the kind of person I ultimately became. That's about all I remember in terms of lasting effect and influence. As far as art is concerned and the Depression during the thirties, I was not in any way exposed to any art forms of any kind. I took to the movies a great deal at the time and worked on Saturdays to earn show fare, it was called. But that was the extent of my artistic experience, with one exception. My mother, I remember, went to the bank and drew out her last penny to buy my brother a piano. I was about, I don't know, seven or eight years old at the time. And he learned to play by rote, I guess. I heard some rumors that he was taught by either Ma Rainey or someone of that ilk.

MASON

What's this brother's name?

PURIFOY

Clarence.

MASON

Do you know how he got the idea that he wanted to play the piano?

PURIFOY

Well, he was associated in one way with Bessie Smith, the blues singer.

MASON

Okay, they would come through- -

PURIFOY

I heard that they were in our vicinity. I'm not certain about this. These are the names that come to mind. Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith were associates of my brother, who probably taught him to play piano and the blues, as the case was. My mother sensed my brother was problematic, in the sense that he drank a lot and he fooled around a lot, so to speak. My mother, as a means of keeping him home, bought this piano. Of course, when she died it was not paid for yet, and it had to go back. This I refer to in my notes about my childhood.

MASON

But music wasn't really, generally-- Well, you said your mother's singing influenced you.

PURIFOY

It wasn't emphasized. It was present but not emphasized as an art form. In no way. We weren't astute enough to associate music with art. It was just done. My twin sisters sang duets in the church and stuff like that. But we just did it

because it came natural- It wasn't construed as any kind of art form or folk music or anything of that nature.

MASON

Were there any craftsmen around?

PURIFOY

Not to my recollection. In other words, I didn't get to the idea of doing art in my childhood. In no way. In fact, I didn't get the idea of doing art until I got unhappy with my work as a social worker and decided to go to Chouinard [Art Institute] . I had given little or no thought to it prior to that.

MASON

We'll talk about that in more detail soon. I have that from 1939 to 1945 you were an industrial arts instructor in Montgomery, Alabama.

PURIFOY

Nineteen what?

MASON

'Thirty-nine to 'forty-five.

PURIFOY

Yeah, I changed college in about 1939.

MASON

Where did you go to college?

PURIFOY

Alabama State [Teachers] College in Montgomery, Alabama. I majored in history and education. But there were no jobs available in history or education or the academics, for that matter. I had had an extensive experience in high school in carpentry and woodwork, so I was skilled enough to teach industrial arts. I never had any basic training, except in high school. That's the kind of job I took in 1939, after I graduated from college.

MASON

So in high school, the industrial arts-- I guess a lot of people were coming in from rural areas. Was that something that was emphasized in the high school because they thought it was a practical thing to teach to people, or was that something that you just personally were drawn to because it had some attraction for you?

PURIFOY

I don't remember. I don't remember any specific dialogue having to do with "If you can't do your academics, you do the hand training." That was Booker T. Washington's philosophy, which I don't know was evident in the high school I went to or not. I went to high school in Birmingham, and it was a very modern, contemporary high school. I always lean towards the extracurricular events and experiences, probably because I didn't do well with the ABC's. It's likely. So I sang in the choir in high school and stuff like that.

MASON

Did you not like school?

PURIFOY

I didn't like school very much. No, not very much.

MASON

What do you remember not liking about it?

PURIFOY

I didn't know what it was talking about. It didn't relate to me. I mean, it just sounded foreign to me. My life experience was not related whatsoever to education, what they were talking about, Lincoln and all that stuff. My life experience was on the street, you know, dealing with everyday habits, everydayness.

MASON

But then you ended up majoring in history or had a minor in history in college. Did you change your mind about that or--?

PURIFOY

About what?

MASON

About history. You were saying that Lincoln and all that didn't relate to you, but then when you were in college you ended up having a minor- -

PURIFOY

Yeah, but that was just the easiest stuff I could take. It didn't have anything to do with preference whatsoever. I mean, I didn't have-- You know, I did very well in college. With the time I had to study, I didn't do too badly. It was just in high school and elementary school that I didn't do too well in academics because I didn't know what they were talking about. But in college-- And incidentally, I went because there was nothing else to do. I tried to get into the military, but I was rejected for one reason or another. That was when I was seventeen. After finishing high school, I had nothing in particular to do.

MASON

Wasn't it expensive, though, to go to the college?

PURIFOY

I don't know. I didn't pay anything. I made application in the spring of 1934, and then I went to Tennessee to live with my sister [Ophelia Purifoy] during the summer. When I got back, I received a letter saying that I was rejected at Alabama State. I didn't accept that. I just went on down there anyhow. I packed my few little things and boarded an interstate bus, I think. It was about 130 miles from Birmingham to Montgomery. I told them my story, that I didn't have any money, that "You rejected my application, but I'm here anyhow because I don't have anything else to do." They said, "Well, we're sorry, we're filled up." I hung around for about a week, sleeping wherever I could, in the

dormitory, in the hall, or anywhere. And finally I was accepted. They said, "Okay, you can come on in." There was a program called NYC, I believe. National Youth Corps [NYA, National Youth Administration] . The president put me on that list, and I received some moneys from them for my education. The rest of it I worked out in the maintenance department of the school . That ' s how I managed for four years. I didn't have to pay anything.

MASON

You just said that what was going on in the streets was more interesting to you. What was going on in the streets that you were involved in while you were in school that was more interesting than what you were doing in school? You mentioned that you tried to go into the army and they rejected you, so I suppose a lot of your buddies had maybe joined, I don't know. What things were you involved in outside of school that were important to you or interesting to you?

PURIFOY

Well, that takes in a lot of years. While you asked the question, I flashed back on what I was doing in elementary school, and there wasn't much to do. There were kids to play with, but otherwise it wasn't much-- We played like the average children did. We made things to play with. You see, the skateboard was something that highly resembled the skateboards that they use today, except they had a handle. We made it out of old skates. We made wagons to play with, four-wheeled wagons, two-wheeled wagons to play with. Nearby, in back of where we lived, was a corn mill, and they threw away burlap sacks which the corn came in to grind it up into meal. So I collected these burlap sacks and spread them out and nailed them down underneath the house where we lived, and I had a place to retreat when I felt like being by myself or inviting kids to come in and we'd play house and things like that. So it was average kids ' play that involved whatever kids did at the age of seven, eight, nine, and ten, up to twelve years old. In high school, I had a couple of buddies, but I read most of the time. I'd go to the library and--

MASON

What kinds of things?

PURIFOY

I'd check out a whole bunch of books and sit on the porch and read, novels, most of them.

MASON

What was your taste back then? Just popular novels?

PURIFOY

Yeah. Zane Grey, you know, stuff like that.

MASON

Then you went to the teachers college, after teaching industrial arts.

PURIFOY

I think I went to war first.

MASON
So you were drafted eventually?

PURIFOY
Yeah.

MASON
Oh, I didn't know that.

PURIFOY
Yeah, I went to war first. Then when I came back I entered graduate school .

MASON
What year were you drafted, then?

PURIFOY
In 1942. I wasn't drafted, I volunteered. I volunteered .

MASON
And where were you sent when you were drafted?

PURIFOY
To the Pacific. From Port Hueneme, where they train the Seabees. I was in the navy Seabees, the construction battalion.

MASON
What is that exactly?

PURIFOY
Oh, you build airfields and Quonset huts and prepare camps for the marines, facilities like they're doing now in Iraq or Saudi Arabia. The Seabees have just recently left Port Hueneme to go to Saudi Arabia to construct airfields and stuff like that. I was a carpenter's mate first-class, I think, eventually. While I was in the military, there was a big stink about prejudice and segregation and discrimination.

MASON
Was that something that you were involved in personally, to try to get the military desegregated?

PURIFOY
Yeah. I'd lean toward controversy. There wasn't much to-do, except we'd just talked it up and made it known that we were unhappy about the discrimination and segregation, where we were being managed by intellectually inferior people. I had a degree in college when I went into the military, and I was managed by some white cat who hadn't even finished high school, and stuff like that. They didn't recognize blacks who were reasonably intelligent and could manage the navy better than the management that they had. So we made it known that we weren't happy with that.

MASON
Did anything come out of it?

PURIFOY

They had some investigations, but nothing immediate came out of it as far as our unit was concerned. Except I got a promotion out of it and some changes, I think, in the high echelon. The captain was moved and somebody else put in his place. Yeah, some things did happen of a small nature locally, that is, where I was in the Pacific. But nationally, I think, is where they commissioned some blacks both in the Air Corps as well as the army. I don't know about the navy.

MASON

Is there anything else about the experience in the service that you remember?

PURIFOY

No. No, nothing unusual.

MASON

Overall did you gain skills maybe that were useful to you later?

PURIFOY

No. I used the skills that I already had to get promotions and to have soft jobs. I was in the water distillation, so I had a soft job. I watched the whole war from a hilltop, where the purification units were, where we made the water for the guys to drink. In the Pacific, I saw our people bomb the island to smithereens and ships split apart and all that. But I was above it all. I experienced little or no danger in the attack.

MASON

Then after that you decided to go to graduate school?

PURIFOY

Yeah, I came home, and I wanted to get a Ph.D., but I was embarrassed with the idea.

MASON

Why? Why were you embarrassed?

PURIFOY

Well, I always associated Ph.D.'s with the elite, and I wanted to avoid these associations with the elite.

MASON

You mean like the bourgeoisie? Okay. What was so distasteful about--?

PURIFOY

Because it was a white thing. I had experienced enough prejudice to not have an affinity for anything related to white society, and education of that ilk was related to white society.

MASON

So you didn't want to be part of the "talented tenth" or--

PURIFOY

No, I actually had a strong affinity for blacks, and I wanted to experience us at the level where we lived at. That [resulted in] my self-imposed poverty in my

art years. I did not want lots of money or lots of clothes or anything like that. I wanted to experience what's it like to be poor. I could have been not poor, but it was self-imposed poverty. I wanted to know what it was like. I wanted to experience all the ins and outs of poverty so that I could report it as it was. Which accounts for the media I used to express my feelings about the aesthetics.

MASON

When you say "report it," report it to whom?

PURIFOY

To the world. To anyone who would listen. "Report" meaning any way you express yourself. In other words, it was through art that I chose to express myself. But I think we're getting ahead of the story here.

MASON

Okay, all right. So what did you study, then, at the teachers college, specifically? What degree did you get and what did that allow you to do?

PURIFOY

Well, when I got out of the service, I went to Atlanta U[niversity], where I studied social service administration, social work. I got my degree in social work, and I worked at it for two or three years, or three or four years, in Cleveland and in Los Angeles.

MASON

What was the program like in Atlanta? I was going to ask if you knew Hale Woodruff when he was there. You weren't involved in the arts specifically then, but the Atlanta University shows, the exhibitions of black art, seem to have been kind of a big thing back then. I'm wondering if that ever crossed your path while you were there at all.

PURIFOY

No, I wasn't interested in art at the time. I was actually interested in social work, because I figured it was a means by which I could help black people. In other words, I could inject here that I was programmed to do good, and that's the worst kind of goodness, which we can get into some other time. My whole concept of-- I think my mother must have held me up by the heels when I was not two years old yet and said that I had to be somebody. So I set off to interpret that for the rest of my life. And my schooling was a means by which I thought that I could best express myself, if I was educated in the field that I chose to express myself. So that's why I took up social work. Eventually, after doing art, I was able to put together all my skills and become reasonably effective in areas of doing good. We can check up on that later.

MASON

So what was the program? I mean, what did you have to do to get this degree in social work? Was there like an internship involved? Or do you remember any

of the reading that you had to do that you thought was helpful? Or do you remember any professors that you studied with that were helpful to you in any way? Was there anything about it itself that was interesting for you, or was it just something that you just thought, you know, you had to do to get through so you could--?

PURIFOY

Well, academically, I was a poor student. So I was helped by my classmates in the university to pass the tests and whatnot. That's how I got to graduate.

1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO (SEPTEMBER 8, 1990)

MASON

You were saying that your classmates helped you get through school and that you were a poor student academically but you got help. I was just asking, were there any professors who were important to you or any reading that you did that really stuck in your mind or that you go back to today?

PURIFOY

Yeah. I can remember now. I was introduced to psychology in graduate school, which interested me a great deal, up to recent years, in fact. As a result of my education at the university, I developed an interest in Heidegger and Husserl's concept of existentialism. It grew out of my study of psychology and psychiatry. Sigmund Freud was a very interesting person to me at the time. And I thought that-- I wanted to explore the possibility that blacks could use psychotherapy. Of course, I found out later that uneducated people [find it] difficult to use that discipline for good health--for health, as the case may be. But that was my sustained interest after my university stint, and that's my sustained interest throughout the years. It was very popular in art, as the case was. So I did utilize psychotherapy as an art discipline. When we get to discussing some of my artwork, as you intimated earlier, there was a piece that I did called *Six Birds*, which was shown at the [California] Afro-American [Museum] exhibition ["19 Sixties: A Cultural Awakening Re-evaluated, 1965-1975"] at Exposition Park recently, and we can talk about that.

MASON

Well, we can talk about that now, since you brought it up, instead of waiting for it to come along. Let's see, what year did you do that?

PURIFOY

I went to Atlanta in 1946, I believe, 1945. Wait a minute. It must be down there. I don't quite recall specifically. It's not a university--

MASON

I had '48 when you got your degree, I think.

PURIFOY

A '48 degree?

MASON

Yeah.

PURIFOY

So I must have gone there in 1946. I was there two years.

MASON

I have that you did *Six Birds* in '67.

PURIFOY

Uh-huh. *Six Birds* was one of many pieces I did with psychological overtones. It was a very somber piece. Black on black I was experimenting with at the time, where across the front of a screened area were seven objects that looked like birds. I imagined on the other side of this screened area was somebody peeping out, maybe a prisoner someplace, where what he saw was confined to a small area. So oftentimes the truth is not evident. because if he had been outside, he would have counted seven birds instead of six. The caption said they were all different colors, but they weren't all different colors-- it was just one color. So that became a very popular piece. I don't want to use the word "popular." It was an extremely significant piece. I recall that the [Los Angeles] County Museum of Art had solicited it from me to put down in the rental gallery. Somebody came from the East to look at my work, and I sent him over to the rental gallery in the museum. He saw *Six Birds* and beat it back and bought it right away.

MASON

Who was this who came from the East to look at your work? What was his name? Was it a private collector or--?

PURIFOY

No, it was somebody from the Whitney Museum [of American Art] in New York [Robert M. Doty]. It's down there someplace. *Six Birds*, Whitney Museum. And it was borrowed, as I said earlier, from the Whitney to show in this Exposition [Park] exhibition.

MASON

That was the "19 Sixties" Olympics exhibition. Was Jung at all popular or interesting to you? Because I know he became, I guess, more popular in the fifties, with--

PURIFOY

Carl Jung?

MASON

Yeah.

PURIFOY

Yeah. You know, in the fifties we all were interested in the new life, so to speak, the new concepts and all. It seemed as though the sixties movement was

vaguely based on a European concept of freedom, manifested by Carl Jung and Jean-Paul Sartre. These people were quoted often as the seekers and the leaders of freedom. I went a little further and studied, as I said earlier, from two other people who I thought had gone beyond Carl Jung and Jean-Paul. They were Heidegger and Husserl, the fathers of existentialism. Existence and existentialism were so closely interrelated with each other with an outstanding philosopher in America, whose name I can't recall at the time [William James] . He would have been the father of existentialism had he been a European. Because he had written earlier about the freedom of the mind to do what it was inclined to do, that the body could develop more healthfully if the mind was constructed in a way in which it had knowledge of the body interrelated with the mind. So in those early years of the freedom movement, the body-mind thing was then thought of to interrelate with each other, to be equal to each other. To me that was extremely profound, that my body and mind had been estranged. It gave me impetus to want to interrelate them, to become one. So during the height of my art years, I also experienced something extremely profound in that I had these oceanic experiences.

MASON

I'm sorry, what kind of experiences?

PURIFOY

Oceanic experiences. Are you familiar with that?

MASON

No, not at all.

PURIFOY

Well, I started out by levitating. Lying on the floor in the morning and it appeared that my body was off the floor. I could lie there for hours on end, and the time passed without my knowledge. Sometimes I'd look up and I'd been there four hours levitating.

MASON

Is this something you knew you could do? Or did it just happen once or — ?

PURIFOY

Well, it was interrelated with the mind-body thing and art. All that was interrelated with itself, with each other, with my study of existentialism and whatnot. It brought all of this about. It also brought back my childhood, too, and my basic self. I was basically a good person. And as I told you earlier, I was programmed to do good. But a good person and doing good are not the same. They're different. Oftentimes I think of Martin Luther King [Jr.] as a person who was programmed to do good. He couldn't do otherwise, because his name was Martin Luther. Martin Luther was a Christian of the earlier years. "King" is somebody who wears a crown, "Junior" somebody: belonged to somebody else. So he was not himself, he wasn't a person. He was a

manifestation of someone else's idea. Maybe his father or mother imbued him with the need to do good because the black race which he belonged to needed his help. Well, I was pretty much the same kind of person. I chose to express it in art, rather than in religion, as Martin Luther King did.

MASON

So you would say that organized religion wasn't really a big part of your life after you left home.

PURIFOY

No, I abhorred it. I abhorred organized religion. It was an ugly thing. Particularly manifested in Catholicism.

MASON

How did you come into contempt of Catholicism?

PURIFOY

Oh, that wealth and all that pomp turned me off completely.

MASON

But you said your family was Methodist. How did you come in contact with the Catholic church?

PURIFOY

The media. [laughter]

MASON

Okay, okay. I didn't know if you had a friend maybe you went to church with or--

PURIFOY

No, no, the media. And being interested in doing good, you want to be knowledgeable of all of the things in life that are supposed to do good. Well, Catholicism wasn't one of them.

MASON

What about Methodism or another religion that you remember from back then?

PURIFOY

No, that wasn't one either. No kind of organized religion was-- I wasn't interested in any kind of organized religion at all. I take that back. My childhood experience was sprinkled with episodes of the influence of organized religion. I remember quite distinctly every year Father Divine would come to Birmingham. Remember Father Divine?

MASON

Yeah. He was based in Harlem, I guess.

PURIFOY

Yeah. He would make a yearly trek to Alabama, to Birmingham, and set up this big tent where everybody came to try to get religion. He would lay on hands and all that stuff. People would fall out, you know, with the spirit and all of that. Well, every time, every year he'd come, from the time I was twelve years

old till I was fifteen, I'd go to these meetings and try to get religion. I ' d go up there and bow down and strain hard to get religion. Instead, I always got an erection. I got a hard-on straining to get religion. That was the manifestation, the result of my straining. So I developed a problem that took me years and years to resolve. I had a conflict between sex and religion. In later years, to resolve the problem, I was about to say how often I went to church on Sundays, different kinds of church, looking for the spirit, looking for the kind of things that people testify about on Monday morning. They'd knock on everybody's door and say, "I got the spirit, I got religion." You must be familiar with that.

MASON

Yeah.

PURIFOY

Well, yes, that's how Christianity influenced me. Until I was in my early adulthood, I struggled to attain that great something that everybody thought was so great and everything. But I didn't ever succeed, so I abandoned it. In other words, I silently, without announcing it, became an atheist. You know, I don't know what an atheist is, except one who does not believe in God. But to this day, I've had no god. I wish I did sometimes, but I don't. And that probably concludes my religious experience.

1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE (SEPTEMBER 8, 1990)

MASON

We ended up talking about religion. Is there anything else that you wanted to add to that? Because I guess the next thing we'll talk about is your work as a social worker.

PURIFOY

After I got my degree from Atlanta U[niversity] , I came back to Cleveland, where my family was, and got a job at Cuyahoga County child welfare [Cuyahoga County Department of Social Services] , and I worked there two years. My responsibility was the total care for youth. I had mostly infants and youth in early childhood. I had to find them a place to live and provide clothing and so forth--total care. We also were an adoption agency, so I did all that. It was an interesting experience. I put my education to use in a most profound way, because I had an opportunity to do so. I felt gratified. Now, I was offered a job at another institution, where I worked for about three months, at a mental institution, as a bibliotherapist . Bibliotherapy does not work with mental patients. I don't know why--

MASON

What is bibliotherapy?

PURIFOY

I don't know why they felt it worked, but it did not. Not because I was a failure, but because the whole program was a failure.

MASON

What is bibliotherapy?

PURIFOY

You expose adults and young adults to books that you think will improve their mental condition. And I left there. It was too depressing a kind of a job, and I couldn't relate to those people. You know, it's outside of my realm of--

MASON

The patients or the administrators?

PURIFOY

Patients. So I left Ohio and came to California, because I'd been in the military service in California, and I dreamed of returning, because it was a very pleasant experience.

MASON

I just wanted to try to get some more detail about the social work. When you said it was depressing and the program was a failure, what did you mean by that?

PURIFOY

Well, I left there and went to Los Angeles and got a job at the [Los Angeles] County Hospital, where I worked for two or three years. I couldn't get along with my supervisors, primarily because they were all women. I had a problem with that--being bossed by a female. I never overcame it because I didn't have to. I just went from job to job. But I had a tendency to work fast with the patients, and I was in charge of patients who had problems accepting medical help, mostly religious people. Seventh Day Adventists, that type of thing, who had problems accepting medical help sometimes. And I had mental patients as well. I would discharge them rapidly because the hospital needed the beds. My supervisors were concerned about my being able to discharge people so fast. And also I didn't like my coworkers, because social workers have a certain personality type that believes that they're God. It's just like it's their money instead of the state's money. Socially, they were hard to get along with because they brought their work home with them, etc. So I finally left the hospital after two or three years and made application to Chouinard Art Institute, just out of the clear blue. I passed that one day and said, "I think I want to go to art school . " And I was accepted without portfolio or anything.

MASON

Really? Now, that's unusual because-- Well, the interview I did with-- Well, Bill [William] Pajaud was one of the earliest black people to go to Chouinard, and he talked (well, it's in a book [Robert Ferine's *Chouinard, an Art Vision Betrayed; The Story of the Chouinard Art Institute, 1921-1972*]) about

Chouinard, about the prejudice that Nelbert Chouinard, the one who founded the art school, had toward blacks. They didn't want blacks to go to the school.

PURIFOY

I didn't experience that. I was considered the first full-time black student. I didn't experience any prejudices.

MASON

You were there from '52 to '56, I guess.

PURIFOY

Yeah.

MASON

Well, that's interesting that they accepted you even without a portfolio. How did you--?

PURIFOY

I was the poorest student there.

MASON

How did you convince them to let you in?

PURIFOY

I don't know. I just walked in, said I wanted to go to school there, and they said, "Okay."

MASON

That's amazing! When did you--?

PURIFOY

I thought it was par for the course. I didn't know that it was unusual. Mrs. Chouinard, I was on speaking terms with her, and she never showed any signs of prejudice or discrimination. I started out majoring in industrial art, and they discontinued that course my second year there, so I switched to fine arts. I remember my ceramics teacher most of all, whose name was-- What was her name? Susan Peterson. She came after Peter Voulkos. I never got a chance to study under Peter Voulkos, but I got a chance to observe his work and all.

MASON

What did you think of his work?

PURIFOY

I thought his little stuff was great, but his big stuff was just terrible. But he got big. Artists have a tendency to want to get big when they're successful at small stuff. He was very successful at making small stuff, and he had, at the time, a very enviable reputation. Now he's probably world-known, no doubt. But I rubbed elbows with those people, and they influenced me a great deal in terms of accepting me as a student. Now, Susan thought I was a beautiful person, so I did great work, although I didn't ever want to be a ceramicist. But I did good work because she was so amiable.

MASON

Do you have any of those pieces?

PURIFOY

No. I kept one piece for a long time, and I sold it. It was a head--an African ceramic head. I never bothered about trying to duplicate the human image. I always had an opposition to that. So I refused to draw. I refused to learn to draw. Today, I cannot draw, because I was afraid I'd get stuck with the human image, and I knew it didn't express my basic feeling about nature and about being: that the human is not the essence of being. The human in relationship to the world is the essence of being. And I knew that even then. Therefore I had problems trying to draw, because the drawing always includes the human figure. There's the model sitting there naked and whatnot. You're supposed to duplicate that. I thought it was copying. So I never did go for landscape or anything like that, because I didn't see-- You can't make it better, so I didn't see-- They had it wrong. The creativity was not manifested in either nature or human nature, because it was always predictable. So I didn't see art as-- I don't know where I got these ideas from about art, but I found in later years that it's as close to the creative process as any thinking ever was. I don't know where I got it from, but somehow I got into art knowing all that already. I don't know where I got it from, as I say. But anyhow, what turned me on to art, really, was art history. That probably relates to where you are at. When I got to study how art is formed and all the kinds of manifestations, it gave me the impetus to do art. Because I had these things inside of me ready to be expressed, but I didn't have a media through which to express them. I tried education, that didn't work. I tried social work, that didn't work. I'd try this and that, didn't work. It didn't communicate to the people my deep feelings. So I was almost always at a loss to feel that I was understood. And art, being a nonverbal language, enabled me to feel I at least understood myself, if others didn't.

MASON

So you felt it was through this ceramics that you did that?

PURIFOY

Yeah, Susan helped me along to realize my full potential .

MASON

Did you have a personal relationship with her or just student- teacher?

PURIFOY

No, she was just a good person. She was a great person, that's all.

MASON

What about other people in the school? Did you--? Because there were some big names at Chouinard. Robert Irwin was there, and I think John Altoon was there, you know, as students. Did you interact with these students in any way?

PURIFOY

No, I didn't have much time to fool around, because I had to work in order to pay my tuition. I worked out at the Douglas Aircraft [Company] defense plant at night.

MASON

What did you do there?

PURIFOY

I operated a shearing machine that cut metal a certain size into templates. Then after I couldn't manage that any longer, because it took up a good deal of time, going to and fro and working all night and whatnot, I got a job at Cannel [and Schaffen] Interior Designs on Wilshire Boulevard. They had a big shop on Wilshire Boulevard full of furniture. I was a window trimmer. So I could set the furniture up and dress it off and whatnot.

MASON

Did you like that or it was just a job?

PURIFOY

I never liked to work, particularly work for somebody else. No, I didn't particularly like it. In fact, I got fired because I wanted to sell furniture. You know, I wanted to be an interior designer. That's what I studied in school. And that wasn't the right place to express myself. I'd come work extra on Saturdays, show customers around without permission, and the management didn't like that. They didn't want black interior designers. You know, they wondered where I got the gall from. So just before I graduated I got fired from that job.

MASON

What kind of furniture did they have? Did they have a lot of modern furniture?

PURIFOY

Oh, yes. The very best.

MASON

Do you remember some of the names?

PURIFOY

Yeah. Heritage. Are you familiar with the Heritage line of furnishings? Herman Miller. Boy, those are two of the greatest lines in the country. Still are.

[laughter]

MASON

Okay, well, I don't know.

PURIFOY

Yeah. They had everything. You know, from Biedermeier, French Provincial, Louis XV, XVI -- They had everything. They had three floors stacked with every kind of furniture you can name. And a lot of great interior designers. So after I graduated, I didn't go into interior design, because you have to have your own business and whatnot. Nobody wants to hire you. I had woodworking

skills, so I got a job at Angelus Furniture [Warehouse] company designing furniture.

MASON

So you ended up taking your degree in interior design? I mean, you went from industrial arts to fine arts to--?

PURIFOY

Well, no. No, I majored in fine arts, but my skills were industrial arts, you know, because of my high school training and whatnot. I was always good with my hands, and I could operate any kind of machinery. So I got this job designing furniture. But I couldn't design anything that they could make commercially. It was too expensive.

MASON

What did they look like? Or what was the concept?

PURIFOY

Modern stuff. Contemporary. I was really up to snuff because I was going to school. I just had a year of industrial design, and the rest of it was spent drawing this and that, drawing interiors. I took all my drawing classes where I could draw interiors. The rest of the class weren't drawing interiors, for the most part. They were drawing Louis XV and Louis XVI interiors and excerpts from interiors and whatnot, but basically it was a figure- drawing class. They let me get away with drawing anything I wanted to draw, just so long as I was drawing.

MASON

I was just thinking that Irving Blum came-- Do you know Irving Blum? He had a gallery [Ferus Gallery; Blum Helmon Gallery] for a while. When he was in New York, he worked for this contemporary art store. That's kind of how he got his start in the arts. I was just wondering, since you were interested in that, if you had had any contact with him at all.

PURIFOY

No. After I left, I took a job operating one of the machines, after they couldn't use my designs at Angelus Furniture company. They still exist, of course. They make cheap furniture and-- Nothing of consequence now, but they used to be a leading furniture manufacturer in Los Angeles. After I left there, I started doing window trimming at the Broadway department store.

MASON

Because that was the only thing you could find or--?

PURIFOY

Related to my skills, yes.

MASON

When you graduated, you must have had some idea or vision of where you wanted to go with your life then. Do you remember what that was? Did you have any plans?

PURIFOY

Well, while I was at Chouinard, I met a student — a part-time student--whose name was John Smith, and he was already an interior designer. He was a mail carrier while he studied at Chouinard and other places to be an interior designer.

MASON

Was he a black guy?

PURIFOY

Uh-huh. Finally, he was able to just exclusively do interior design. I went in with him more or less and did the things in interior design that he didn't want to do, like hanging drapery and supervising the carpet laying, and all that type of thing, in my spare time after working eight hours at the Broadway, with the idea that I would eventually go into interior design. Well, I actually became a better designer than my friend, but I couldn't please Mrs. Jones. You know, I would go and hang the drapery and have the carpet laid and do this and that, tear out this wall and design furniture and have it custom-made and all that. But she'd keep calling me back about something wrong. Now, I couldn't endure that. I just hated that kind of thing, that I could never complete a job. I mean, they'll call you back to do something over. So for those reasons, interior design did not appeal to me as such. It was exciting, because I love color, fabric, and that type of thing. But I couldn't work with the people, which was one of my basic problems anyhow.

MASON

What do you mean? It was a basic problem?

PURIFOY

Dealing with personalities. That's when Sigmund Freud became so interesting to me, that he dealt with these archetypes. Carl Jung spoke about them extensively. Psychology has a tendency to put people in pigeonholes- - categorize them- -for your own aggrandizement, your own satisfaction, your own comfort in the universe, in the world. It's better to deal with somebody you know- -or at least you think you know- -because you put them in this little box, and you know all about that little box and what's in it. So you put them in that little box, and you could deal with them. You see them coming a mile away. You know what they're going to say. You know what they're going to do. So I had a tendency to interpret psychology in this way, and I made a fairly good adjustment with people as a result of doing so, knowing full well it was unfair. But for my own peace of mind, so to speak, that's the way I got along in the world.

MASON

So you were finished with the interior design, and then what did you do? What years was that? Let's see. You graduated in '56. You were at the Broadway from '56 to '64.

PURIFOY

Uh-huh. Then came Watts. Eve Echelman, somebody who worked for the Watts Towers Committee [Committee to Save Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts]-- They had hired someone to look after their business in Watts, look after the towers, look after the little school they had. They were looking for somebody with an art degree and some experience with social service, which was me. I was unemployed at the time, and I said, "Well, that sounds just like me." And I split for Watts.

MASON

Where were you living at the time when you were working at the Broadway?

PURIFOY

On La Brea [Avenue] .

MASON

What kind of community was that there?

PURIFOY

On La Brea? Well, everybody knows about that old house I had. I had moved there when the rent was \$50 a month, and I'd probably been there twenty years or fifteen years or so when I went to work in Watts. That little place where I lived became a center for most of the artists and people I know that would come through and sit and--

MASON

This was after you started to work at the center?

PURIFOY

No.

MASON

Oh, it was before.

PURIFOY

Yeah.

MASON

Oh, well, we should talk about that, then, before we get--

PURIFOY

Well, I got interested in high fidelity and sound and record collection.

MASON

What kind of music? I know there were some jazz musicians who came out to L.A.

PURIFOY

Yeah. I was already a student of jazz, and I hired a tutor to teach me to appreciate classics. Because I had little or no classical background. I felt a dire need to understand the classics, because I hated Beethoven or anything that sounded like Beethoven. Everybody says Beethoven's so great and all. If I can't see the greatness, there's something wrong with me. I said. "There's definitely nothing wrong with me, you know, never has been. There's something wrong with you all who think Beethoven is that great. Don't you hear the overtones here? That music is only for a few ears. It doesn't relate to where I am or where I've been or where I'm going in the least. It doesn't relate. But yet I have to know about it." So I bought a whole bunch of classics and I got a tutor, and he tried to teach me to appreciate classical music. Failed miserably.

MASON

Where was your tutor from?

PURIFOY

I don't recall who it was. It was just somebody that I knew. It wasn't anybody of note. It was just somebody who appreciated the classics and who could talk about them intelligently. Well, I wasn't satisfied with just the sound coming out of two speakers. I had to apply my skills and construct a nine-foot cabinet to hold my instruments. I designed my own speakers, and the sound was superb. There wasn't anything such as-- I forget the terms. But anyhow, I had the latest sounds around. And people came from far and near to hear. I was stepping over people over the weekend whom I didn't even know. They were flopping at my pad all day and all night. But I encouraged this because I had a need to want to understand people. I had a problem with people. You're not supposed to have a problem with people if you're going to influence them. So I had a need for people to gather around me, and they came from everywhere. I developed some interesting friends as the results of that. Harry Drinkwater, a photographer, was one. We still are friends, wherever he's at. In other words, although I liked girls a lot, I didn't know how to approach them. I always would approach girls as though they were my sisters, to be corrected if they're wrong. That didn't strike well. So I had real problems with girls, not only with people, but girls. I knew that didn't make for a very well rounded life. I knew the cause, basically, of my inability to relate to women was because I had six sisters. I couldn't be natural around them. I'm acting like a brother all the time. A girl doesn't want a brother, she wants a lover. I thought it was black women that I was having this problem with, so I started going with white women because they were available to me. And I did a little better. To say the least, I did a little better. Then I could look at a black woman as my sister and it was okay. If I have sex with her, you know, I feel a little bit guilty, because I feel like it's incest. You know what I mean? But I waited too long to relate to women in ways in which I could anticipate marriage. So I became a stud, in a way. Women who were ashamed

to be with me in polite company would come on Saturday morning and spend the day. These were black women. I felt really comfortable with these women whom I could relate to this way with no future, no anticipation. They thought they were getting away with something, and I was getting away with having a satisfying relationship with a black female without any attachments, which I always felt there ought to have been. In order to relate intimately, there should be some projection into the future, like where are we going, etc. So this went on for years. It was gratifying. I began to like myself better, and consequently I could go on and do my work. That's when I started to do art. I quit the Broadway department store, came home, and just sat around for a year thinking about doing art. I had one drawing that I copied somewhere, and that was the focal point with everybody who came to talk. I had a studio clean enough to eat off the table. I never did a lick of work there. I wasn't in the studio. I had a beret and all. I ate cheese and drank wine, but I wasn't an artist yet until Watts. That made me an artist.

MASON

I want to hear more about this period and some of your other friends, because it seems that there are a lot of sort of bohemian enclaves for artists in the fifties, different jazz clubs people would hang out at.

PURIFOY

I wasn't even an artist, but they flocked around me anyhow because I pretended to be an artist. I'd graduated from art school, and I had ten years of experience vaguely with artists. So I was accepted as an artist. In fact, I didn't have anything to show for it.

MASON

Did you have any friends who called themselves artists?

PURIFOY

Just about like myself. Sunday painters. That's about the extent of it.

MASON

Did they ever go on to practice it full-time or not?

PURIFOY

Well, after I started doing art, then the artists came. I was the artist's artist. They dug my work, my mannerism and my style, more than the people did. It was the artists that corralled around me because I had words to say about art, to relate to art. Having three academic degrees by then, I was pretty verbal and astute. And I was also extremely knowledgeable about people, because I had so many problems with them in growing up and so forth. I had a whole flock of people around me all the time. It came in real handy when I originated "66 Signs of Neon." I had all the help I needed.

MASON

What about the art history? Did you continue to read about that or learn about that or visit the galleries and the museums?

PURIFOY

I visited galleries and museums frequently.

MASON

Which ones did you go to?

PURIFOY

The [Los Angeles] County Museum [of Art] I frequented often and the galleries on La Cienega [Boulevard] every Monday night. That was before I was a full-time artist. Simply because not only was I interested in art--knowing about art-- I was also interested in what was going on. So I went down to Tijuana once a week. I was interested in knowing what was happening in the community all over the place. I went to UCLA to hear all their concerts. Till Stravinsky died, I saw every one of his. So I was just knowledgeable about what was going on all over the place. I wasn't participating. I was just knowledgeable about it, because I felt responsible to know.

MASON

What about assemblage art in particular? There was the Ferus Gallery that Ed [Edward] Kienholz had, and he would show his friends assemblage art.

PURIFOY

Well, I always thought I was better than Kienholz, simply because my things did not extract from an individual that which he didn't choose to give. Kienholz did that, and I didn't like that.

MASON

Extract from an individual--?

PURIFOY

That which he didn't intend to give. Pathos. That's Kienholz. Kienholz has all the characteristics of the Jew that wants you to feel bad because he wants you to feel bad. His hospital scenes and all are evidence of that. And I didn't like that. I didn't care about that. We both showed in Germany, but I never did like Kienholz's stuff. You've probably read articles about--

MASON

Yeah, they compared your —

PURIFOY

Right.

MASON

You did a tableau for the —

PURIFOY

I resented that. I didn't ever do it publicly, but I resented being compared with Kienholz. I thought I was more of a person than that, to do stuff like that.

1.4. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE TWO (SEPTEMBER 8, 1990)

PURIFOY

When the U.S. Office of Information asked me if I wanted to exhibit in Germany in a recycling exhibition they were having over there-- When was it? Nineteen something.

MASON

In '67? I don't see it right away. We can fill it in later. It was around '68.

PURIFOY

They'd tell me who was going to be showing, you know, and give me a choice to decide whether I wanted to show or not. Because of the title of the exhibit, some of the people refused to show. Among them was what's-her- name, who does these shadow-box things, Louise Nevelson. But anyhow, Kienholz and I were the ones who committed ourselves to showing in Germany.

MASON

Okay. I have it here. It was 1972, and it's "Garbage Needs Recycling."

PURIFOY

Right. Even then I'd already formulated some concepts about Kienholz. He seems to be the subject here. I was supposed to feel like something showing with him, but I didn't. It didn't matter with me.

MASON

But you knew about his work from the galleries prior to the show.

PURIFOY

Yeah, from seeing it.

MASON

You didn't like it then, and you never did like it.

PURIFOY

I never did like it, no.

MASON

Well, we should talk about your installation, then, at the Brockman Gallery, even though we're jumping ahead. But as long as we're talking about-- Because you were compared to Kienholz a lot with that, with the tableau, with the long titles, *Niggers Ain't Never Ever Gonna Be Nothin'--All They Want To Do Is Drink + Fuck*. Could you talk about that piece and what you were trying to do with it and anything else you want to--? [tape recorder off]

PURIFOY

The best example of what I'm talking about has to do with the world of the spirit, Christianity, and religion. Now, those people are hard sell. They want everybody in the world to be like them, so that's why they spread the word. Well, artists have taken on some of the same characteristics as religion, and I think it's not cool at all. It has little or nothing to do with the creative process as

it is. My ideas come from having people try to influence me into becoming someone other than who I am at their will instead of my own. When artists begin to use their work to communicate something that they think people ought to be or feel, I think it's an affrontation, and I think art loses its real essence, based on the creative process. The creative process is something that you never know enough about. Even though you do art for all your life, or two lifetimes, you do it without a knowledge of the creative process, which is very interesting. So I made a long study of the creative process and attempted to relate it to art. They're two different extremes. Art and the creative process are not one and the same thing. My idea is to interrelate them if I can, like I attempted to interrelate my mind with my body to make one whole person. I think most of the things in the world--idea- wise, particularly--need to be related to human beings or related to one another. In other words, I lived almost a half to two-thirds of a lifetime telling other people how to live without applying it to my own self. One day I turned around and said, "Is what I know applicable to me?" It was the most upsetting idea I ever had in my whole life. In fact, I'm not over with it yet. Because all that I ever was was not applicable to me. Because I thought I was okay. "It's the world that's wrong, not me." You can imagine what it's like to carry that around with you all your life and resort to art as an escape. That's what art was for me to begin with, at the beginning.

MASON

When you did your installation at the Brockman Gallery, that was in '71, and people were really moved by it. How would you compare what you were trying to do then with what Kienholz was trying to do at that time?

PURIFOY

Well, actually I've never been satisfied with little things that hang on the wall. That's how I started out, because that was the best way I could express myself. I didn't even have an easel. I worked on this thing for a week or two lying flat on the table, and I never really saw it until I hung it up one day. I thought it was finished, so I hung it up. And I was bowled over with the idea that I could transfer my ideas from my head to a board, but it never satisfied me as an expression. I just thought there was some absence, some lacking in it. As a result of that opposition to flat stuff hanging on the wall, I went to the environment. It was a likely place to go. That was my thinking all along, and still is. That accounts for this piece out here. The pieces at Brockman were the first and the last environmental pieces I made until I came to the desert. It was probably more gratifying than anything else I've ever done, also, and the least creative.

MASON

Could you describe it? Because I've never seen any photographs of it anywhere, just a few verbal records.

PURIFOY

Yeah, I have a tape of it, I think. Somebody filmed it. No sound, but-- Yeah, I've got sound, I think. I will attempt to find it before this is over with. It was a one-room apartment in the upstairs section of the Brockman Gallery. Here's the bathroom, and here's the kitchen, and the rest of the space was allocated to the bedroom. So there was one bed here, and the rest of the space was lined with pallets--that is, mattress on the floor and blankets and whatnot. The whole place was treated. The walls were treated with torn wallpaper and old photographs of black people and pictures of Jesus Christ, implying the religious overtones. There were ten of these pallets on the floor with mannequins in them, covered over with blankets. Here were people lying on the floor--the so-called members of the family--and you just saw the shape of the person because they were mannequins on mattresses. I got all this from the junk pile. But in one bed was a male and female, called mother and father, and baby. The mother and father were having sex while the baby watched on. These figures were animated to move up and down. They were also covered with blankets, so you could just see the movement up and down, that's what you could see. On the nightstand beside the bed were liquor bottles and whatnot, like what people engage in in their waking hours. Somewhere was a television splattering at midnight with no picture, just sound. Somewhere was a radio spilling out sound simultaneously with the TV, as is evident among poor or black people. In the kitchen here was a sink and the kitchen table with chairs. There were roaches crawling on the kitchen table and evidence of rats around. A refrigerator that had an astounding odor when opened. This was the entrance. People would come to the door and fall back, for the most part. [laughter] They couldn't endure the reality of what was going on. The bathroom was also fetid, in every regard. I didn't overlook any aspect of a whole apartment, so to speak, in trying to give it the very essence of poverty and the way black people live. So therefore, it wasn't creative as such. It was a duplication of what was real.

MASON

This was what you had seen while you were a social worker .

PURIFOY

Yeah, during my course. Now, during the reception we had black-eyed peas and corn bread. I made it myself. The music that was going was my voice singing the hymns and whatnot. The tape was going all the time, and it was really a great scene. [There was] very little light in there. Just enough to show off what was going on, more or less. There was a passageway right through the kitchen to the back end, where people would go through and come out somewhere. Few people milled around. Few. But some did. But most people came to this point- -

MASON

Yeah, the entrance.

PURIFOY

--and went back thataway. Now, this was extremely effective, because it was an absolute truth. I wasn't trying to communicate anything more than what was real, what was happening. If anybody had any deep feelings about poverty, it was unintentional. That is to say, it was just my privilege--instead of prerogative--to show this. And, of course, I express my appreciation to Alonzo [Davis] for giving me the exhibit and all, but he behaved just like everybody else, in a way. In other words, I expected somebody to help me move the refrigerator up there at least, you know--up those stairs. Everybody was anxious to see it complete. Nobody came to observe the installation. They wanted to see it complete. In other words, Alonzo stayed out himself and kept other people out until it was all finished. It was rather gratifying. I don't know how successful it was, with one exception. People still remember that exhibit today. You know, that's part of the essence of art is that aspects of it--seeing with the eye and recognizing with the mind--are a permanent experience, unforgettable experience. This in itself was incomplete. There was another part in my mind to put with this, and that's *Extreme Object D-E-D*. Where these people are having sex and having a ball up here, downstairs I had hoped to have two white people sitting on the side of the bed opposite each other, staring out in space, with the space all decorated with French Provincial and whatnot and a Rolls Royce parked on the outside. William Wilson, the art critic, his comment was that he'd never seen this kind of exhibit before in all his experience. That's what he wrote about it. It's in one of those articles you probably have. He said the only thing that was absent was the rest of the exhibit that I intended to present. I didn't know how he knew that, but that's the statement he made. That the only thing absent about the whole exhibit was that the opposite wasn't on display--you know, the elite part. For years I had hoped to do that exhibit over with this whole thing, but finally I abandoned it because I abandoned art in the interim. [tape recorder off]

MASON

Okay, there's something that you wanted to add about the exhibit.

PURIFOY

Yeah. It was meant for black people. It was my continuous zeal to communicate to black people some idea about who they were really, with the hope that they could manifest some change in their general conditions and status. That's really inherent in the title. *Niggers Ain't Gonna Never Be Nothin'-All They Want To Do Is Drink + Fuck*. Now, the blacks that I've interrelated with most of my life know nothing else other than what I described here: all the poverty and how you escape it by drinking and having sex. What I meant to communicate was that there's more to life than that. I don't know to what extent

the people whom it was meant for got to see it. because they don't come to the Brockman Gallery. But that's to whom it was directed, and that's part of my original premise, to communicate to my own people what I think they need to know in order to better themselves. In Watts-- That was my idea, not of bettering Watts, but to get the hell out. You know, find some means by which you can get the hell out of here and go somewhere elsewhere you can be influenced by some other elements, because you'll never improve yourself here. That was my idea of bringing to the black public a reminder of "This is either where you are or where you're going." Being on welfare and whatnot is-- There's a better life than that. "From one generation to another, you know, you've always been on welfare. Well, this is where that leads to." Now it's drugs, so my prediction was quite correct. I was concerned also about the school dropout problem, a whole bunch of problems, as a result of this exhibit. But this-- no matter who saw it--gave me the opportunity to express what I'd been feeling. That's all I can think to say right at the moment. Could be more later.

1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE (SEPTEMBER 9, 1990)

MASON

Right now I want to finish up talking about your post-Chouinard [Art Institute], pre-Watts [Towers Arts Center] years, because you were saying yesterday that even though you didn't feel that you were an artist, you were still trying to find out what was going on in the art scene in L.A. and that you were going to galleries on La Cienega [Boulevard] . I just wanted to ask, what kinds of things did you see that made an impression on you in the galleries? Were there any black artists in the galleries, or did you--? Well, I'll just leave it at that. [laughter] You can start there.

PURIFOY

I wasn't particularly impressed with anything. I just wanted to be knowledgeable about what was happening in Los Angeles. I'm trying to [recall], through interpretation of who I thought I was at the time, what was my idea and attitude toward what I was looking at. Was I primarily interested in art in order to be intelligent about what was happening, or was I really interested in becoming an artist at the time? Working at department stores, being a window trimmer, was reasonably gratifying. I was receiving a fairly good salary, and I was treated well on the job. I had twelve suits, and I wore a different one every day. I was doing pretty good, I thought . But vacation time came one year, after being there for nine years, and I felt comfortable at home fidgeting around the newly decorated studio with nothing in it. So I started working on some collages, which was something that I enjoyed doing, I thought. After a while I

decided I didn't want to go back to work, so I called and said that I wanted another month's leave. They said if I didn't come back I was fired. So I got fired. I'd saved some money in the savings plan at the Broadway, so I thought I'd spend all my money just hanging around the house and trying to fiddle with art and so forth. Fortunately, a friend of mine moved from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C., and left me all of his art equipment, including the easel.

MASON

Who was that? Was this John Smith, the designer that befriended you?

PURIFOY

I'll have to think up his name and tell you later. But anyhow, that gave me the impetus to actually begin to do art, because I had some equipment to work with. So I started out by doing collages. I was reasonably pleased with what I was doing.

MASON

What did the collages look like?

PURIFOY

They had African overtones. An abstract figure of a warrior with spear and shield was the first one I did. The second one I did was oriental. The third one I did was something else and something else. It kind of represented a universal concept of what I call an art motif. The reason I did an African motif is that it just occurred to me to do an African motif. It didn't particularly have anything to do with my being black as such, except I wanted to express in art I thought at that time--that early time--the universal conscience, which has enabled me to do something in African and oriental and so forth. The second year the money ran out, so I started doing janitorial work at nighttime in order to have my daytimes to work in. And by that time I got called to Watts, I think. [tape recorder off]

MASON

This is 1964?

PURIFOY

Yeah, I think so. You asked me how did the pieces look, and I had begun to describe how they looked in terms of essence. But more specifically, I had utilized found objects. So the very first things I made as collages-- Or actually not collages as such. They were assemblages made of found objects. In the case of these first pieces, they were small objects that seemed to represent what I wanted to represent, such as the shield, the spear, and all, and the African motif and everything. They were objects that looked like a shield or a spear, etc. , as was the case in most of my things over the years . I mentioned yesterday about how the Watts Towers Committee [Committee to Save Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts], who owned the Watts Towers, had employed a person to go to Watts and try to create some happenings around the Watts Towers. Her name was Eve

Echelman, and she heard about me. I went out and thought it was okay if I started working there. There was another person in the community, who was, I think, teaching school in one of the elementary schools, whose name was Sue Welch. Sue Welch and I began to explore the community in terms of designing an art program in a house that was rented by the Watts Towers on 107th Street, just a stone's throw from the towers themselves. We worked for weeks on end trying to recruit youth to come to the towers to experience the programs that we were going to design. So after many weeks and on to months, we had designed a program utilizing all of the resources that we could find, such as the youth programs, and there were some moneys to support art programs.

MASON

State money?

PURIFOY

Yeah, state and federal dollars. We wrote proposals to get these moneys, both as salaries for our people and for equipment and so forth. I also ran across a person who gave a lot of assistance, whose name is Judson Powell. So Judson Powell, Sue, and myself became the team to create an art program in Watts. Eve Echelman did not participate in creating the program. She left the community for points east and returned in about a year to see how well we had made out. I'd like to say that I founded the Watts Towers Arts Center, which it eventually became, but considering the help I had in Sue Welch and Judson Powell and Eve Echelman and others, it was a group effort, I would say. Rather than single-handedly having created an art project, I would say that I was a cofounder of the Watts Towers art school. Considering it is still in existence--and run by John Outterbridge now and has been for years--I would say that it was definitely a group effort that made that little school possible. We had two full-time teachers, whose names were Debbie Brewer and Lucille Krasne. We had programs designed for kids from age four to late teenagers. The young kids would come in the morning--those particularly who weren't going to school--and stay till about nine or ten o'clock, where they had drawing and painting, finger painting, and so forth. In the late afternoon, the youths would come from the general elementary and high schools. After a while, we created such a vital program that we were actually bulging at the seams. The little children oftentimes did not want to go home when it was time to go home, and we had to escort them. They were kids mostly from the immediate community or 107th Street and elsewhere close by. We also recruited kids from the schools, and they came for workshops during school hours. So we were rather busy, for the most part. Judson and I maintained the facilities, while Debbie and Lucille conducted the workshops. We utilized found objects to teach with. Oftentimes we'd take the children on trips to pick out objects-- junk and etc. --and bring it back to the towers, to the art center, to do assemblages and collages and so

forth. We were interested in ascertaining if the children were interested in utilizing objects as applied to some form of learning. We learned that it was rather natural and instinctive for the kids to assemble and disassemble an object, with the idea of counting the parts and so forth. So this was a profound discovery for us, which put us onto a direction which we did not anticipate. That is to say, art education. [tape recorder off]

MASON

Let's go back to the beginning. Now, who is Eve Echelman exactly? Was she a part of--? Was this project to go into Watts to work with the community part of the California Arts Council, do you know? I mean, why did somebody get the idea all of a sudden that they wanted to go to Watts and work with the community in '64?

PURIFOY

Well, as I said before, the Watts Towers Committee had bought the Watts Towers from a man to whom it was left after Simon Rodia took off. He left it in charge of someone in Watts and went up north somewhere. So a group of people in Los Angeles formed a committee to purchase the towers, and that they did. They already had something of a class going on at the towers, an open-air project of some nature, where the kids would gather around and they would do finger painting and collages. But the towers wanted a more sophisticated program than that, so they hired Eve Echelman, who was an astute person in organizing and so forth, to see if she could come to Watts and drum up some people who could create an art school. And that she did.

MASON

You said she heard about you. Do you know how she heard about you?

PURIFOY

Yeah. I was unemployed at the time, meaning that I was sitting around with art at home, and I was ready to do a project of this nature. So therefore I accepted responsibility to do the project.

MASON

Now, what about Judson Powell and Sue Welch? Were they both artists or what were their backgrounds?

PURIFOY

Judson Powell was a musician, and Sue was a school teacher. They were just people available who agreed to work on the project with me. I didn't care whether they were artists or not. That wasn't my concern. My reason for selecting them was, first, they were available and, second, they were dependable and, thirdly, I figured we could work as a team. At the time I wasn't too discriminating regarding who I got to work, because actually there was no money as such to pay them with, except promises. So I figured if we were

successful at organizing our school, there would be moneys to be paid.
Eventually they were [paid], and so was I.

MASON

So you only worked with Judson Powell in this capacity, or was he a personal--
?

PURIFOY

Oh, he said-- He asked me-- Judson was a musician. I think I mentioned that.
What was the question, again?

MASON

Was that your only relationship, or were you also friends outside of the Watts
project?

PURIFOY

Yeah, we were best friends. And so was Sue. Best friends. I don't think I could
have selected a better combination of people to design this project. I was
surprised at their determination to work to make it successful, because
generally when somebody comes to work on somebody else's idea, they have a
tendency to do what you say to do and that 's about all . But these people had a
great deal of enthusiasm for the project, and they contributed greatly toward its
success. The school became very popular for one reason or another. Maybe
because it was in Watts, I don't know. But it attracted a lot of people. Among
them was an educator called Ron [Ronald H.] Silverman. He was an artist and
an art educator and a research person, so he solicited a grant from the
government to do a study on black youth to determine-- What was his
objective? Let me check that out. [tape recorder off] I don't recall the objective
of the program, but it had to do with the learning process connected with art
education of some nature. This I'll find out later. The name of the project was
"The Aesthetic Eye," and that was around 1960. I'm sorry I don't have the
correct date here. They have August 1976 here, but the project was actually
done in 1964, or begun in 1964. So we'll have to straighten that out if there's
any problem with that.

MASON

You said that suddenly you found out about children's creative abilities or their
abilities to learn through education. There's a quote, "Education through
creativity is the only way left for a person to find himself in this materialistic
world." That was one of your quotes from an article about the Watts Towers
Center. So in other words, you weren't trying to train kids to be professional
artists. You were trying to train them simply to express themselves, or what
precisely was the--?

PURIFOY

Well, as a rule, black kids, particularly poor black kids, have low self-esteem, a
low self-image. The object here was to raise the self-image. We believed that

an art experience was transferable to other areas of their activity and so forth and that if they could come to the towers and have a good experience, a positive experience, they could take this experience with them wherever they go. It improved their self-image, and this would make a great deal of difference in terms of their ability and capacity to grasp whatever the objectives were, whether it was in school or out of school . Does that answer your question?

MASON

Yeah, that's fine. Well, we can talk about the Watts riots that happened in August of '65, how you experienced that and maybe things you remember leading up to the riots.

PURIFOY

I want to inject here something of interest. I attended a conference in Maryland--or Washington, D.C., as the case was--on art education. It was the first conference held by the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] back in 1964. I don't have all the data on that, but I want to brush up on that for next time, if we can go back to it.

MASON

Okay.

PURIFOY

I'll just inject it right here because it interrelates with this "Aesthetic Eye" art program that Ron Silverman did. He was instrumental, I believe, in having me attend this NEA conference in Washington. So I'll write a note to myself to refer to that next time. The center of the Watts riot was on 103d Street, and the Towers Arts Center was on 107th Street. Between the towers and 103d Street were very few structures. In other words, the view from the towers, or from the arts center, as the case was, to 103d Street, where the event took place, was clear and unobstructed. We could see clearly what was happening on 107th Street. Not only could we see clearly what was going on over there, the looters came right down by the towers with their booty on their way to their homes. So we were fairly close to what was happening. We did not have to go to 103d Street to see what was going on. We could experience this from our back door of the Watts Towers Arts Center. The students at the towers--particularly the adolescents-- participated in the riot. Most everyone did. They would loot and stash their loot in and around the art center. We permitted that, because this was an extremely unique experience, and we thought that at least the kids were still interested in what was happening at the center. Merely because they brought the loot there was a fact that this became a place for them, a center for them, a refuge, so to speak, for them. So we did not discourage it, simply because we were interested in actually what was going on, and they could bring us news of the events.

MASON

When you say you could see it, what did you see exactly? Just people running, or what was the--? Was it something that just exploded all of a sudden, or do you remember anything leading up to it? I mean, did you realize at first that something really awful was happening, or did it just seem like something that may be--? I mean, what were the sort of first impressions of the riot?

PURIFOY

Well, my impression was that it was certainly a most devastating event. Had there been just looting, that would have been one thing. But there was not only looting, there were huge fires, smoke that permeated the whole community. Those were the sights that we saw from our back door. We saw police policing the place, firemen trying to put out the fires unsuccessfully. We saw crowds and crowds of people running to and fro. For what reason, now, you know-- It's just that everybody was excited, and everybody was participating in the event. Very few people did not participate. Very few people stood on the sidelines to watch. This went on for over a week. And 107th Street, near the Harbor Freeway-- And the freeway was cluttered with cars and police. Later, military troops were brought in to subdue the riot. But none of us worked the first week. The community was making Molotov cocktails and throwing them at the police and at the buildings and everything. They were buying nails and tacks from the hardware store and strewing them on the street to prevent the police and other motor vehicles from coming into the area. So actually, the authorities did not know how to handle the event. It was a unique experience for everybody involved. By the second day, the newspapers were full of events harking back to the possible cause. As it is well known, the police stopped two people on the freeway and started molesting them in one way or another, and other people got involved. So that's actually what started that. But once the hotbed of poverty-- And my idea was that it was brewing all the time without us knowing it. There had been an underground movement such that had there not been an event that occurred on the freeway that night, there possibly, in my own opinion, would have been a riot anyhow, because the people were extremely dissatisfied with conditions. Poverty money was in the community, but it was mostly designed to keep the natives quiet, as the case was, or as the rumor was.

MASON

What is this underground movement?

PURIFOY

Certain revolutionary persons in the community were already talking riot. It would occur. So this was a mere vehicle to enable them to implement their own ideas. The [Black] Muslims, who are present today in Watts-- To what extent they participated is not specific in my mind at the moment, but SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] was there. There was general unrest. I don't think the [John A.] McCone report [California Governor's Commission

on the Los Angeles Riots (1965)] in any way did justice to what was going on, because they actually did not know. It was only the few people who were on the inside and were knowledgeable about what was happening prior to the riot and what stimulated it as it progressed.

MASON

Now, what about the "66 Signs of Neon"? How was that conceived, and what was your objective in assembling that work?

PURIFOY

In late 1964, I broke my leg at the Watts Towers. I was unloading--or helping to unload--an object that we were going to put on display, a large wooden object of a description I don't quite remember. But I broke my leg, and I was laid up for six weeks. It was an extremely profound experience, because everybody rallied round, and while I was in the hospital-- It was really a great experience to have old friends renew their acquaintance and make new friends at the same time. I recommend that during the course of a lifetime everyone should break his left leg below the knee. While I was laid up, the Watts Towers had an inkling that they weren't quite satisfied with my attitude regarding what should be going on at the Watts Towers Arts Center. They wanted a more sophisticated program. Their more sophisticated art program was to include people outside the community, kind of an art school where people come to matriculate, you know. They wanted to be known as something profound, some advanced art school of some echelon, I don't know what. It made me very unhappy about their attitude, because they didn't fully realize that that was Watts. That you can't get to know a community by having a sophisticated arts school there that did not include the community. So I thought they were dead wrong, and I argued with them for hours on end regarding that. But they seized an opportunity to think of dismissing me when I broke my leg. So when I returned, there, kicked up on the desk, wearing a pair of crutches, I found that they had put a person in my place there in my stead, without announcing who she was or what she was doing there. It was up to her to edge me out, as the case was. So I kind of got the idea that it was time to leave anyhow. We'd had a very successful two years there. We had many extremely interesting projects including the whole community, one of which was outstanding in my mind, where we painted all the houses on 107th Street. We collected the paint from the paint stores, and the kids donned their work clothes, and we invited people from outside the community to come and help and so forth. After painting all the houses, we washed the street down and had a party that night and everybody came. The whole community came. The streets were so crowded we had to spend most of our time directing traffic. For the open house, as we called it, we erected a mural outside with some painting and sculpturing and whatnot. That was the highlight of my experience there, an extremely profound

experience. But I had a tendency to want to create things and move on, so I accepted the towers' recommendation that I should retire. That gave me the idea that the junk that we collected - three tons of junk that we collected that was in the back of the Watts Towers Arts Center- -was something to be utilized. So we began to think about having an art exhibition. It was at the Markham [Junior] High School, just a stone's throw from the Watts Towers Arts Center, where we gave our first arts festival. That was in the spring of 1965.

1.6. TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE (SEPTEMBER 22, 1990)

MASON

You wanted to talk about the conference that you attended in Gaithersburg, Maryland, called "Arts and the Poor." I don't know what you wanted to say specifically about the conference, but you said it tied into your experience at the Watts Towers [Arts Center] and your development of an art education program for the Watts Towers.

PURIFOY

Yeah. Ron [Ronald H.] Silverman--I think he was professor at Cal State, L.A. [California State University, Los Angeles] --was instrumental in getting me invited to Maryland to the first NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] conference, where we discussed art and the poor. It was a week-long conference that included educators from all over the country. There wasn't anything profound concluded as such, except that Ron Silverman a couple of years later received a grant to make some studies at the Watts Towers. I derived a great deal from it simply because it was my first experience at rubbing elbows with high-powered educators and art educators. I was already interested in art education, because I had a feeling that blacks like myself really didn't necessarily relate to art. It was removed from their experience. Although blacks have some profound characteristics in that they have depths of feeling, this is not applicable to anything at all. Primarily, it was exercised in their spiritual life, rather than any other experiences.

MASON

Do you remember some of the people that you interacted with, that you met there, that left you with any kind of impression? What do you feel overall that the conference--? Do you think it accomplished what it tried to accomplish or do you think things were maybe not well defined enough to accomplish anything?

PURIFOY

It was a new subject. I don't think heretofore it had been-- There had never been a conference on such a subject as this. I'm trying to think of a name of

someone else whom I've met there that left an impression on me, but I can't recall anyone for the time being. Maybe later.

MASON

Actually, I have a quote. I found a pamphlet in the library that talked about this conference, and I read that —

PURIFOY

Oh, Katherine Bloom. Some of the directors there were impressive, one of which was Katherine Bloom. I think she was head of arts and humanities for the federal government at the time.

MASON

Well, you're quoted in this pamphlet they put together about the conference. I don't know if you've ever seen it. It was put out by the government.

PURIFOY

What year?

MASON

It must have been '67. Does that seem right?

PURIFOY

I think the conference was in '67, so it's '66. Or was it before the [Watts] riot? I think the conference was-- I don't know about that.

MASON

Yeah, I think it was in '67. You're quoted as saying, "The whole point of the conference was or ought to be the salvation of the world, not just the poor, through self-affirmation on the part of the nominal giver, the artist or teacher, and the nominal receiver."

PURIFOY

I forgot about that.

MASON

Oh. [laughter] Is that something that you would still agree with today, that that should have been the point of the conference?

PURIFOY

Yeah. I've changed radically since then, of course, but I still feel that it's-- To direct art at the poor is prejudiced, the same as [acting as] though it belongs to the elite. That's a form of prejudice also. I don't think they meant it to be, because they were sincere about finding some means in education to stimulate poor people. But they weren't aware that art is about the last thing that poor people get to. They weren't aware of that. Just like psychotherapy, which I experienced at the mental hospital in Los Angeles. Blacks cannot utilize psychotherapy because it's long-term, and blacks are more susceptible to change in short-term experiences rather than long-term experiences.

MASON

So as far as their using art, do you think that they were trying to--well, maybe some of the people, not everybody, but some of the people involved in the conference- -use art somehow in the ghettos to make poor people conform to some kind of social norm? Is that what you're saying?

PURIFOY

Not these people. They were really sincere about the dropout problem, basically. That's one of the problems of the poor. No, I have the utmost respect for their sincerity. However, they were white people and they were just misguided, that's all.

MASON

Okay. In our last session, we started to talk about the beginnings of "66 Signs of Neon, " and you mentioned your leaving the Watts Towers [Arts Center] , the incident about breaking your leg, and how they kind of took advantage of your being in the hospital . What happened to the people you were working with, Sue Welch and Judson Powell? Did they continue to work there when you left?

PURIFOY

Yeah. They weren't fired. They continued to work there for several years. We organized Joined for the Arts in Watts and did the [Watts Summer] Festivals, though he [Powell] wasn't employed by the Watts Towers Committee any longer.

MASON

What is Joined for the Arts? What kind of organization was that? What were your goals and who belonged to it?

PURIFOY

Well, there wasn't a steady membership, actually. It was an idealistic concept. Our goal was to build an arts center there on 107th Street, which was eventually done. But in the interim, we started to manage "Signs of Neon." We had collected three tons of debris after the riot. We fashioned it in some kind of a sculpture and whatnot. That's why we solicited the aid of six other people. We didn't feel that our expression alone would be sufficient to communicate through the debris. So we invited some other artists to come in and cart away some of the junk and make something for the first festival, which was at Markham [Junior] High School.

MASON

What were some of the first pieces that you and Judson made before you called in the other artists?

PURIFOY

We hadn't made anything. This was a part of the original plan. We just sat down and talked about it and said, "Here's all the stuff. We've got the time to do it in because we aren't working for the towers anymore . What would you like

to do?" We decided that we'd call in some more people. Among them were Arthur Secunda, Gordon Wagner- -

MASON

Max Neufeldt?

PURIFOY

Yeah, Max Neufeldt and Debbie Brewer and two others there in the magazine. You can get the names out of the magazine.

MASON

Do you want to look through that as we talk about this?

PURIFOY

Okay. [tape recorder off] The artists were--in addition to the ones I named-- Leon Saulter and Frank Anthony. Those were the six, I believe.

MASON

How did you decide on them? Were they friends?

PURIFOY

I don't recall. I don't recall how we came up with these names.

MASON

No, but I mean you must have seen their work before. You know, like Gordon Wagner's work? No? [laughter]

PURIFOY

[laughter] Well, I guess we must have. These were people who had a reputation for utilizing found objects, and these were most certainly found objects. Junk-art sculpture is utilized mostly as assemblage. Assemblage was very popular at the time. Well, not very popular, but popular. Since then, it's become extremely popular and preferable. But at that time, we were kind of exploring new territory. Of course, the concept was developed at the beginning of this century by Picasso and Braque and others. The period was called dada, if you recall. The history most certainly would include the period.

MASON

Were you studying that at the time? Because before, you said that you were interested in art history and kind of familiarized with that.

PURIFOY

I had already graduated from an art school.

MASON

Right. You went to Chouinard [Art Institute].

PURIFOY

So I was reasonably intelligent about art history. This period particularly appealed to me because I basically was a craftsman. It's allied with craftsmanship in wood and metal .

MASON

Is there anything specific about a found object that has kind of been used and you're recycling it? Is there something specific about junk that appeals to you aesthetically?

PURIFOY

Yes, yes. First, it's easily accessible. It's available, and that's for certain. Everything is recyclable here. But in large cities, junk is not often disposed of in junk piles, so to speak, at garbage dumps. It's exposed out oftentimes in communities that don't care.

MASON

Like Watts, for example. [laughter]

PURIFOY

In Watts it was extremely accessible. Number two, it relates to poor people. Wherever there are poor people, there's piles of junk. People bring the junk there. In Watts, there were mounds of scrap metal all over the place and defunct foundries where there were piles of metal and junk. Garbage day was a time when people put their trash out, but it was often not picked up, and so it stayed there for weeks. In some places, there was no pickup at all. People would buy furniture and household appliances cheaply, but they had to throw it away before they got it paid for. So these are characteristics of poor people which made it a haven for me--one who collects objects. There's something else about objects that appeals to me--it stimulates my imagination. I can think to do something with it, turn it into something else other than what it was originally designed for.

MASON

Do you feel like you're elevating the object to art? Elevating junk to the level of art? Is that the way you look at it?

PURIFOY

Well, Marcel Duchamp founded the concept of "as is." You're familiar with that, no doubt. "As is," I think, makes the assemblage legitimate, because many things that are designed for use--household use and so forth--are excellent shapes to look at, particularly in the early American days. People hand made things and contributed a great deal of thought to the structure. However, when new things come into being, people throw away the old things, and these are things that are oftentimes well designed. Duchamp recognized this and created the concept of "as is." In other words, he had a tendency to display an object without doing anything to it and say, "This is okay like it is." That also appealed to me in terms of junk art. It kind of trickles down from "as is" to junk art, because in assemblage I try to enable the article to remain identifiable, although it's intertwined with other objects. The more it becomes identifiable, the more interest I believe is created around the object, the complete object d'art.

MASON

Well, let's talk specifically about some of the pieces in "66 Signs of Neon."

PURIFOY

Okay. The one on the cover here, made of stove- pipes and--

MASON

Maybe we should identify it. We're looking at *Junk* magazine, which was published by "66 Signs of Neon, " but is that just another name for Joined for the Arts in Watts?

PURIFOY

Well, it was published by us, but it was underwritten by American Cement Corporation of Los Angeles. There should be a date somewhere here indicating when it was published, but I don't see it.

MASON

That's all right.

PURIFOY

It's around 1968 or '69. This object on the fly sheet, on the front cover, is composed of stovepipes- -two joints of stovepipes standing about thirty-six inches tall, with a part of a roof of tar paper and tin mounted on its peak, on a pedestal. There's a brace--a piece of metal brace there--to hold it up. It's called *Breath of Fresh Air* . I don't know why. [laughter] But that's one I did first off.

MASON

Oh, that's the first one you did?

PURIFOY

I don't know.

MASON

Oh, okay.

PURIFOY

When I say "first off," it was among the first ones we did. I don't know whether it was the absolute first one or not. Turning the page, we come to *Sir Watts*. *Sir Watts* took on its own identity, and I don't think there was anybody who did not like *Sir Watts* upon sight. Some feel that it's done tongue in cheek simply because it's called *Sir Watts*. It was said that I have something of a sense of humor about my work. I don't know.

MASON

Well, that seems poignant in some ways, too, because where the heart should be there 's kind of an opening with safety pins coming out, and it's sort of cut away. Then for the face there's a purse, which I've seen opened in some reproductions, so it seems to be sort of saying something about vulnerability, even though it's all metal. There seems to be an element of vulnerability about it. Is that something that you had in mind?

PURIFOY

No, it was kind of a tongue-in-cheek object, a pun, more or less. I enjoyed doing it. It was something that-- The finish on it--on the surface and all--was extremely unique, the paint and whatnot. The objects that represent the arms and the head and the torso consisted of drawers and so forth. Juxtapositions just occurred to me, and it worked. It worked quite satisfactorily as a representation of the human figure. Naming it *Sir Watts* was the tongue-in-cheek concept that I oftentimes can muster. There's an interesting story connected with *Sir Watts*. During my exhibit at the black arts museum [California Afro-American Museum] on Expo[sition Boulevard], the curator there was so anxious to find and display *Sir Watts*. I was of little or no help because I didn't know where *Sir Watts* was. She asked me if I could make another one, and I flipped out, because it's virtually impossible to duplicate junk art. You have to find the same objects; you have to be in the same mood. [laughter] And I oftentimes chuckle to myself that someone would be so naive. [laughter]

MASON

When you say you don't know where it is, you sold it but you didn't keep track of it?

PURIFOY

That's right, yeah. The U.S. Office of Information solicited it once and sent it to Germany. They sent it back to the owner, and that's the last I heard of it. I wish now I did know where it was, at least to make it accessible to the public. The next page of the *Junk* art magazine shows one of these what we call "signs of neon." "Signs of Neon" is a little confusing unless one is aware of where the exhibit got its title from. The exhibit got its title from the drippings of neon signs upon the ground, formulating crystal-like meltings, mixing with the sand and dirt, formulating extremely odd shapes. What Judson and I did was simply take the shapes out of the sand, brush them off, mount them on something, and sell them. They went like hotcakes. Another interesting--

MASON

Who were you selling them to? Do you remember?

PURIFOY

Well, yes. Gregory Peck owns one. He came to the festival at Markham in '66. He was then representing the NEA, and he participated in some way in deciding where the grants go. He ultimately provided a grant for me to ship "Signs of Neon" to Washington, D.C. He came to my house and brought a lot of people with him who were on the committee. That's how he happened to know about the exhibit at Markham.

MASON

I was just wondering who was collecting these kinds of pieces then, since you said they weren't as fashionable then. I just wondered who would be interested in those kinds of things.

PURIFOY

Well, we had no problem in selling them once people understood where the source was from whence it came. Another interesting object on this page is the *Phoenix*. The *Phoenix* is simply a piece of bent-up metal mounted on a twelve-foot pole with a base to enable it to stand up. We called it the *Phoenix* because it looked like a bird.

MASON

Who was this done by?

PURIFOY

This piece of sculpture on this page [*Max Untitled*] --an excellent piece of sculpture, made of heavy metal--was done by Max Neufeldt.

MASON

And this one, the *Phoenix*, was done by--

PURIFOY

The *Phoenix* was a group effort, Judson and myself.

MASON

How did that work? Did you guys talk about what you wanted to do beforehand?

PURIFOY

No. We seldom talked about what we wanted to do. We would look at an object, segregate it from the pile of junk, study it for a while, and say--one of us, more or less; it didn't matter which one was first-- "Oh, I know what that looks like." And then we'd proceed to assemble it. It took only minutes, for the most part.

MASON

Now, that's by Arthur Secunda.

PURIFOY

Yeah, this is called *City*. Arthur Secunda had collected many objects embedded in plastic. A very interesting concept.

MASON

All round, many of them.

PURIFOY

This is called *Watts Baby*, I think. I don't remember. *Race Baby* it's called, by Ruth Saturensky, who was one of the artists that we solicited that I forgot the name of. That is the only flat piece I think we had, only wall piece. One of the few wall pieces, I'd say. It's not the only one. It has photographs of black kids in it, more or less, and you could call it a montage, I guess. On the next page is

a sculpture by Neufeldt called *Spoons*, one by myself called *Sudden Encounter* - -

MASON

Is this glass?

PURIFOY

Sudden Encounter is, yes, a windshield mounted on a crosstie upright, with a--
What do you call that? A flit-gun.

MASON

A flit-gun?

PURIFOY

Uh-huh. For mosquitoes.

MASON

Oh, I don't know what that is. Was this broken glass in any way a reference to Duchamps, his *Large Glass* [*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*] or--?

PURIFOY

"As is"? You see, there are only two objects here, so that's as close to an "as is" as I'll ever get. I have a big piece of rubber about six inches thick and about twenty by twenty square, pure rubber, weighing about 150 pounds. *Barrel and Plow* was an interesting shape. It's simply a beer barrel and a plow, mounted on a table.

MASON

Oh, so it's stationary. It doesn't move.

PURIFOY

No, no.

MASON

Was there any idea that you were trying to--? Maybe a reference to your childhood?

PURIFOY

No. The shape just appealed to me. I oftentimes result in pure, unadulterated design, with no overtones whatsoever, with no tongue-in-cheek or anything. I prefer it. Maybe later we could talk about that in reference to some of my protest pieces, if you're interested.

MASON

Well, I notice that round shapes often appear in your work in some significant place. Is the circle something that--?

PURIFOY

No. No. No, it's just a basic shape that I often use.

MASON

It's my imagination. Okay.

PURIFOY

Yeah. But no particular significance, except it's an art form. I mean, it's what artists do.

MASON

This is *The Sink*, which is another group effort by David Mann, yourself, and Judson Powell.

PURIFOY

We often did things together because we wanted the community to relate to each other. Poor people--and particularly black people--have a tendency to not want to relate to each other on an equal level. We are inclined to be selfish and vindictive, often childlike, as the case may be. Children are often cruel.

However, I imposed a great deal of poverty upon myself to learn about blacks. That sounds strange coming from me. But I went to Watts not being quite colored. I had a lot of white characteristics.

MASON

Like what? [laughter]

PURIFOY

First, I was overeducated . I had three academic degrees. And nobody in Watts had a degree hardly, even from high school. So in order to understand a community, I had to be like them, I thought. I had one pair of shoes at the time. I never wore a suit. I didn't own one. However, prior to Watts, I had a dozen suits or more. I never wore a tie. In fact, I tried to emulate the people of Watts in order to understand their plight. Their whole direction here is justifiable, so to speak. [People say] they're selfish and uncooperative, and we were talking about *The Sink* as a group effort. It is often said that blacks spend enough money in America to have their own businesses and whatnot, and we can be independent. We don't have to depend on white people to assist us. Considering how many blacks are on welfare and whatnot, we thought the group effort would demonstrate how blacks could cooperate with each other and become independent. The justification for selfishness is all poor people are selfish--it's not just blacks--because they're the have-nots. When you don't have, you want, and in the wanting you oftentimes do not get, and therefore you internalize all of this woe and become ostracized.

MASON

Well, maybe some people would argue that poor people-- Maybe not in urban areas. You know, to talk about poor in urban areas and in rural areas is to talk about two different things. Because sometimes when you think about the rural poor, they don't have anything, but it seems that they're always willing to share a meal with somebody.

PURIFOY

Well, overtly that's quite true. On payday-- payday meaning when the welfare check comes--the neighbors invite me in for a drink of gin early in the morning.

Despite the fact that I don't start drinking till nightfall, I would take a drink in order to be sociable. I wanted to win their favor. So in the morning when I'd take the children from the center-- (Because they didn't want to go home. They liked it at the center so much, till we had to carry them home sometimes on our backs.) If the welfare check had come, generally mama had a pint of gin on the coffee table, and so she was rather generous in offering me a drink of gin. I didn't even drink gin, really. I preferred bourbon. Yes, however, blacks collect brown stamps. They expect to be paid back. So, you see, that is not the generosity that we like to feel here. Maybe you don't agree with that, where you come from. I'm talking about American blacks, American poor. I'm not talking about European poor. I don't know what they do.

MASON

I don't either.

PURIFOY

But that's where blacks have an excellent memory. They remember everything they do for you, and they expect remuneration. They expect payback. They'll remind you, "Remember I did thus and so? And it's time to pay back the favor." So when your check comes-- That's what I mean. So, yeah, blacks have a tendency to be generous, but for reasons-- Poor people are exactly what it says, poor, poor both in spirit and in well-being. Oh, yes. We were talking about *The Sink* and the group effort. The group effort was sustained throughout my art experience in relationship to doing workshops wherever I would go. UCLA heard about the group effort and invited me to participate in one of its festivals, where they also invited well-known people such as Marcel Marceau and Buckminster Fuller. Debbie Brewer was there, Judson Powell was there, and several other people, to stimulate the building of a large piece of sculpture where any student or anybody who comes by can participate. The philosophy of group effort is that I pay attention to what you do on your side so that I'll balance it off on my side. This translated into existence as being that I want to get rid of my selfishness. I want to sense my relationship with the world at large, you included. The last page--second to last page--in *Junk* art magazine is an object called *The Train*. It's a train mounted between a freestanding structure and a lot of objects juxtaposed on four sides. It's said to be a piece of sculpture with a pipe hanging out the top. It was featured in a brochure on the exhibit we had in Washington, D.C., in 1969, I believe, '68 or '69. Walter Hopps was the curator [of twentieth-century painting and sculpture] of the Washington modern art gallery [Gallery of Modern Art], I believe. We showed there in 1959, I believe, or '68. I think you asked me earlier to say something regarding what effect art had on a community, and I happened to think of--

1.7. TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE TWO (SEPTEMBER 22, 1990)

PURIFOY

Before we went out of state, we exhibited "Signs of Neon" at nine universities from '66 to '69. We made available to the spectators a pad and pencil to make comments. And we kept the comments for years. We had stacks of them made by students who either liked or did not like the exhibit. The things that we displayed were extremely expressive. It isn't particularly evident in this magazine, because this magazine shows specific objects, specific pieces of sculpture on one page. But we assembled the exhibit in a large hall, and it was well done and quite colorful and exciting to look at. We always entertained crowds of people. I remember particularly at [University of California] Berkeley — We were there for nineteen days during some of the hottest [most turbulent] times on campus. For that reason, and others, no doubt, we had crowds of people coming through all the time. When we took it to Washington [D.C.], they wanted us to stay there and utilize their junk, too, and make sculptures. Of course we refused, because we were doing great like we were in Los Angeles. The last one is *Sunflowers*, I think it's called, by Debbie Brewer. I wanted to mention that, because Debbie participated in "Signs of Neon" by making things and sending them to us. We sold lots of stuff, we'd send the money back, and we would make some more stuff. So we always had sixty-six pieces to display, but there were different pieces from time to time because we made sales. That's how we existed, all six of us. Particularly Judson and me. We had some horrible-- I would just mention this in passing. We never got to show at any of the university galleries. We always showed in the student union hall or someplace like that. And they had terrible facilities, sleeping quarters and so forth. They were just terrible. People felt sorry for us because we complained a lot and put us up in their homes. I remember particularly, at Berkeley, again, a patron from Los Angeles came up and saw how deplorable our conditions were, so she put us up at the Hilton hotel for a whole week. And we were delighted at that.

MASON

Who was that?

PURIFOY

Lillian Testie was her name. She was the daughter of a well-known piano maker. I don't recall which one.

MASON

But you say she was an arts patron, so to speak?

PURIFOY

Yes.

MASON

Why do you think they would bring the show and not give you good facilities?

PURIFOY

They were just concerned about activities, you know, rotating activities on campus, that's all. You're familiar with that. Anything that they felt would interest the students was their job. Where we slept and all was secondary to the exhibit. The exhibit was excellent. It was really good. A wonderful exhibit, professionally done. I was a curator and didn't know it.

MASON

I just want to ask about one comment that I read. When the show went to Washington, there was a reviewer for the *Washington Sunday Star* who said he was really disappointed with the show because it didn't evoke for him the excitement or the horror or whatever of the Watts riots.

PURIFOY

The eyes of the beholder. We had the objects there. It was just done in such a fashion that it was really creative. Every object was extremely conducive to creativity. You know, done well. The group we selected to do the things were excellent artists. There must have been some positive comments.

MASON

Well, he said that even though it didn't evoke the riots for him, his attention was finally drawn to the objects as objects, so that's kind of where he left off.

PURIFOY

That was our intention.

MASON

Yeah. But he didn't quite get that.

PURIFOY

We didn't intend to provoke.

MASON

Because he wanted like a slide show.

PURIFOY

It wasn't intended to provoke. I didn't have that in mind at any rate. I don't know about the other two. I don't think we even discussed this. But the pieces were so well done, and done in such good taste, that it became an assemblage show of terrific art. Everyone said that. As mean as I was, I did not care whether people reacted in a hostile way or not. We just wanted their reaction, that's all. We didn't care. We didn't want to excite a riot or anything. That wasn't the object whatsoever. But had it excited a riot, you know, so what?

MASON

Is there anything else you want to add about the "66 Signs"?

PURIFOY

No, I think that just about covers it. But the old stuff-- I can't think of any other piece I'd like to speak about .

MASON

Okay. We can talk about the workshops that you did, your teaching experience, from '66 through '73, and the works that you were doing in that period.

PURIFOY

The workshops?

MASON

Well, your teaching experience at UCLA, UC [University of California] Davis, Immaculate Heart College.

PURIFOY

And particularly [University of California] Santa Cruz. I was more consistent with Santa Cruz. I was a visiting teacher for four years intermittently. I want to also mention two people who were extremely instrumental in furthering my career. They were Dr. Page Smith and his wife Eloise [Smith] . I developed a lifelong friendship with them. I was visiting recently.

MASON

They were both teachers at UC Santa Cruz?

PURIFOY

Page was the provost there, and he resigned after twelve years and took to writing history books. [tape recorder off]

MASON

So we were talking about Page and Eloise Smith at Cowell College, right, at UC Santa Cruz?

PURIFOY

Yeah.

MASON

You said they helped your career? How so?

PURIFOY

We were in San Francisco in 1966, I believe, when it was suggested that we go to Cowell College at Santa Cruz for some reason or other. I don't recall. But I ended up there one evening, and we stayed so late till it was suggested that we spend the night . We didn't have anywhere to sleep, and Eloise, Page's wife, offered to put us up, especially me. She got familiar with our philosophy, having seen photographs of our work, and ultimately she got to see the works herself in Berkeley. She talked Page Smith into inviting me to do a workshop at Santa Cruz. We did a workshop commemorating their second, third, or fourth anniversary from the time the school had opened- -Cowell College. It was new at the time. Page had come from UCLA, as a historian there, to be the provost at Cowell College. That's how I got to meet up with Page and Eloise, and they invited me back each year for four consecutive years to do a workshop in the spring. The workshop consisted of two days a week, and I was paid extremely well. It was great. One day a week we would do sculpture in Page Smith's

garage. (They were living on campus.) And the next day we would have classroom discussion of how art related to education.

MASON

Was this for art majors?

PURIFOY

No, this was for anyone. So I had two classes a week and about thirty students per class. We went into some heavy details about art and art education and how it interrelates with humans. I was never interested in art as a thing in and of itself. So we were talking about art in relationship to, but not art per se. The one day we'd do art would demonstrate how within oneself there's a creative process going all the time, and that it's merely expressed in an object called art. But one's life should also encompass the creative process. We were trying to experiment with how you do that, how you tie the art process in with existence. We called it art and humanities.

MASON

Were you working with ideas that you learned at the Watts Towers?

PURIFOY

Yes. It was a carryover. I was primarily pushing "Signs of Neon" at the time, so it was convenient for me to take out a few weeks or a few months and do a workshop in Santa Cruz.

MASON

We can talk about some of the pieces that you did after the "66 Signs of Neon." Do you remember the first piece you did after? Or did you constantly use the material that you had found there and incorporate it into other works?

PURIFOY

Eventually "Signs of Neon" came back from some place or other, maybe Tennessee or Alabama. It got down as far as Tennessee, I believe. I don't recall. It's listed there, I think, in the resume of where it went down that way. I didn't go with it. But from Washington, D.C., the exhibit traveled. About 1969 it came back in a truck just about in the same shape it was when we found it in Watts, in the smoldering embers of the Watts riot. In other words, that was the end of "Signs of Neon. " It was back in its original state: Junk!

MASON

I'm sorry. Are you saying that the pieces weren't taken care of?

PURIFOY

Right. Right.

MASON

Okay, I just wanted it spelled out for slow people. [laughter]

PURIFOY

Oh, no, I just wasn't being too exacting. I was trying to be poetic, I guess. [laughter] However, there was still some demand for the exhibit. Some people

wanted to create a black museum or something. There was a lot of talk about utilizing an old fire station in central Los Angeles to house the exhibit. I entertained the idea, because we could always refurbish it or whatnot. But nothing ever came of it, so it just deteriorated in somebody's garage someplace in Watts. That's the last I heard of it. Gordon Wagner was concerned about his pieces that didn't get sold. I didn't get any flak from Arthur Secundo or Neufeldt. I think Ruth Saturensky was a little bit unhappy about the condition of her piece, but all in all that was just about the end of "Signs of Neon." I had to go and do something else, so I gave up art and went to work in a mental institution. I said "work, " not [be a] patient, work. I got a job at Central [City] Community Mental Health Facility [Los Angeles], where I was able to utilize my art experiences as well as my degree in social service administration. So I experimented with utilizing art as a tool for a change, for mental health.

MASON

Okay, so that was '73 to '76 you did that.

PURIFOY

From '71 to '75.

MASON

But before you did that, you had done some other work, it seems. I have some things that are dated before then, a few untitled pieces of totem with feathers and fur, slippers. [tape recorder off] You wanted to talk some more about the Watts Summer Festivals.

PURIFOY

Yeah. Here's a brochure that you might be interested in which describes actually how sufficient we were and how adequate we were as curators. Here is a brochure we did in 1969 or '70, I believe. Inside, there are labels for the artist to cut out and paste on their works and so forth. It gives you information regarding who is eligible, community rules, registration, prize awards, sales of works, art auctions, and other categories. Usually, I would open up the place where the artists would drop their works off two weeks before the exhibit. Now, why would I do that two weeks before? Nobody else does, of course. Well, first, I had the time, and second, it was an excellent opportunity to sit down and talk with the artists as they brought their works in and see how they were thinking and actually how they were doing. So I became familiar with all the community of artists by allocating this time before each festival. I did this nine consecutive years, and I got very familiar with what was going on. Also, we would stimulate the artists to do work expressly for the festival. Not only did we do that, we went around to all the schools and collected works by the students.

MASON

You mean the art schools or the public schools?

PURIFOY

Public schools. We also were interested in collecting works from anyone, all students. At the time, Chicanos only were in East L.A. They weren't all over the place like they are now. So we consistently went over there and spoke with their teachers and collected their works and displayed them. As results of that, we stimulated a lot of kids to do art. Oftentimes, the teacher would encourage them to do art expressly for the festival. So we got to stimulate quite a number of people in our community, thus making us really community artists. We weren't artists per se, like artists who close themselves up in a studio. We really got out on the streets, leading the people.

MASON

What kind of art were you commissioning? Was it assemblage art, or did you have any preference?

PURIFOY

Oh, no. We didn't discriminate whatsoever. Any kind of art they brought was great. We had a lot of categories, as you see in this brochure. We picked people like [John] Outterbridge, Alonzo Davis, and Dale [Davis], his brother, to do the judging and whatnot, people that the community respected. I think calling ourselves community artists harks back to the beginning of art in Cleveland, where at the Karamu House, as you recall, they were practicing community art for years. They were usually associated with other activities in a building that was concerned about social welfare as well as the health of the community at large. And invariably they would include art, both performing and visual arts. So I think I took the cue from having lived in Cleveland for a while.

MASON

Oh, you did? Did you know Curtis Tann, who came out here?

PURIFOY

Yeah, he came from Karamu House. So community art has a certain belief system. It doesn't believe in art for art's sake. So you can imagine the problem one would have in an elite community like Los Angeles with this kind of belief system. And yet we were consistent with our idea. We didn't have any confrontations until we started dealing with the [Los Angeles City] Board of Education and the state [California] Arts Council, when we were concerned with art education and art as a tool for learning. You asked a question once about whether or not I influenced the artists or the artists influenced me or whatnot. Well, I think I was more popular among the artists than I was among the patrons, because I always had something to say about art. At the time, I recall, we didn't verbalize much about art. We insisted that art speak for itself. But my attitude toward that concept was that it was elite and that poor people could not afford to feel that something was in and of itself because of their basic needs and dependency. So what I was insisting upon verbally, as well as

attracted to convey it in my work through the group effort, was that it's an elitist concept to feel that art is in and of itself art. It is not in and of itself, because it interrelates with the world at large. We tried to say this in "Signs of Neon."

MASON

In other words, art as just an aesthetic experience isn't enough. It isn't enough to just explore color and line.

PURIFOY

It doesn't reach blacks at all. It excludes blacks and poor, and it just burned me up. Art is the most uncontaminated discipline existing in the world, and there was excellent opportunity to interrelate it with even poverty.

MASON

Now, you started a theater group, too, in the sixties. How did that work with--?

PURIFOY

Yeah, because I was interested in theater from college. Even from high school, I think. I'm not sure. I had a theater group in a little town I worked in called Tuscaloosa [Alabama], and we traveled around the community doing theater pieces. So when I went to Watts, I met Steve Kent, and he was from Watts.

MASON

I'm sorry, who was that?

PURIFOY

Steve Kent. He was a UCLA drama graduate at the time. Around the early part of creating the Watts Towers Arts Center, Steve was one of the people who came to assist us in designing a program. Included was drama. It wasn't the kind of drama that you get on the stage--say your piece, bow, and leave. It was improvisation. You know, you just create the concept on the spot. I thought this was an excellent media to relate to the community, so I encouraged it. Steve developed a wonderful theater with the young people in the community, as the case was. Finally, Steve came to us and said, "You know, we'd like to have a theater. I want my own." I said, "Okay, let's do it." So we went to Beverly Hills and created a theater.

MASON

What was in Beverly Hills?

PURIFOY

A theater.

MASON

There was a stage, you mean?

PURIFOY

Improv. Yeah. It was housed on Robertson Boulevard in Beverly Hills. We had a lot of help, a lot of volunteers. I happened to check here in this book when you spoke. It was called the Company Theater on Robertson Boulevard in Los

Angeles. They had a repertory group and they put on two or three plays a year. They also traveled to the festival in Edinburgh in 1967. Despite moving out of the community, Steve Kent continued to work with the Watts Towers Arts Center theater group. The name was changed to the Improv Theater, I think, and finally they folded up about three to four years ago.

MASON

So there were young people involved in all aspects, then? In set design and costume design? Or was it more minimal than that?

PURIFOY

Well, no. It wasn't that kind of theater. See, improv pretends you've got a background, pretends this is a bedroom, pretends this is a living room, and there are no props. That was the beauty of improv, that the audience has to pretend that-- [pointing to photograph] That's Steve Kent.

MASON

Do you remember what kinds of themes people usually dealt with?

PURIFOY

Themes?

MASON

Yeah, in the skits.

PURIFOY

Pregnancy, teenage kids' concepts, jealousy, intrigue, sex, every subject that teenagers are interested in. Oh, I want to mention also, I don't think we could go past the improvisational theater unless we mentioned Joyce Weddolf, who was a volunteer who assisted the "Signs of Neon" and the theater a great deal. She was our resource person, publisher, etc. You asked me to name names. I just happened to think of that name.

MASON

Okay. Could we talk about some of your work?

PURIFOY

Uh-huh. What work?

MASON

Well, this work after Watts and before 1970.

PURIFOY

I'm not too clear, except I was working all the time. Even when I was working with "Signs of Neon, " every time I'd come home, any spare moment, I was doing something.

MASON

Was the material still stuff from the riots that you had stored, or did you look for new materials to use?

PURIFOY

No, once we used up that material--and we used it all up in "Signs of Neon" pretty much--we had to find new sources for found objects, for junk. That's available, as I said before, in Watts and other places in Los Angeles. As you can see, this [untitled] piece here was made into a postcard. Samella Lewis did that [i.e., had it printed on a postcard], and that's one of the things that she did best, I guess.

MASON

You said she bought that piece for the Museum of African American Art. Or was this for Contemporary Crafts, the gallery?

PURIFOY

No, she bought it for herself to own. She liked it, you know, and hung it on her wall. She thought it was great. I hung it up for her because it was heavy.

MASON

Do you remember what kinds of ideas you were exploring in this piece? It seems like it was more layered than some of your other pieces.

PURIFOY

What's that word?

MASON

Layered. Like there are objects on top of one another, whereas- -

PURIFOY

Oh, juxtaposed. Okay, I've got you. Want me to say something about that?

MASON

Yeah. [laughter]

PURIFOY

Well, as you know, I'm well aware that the dadaists utilized juxtaposition like no artists ever did or ever will do, no doubt. If you'll recall, the shapes of things that came out of that period, both done by Braque and Picasso, were a great deal of juxtaposition, one thing piled on top of another to create depth, etc. Because what they were protesting most of all was perspective, you know, drawing in perspective to create depth. They were in opposition to that altogether. So in order to achieve depth, they would juxtapose one object on top of another and therefore achieve depth without perspective. They thought it was more honest to do it that way, and so did I. So I got that from dada. You'll notice in this piece here I did not discriminate. Whatever my hands came to, I put it in there. If you can observe, here is an old shoe, a shovel --

MASON

An umbrella.

PURIFOY

See the shovel in the left-hand corner here? Right here? Here's a handkerchief or a scarf and more shoes, more shoes, and wood objects. I didn't have a

tendency-- The less I discriminated, the more successful I became in doing junk art.

MASON

Well, shoes are an object that reappears in your work. Like in these two totems, you have shoes and shoehorns, you know, and slippers.

PURIFOY

They were just accessible. That's what's available. I use anything that's available. I think that's part of the creative process, that you don't discriminate. I do more discriminating now than I ever did before.

MASON

I'm looking now at the show that you did with Bernie Casey, Betye Saar, John Outterbridge, and Benny Andrews, curated by Samella Lewis. You have an untitled metal sculpture with kind of an obvious sexual pun, I guess. I don't know. It's a kind of anthropomorphic shape. What were you trying to convey about sexuality in the piece, or what kind of ideas were you--? Because I was saying that a lot of your metal sculptures seem to stand on legs, which gives them a kind of anthropomorphic quality. So how are your metal sculptures--? I mean, besides the fact that you're blending the materials together through some process, you're-- [tape recorder off]

1.8. TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE ONE (SEPTEMBER 22, 1990)

PURIFOY

That piece of sculpture, incidentally, Alonzo [Davis] sent it to San Francisco, I believe to participate in some kind of metal exhibit.

MASON

We're still talking about the untitled metal sculpture with the phallic symbol or penis attached to it, in the show by Samella [Lewis] .

PURIFOY

Well, I went through a period where I did a lot of them. I did some four-foot penises all juxtaposed. They never got shown, however, but I did them anyhow, papier-mâché and whatnot. They were real, you know, actually real, four feet tall and ten inches in diameter. I think those are the first things that I did with some idea of self-expression. Usually, I didn't look at art as self-expression. I didn't give a damn. I keep repeating that my object was to utilize art as a vehicle to gain my self-certainty. But doing those large penises, and projecting the one on that piece of sculpture that you're looking at, was a discovery of something about me I've been saying all the time. This was an introspective exploration of an attempt to improve one's inner self. I learned that I was sexually precocious, and it becomes evident in my long spiel about my childhood. If there's anything in art that connects with my childhood, it's when I

got the nerve to express myself in this way, with these large penises. But it was many years after that--after making those pieces--that I had the opportunity to actually express myself in a more profound physical way. One who's sexually precocious turns out to be-- whether he or she knows it or not--erotic. So I spent a lot of time thinking about my eroticism and trying to overcome, in one way or another, what rode on top of it, religion and Christianity. There was no getting it off through art, which I can testify to. I did not receive any great, lasting gratification from doing art. While I was doing it I was thoroughly gratified, but that's what's contagious about art: you just have to keep doing it to receive the same gratification. That's what becomes addictive. However, when I discovered I was precocious, I looked around for such a person who was also precocious, with the idea of signing a contract. This was the way in which I overcame my sexual precociousness, if that's the right expression. It wasn't through art.

MASON

When you say "signing a contract," you mean an actual marriage contract?

PURIFOY

A verbal contract.

MASON

Oh, okay.

PURIFOY

A verbal contract. A verbal contract, like "just describe to me what satisfies you, and I'll describe to you what satisfies me, and let's make an exchange." Two years of that enabled me to overcome. I was going to pornographic movies up till then.

MASON

Yeah, well, there was a lot of that in the sixties. You know, the free love period and a lot of people exploring their sexuality. Did you think that you were somehow different from those people?

PURIFOY

I didn't know about those people. I just knew about me. I didn't know why they were doing it. But I most certainly took advantage of it. Being the person that I am, though, I can't take advantage of a situation without compensating for it. At [University of California] Santa Cruz, I was thrown in a hotbed of young females, so I took advantage of the opportunity, but not without paying it back, paying something back in return.

MASON

You mean to them or to society?

PURIFOY

To them, to them directly. Being that, you know, "I'm available to you anytime you need a shoulder to cry on. What are you unhappy about?" Things like that.

Despite my overtness, I experienced some high spiritual times during that time where communication was phenomenal. Like an experience I've never had before or since, where you don't have to say words to communicate. We really were utilizing art at the time to create a process to communicate with. And it was extremely profound. I can't begin to describe how phenomenal a human being we became. I did not think it was possible. It's just like getting religion. I described the [episode of] Father Divine and the quest for getting religion. Well, I finally got it, but not in a Christ-like way, another kind of way that I wasn't familiar with whatsoever. It's when one soul talks to another and not a word is said, a phenomenal state of being. I enjoyed that for a long, long time, three or four years.

MASON

This is when you were still having the oceanic experience, or was that a part of it?

PURIFOY

I don't know if that was before or after. I think it was afterward. It was a spillover into-- That was the aftermath of the oceanic experience, I'm pretty sure, because I'd already had the Watts experience, so the oceanic experience phenomenon came during the Watts period.

MASON

Do you feel like that was the first step, maybe, in getting in touch with who you were or who you wanted to be?

PURIFOY

It was confirmed. It was confirmation. It was the absolute certainty that I not only was the person that I admired most, but I was indestructible and I would live forever. I really believed that. But my life-style implied that I was already not of this world, so to speak, although indulging in everything common to the world, like drinking, smoking, and having sex. But it was done on a rather high level of spiritual communication. Like alcohol was an ally.

MASON

You say it was an ally?

PURIFOY

Uh-huh. I drank a fifth a day for twenty years. It did not make me addicted because I quit cold turkey three years ago, three or four years ago, five, drinking and smoking. I just started back smoking yesterday. I have a glass of wine occasionally, great wine. You can buy it for a dollar a bottle here, and it's great wine.

MASON

But it's not Thunderbird, right?

PURIFOY

Oh, no. It's great wine, blanc de blanc.

MASON

I asked you about Freudian symbols in your work, like the shoe and those things, which sometimes can be construed as Freudian fetish objects.

PURIFOY

No, no, no. I never looked at a shoe as a fetish or a phallic symbol. No, never. Shoes are a black man's fetish.

MASON

Why?

PURIFOY

I don't know.

MASON

But I mean, what makes you feel that?

PURIFOY

Well, it's a fact. It's not what I feel, it's a fact that shoes-- He can have on overalls, you know, but his shoes are patent-leather shined. And Stacey Adams. You know, he may not have the next meal, but he's going to have some Stacey Adams shoes. That is not generally known, but that's fact, that's a fact. Having been born in rural USA, I would know.

MASON

You were saying before that you had at some point gone beyond Freud .

PURIFOY

Yeah, I'd rather go with Carl Jung. He's more dependable than Sigmund Freud when it comes to symbols. But I don't go for either one of them, because I just never dug symbols. If I use them, it's unconscious. I know they're important in art, but I just didn't go for it. That's a funny way of communicating. I don't know if everybody understands what a symbol means. You have to be highly intelligent, and I wasn't speaking to intelligent people through my art. I was trying to get black folks to buy it .

MASON

The two are mutually exclusive? [laughter] Okay, is there any more you want to say about the [University of California, Santa Cruz] Cowell College teaching experience? Did you say you wanted to say something about Beatrice Thompson?

PURIFOY

Who?

MASON

Beatrice Thompson.

PURIFOY

No.

MASON

Okay. Then you came to a point where you stopped being involved in the arts and-- No, actually we should talk about something before that. I wanted to talk about the black art shows in the sixties and the galleries just overall. What role do you think that the Brockman Gallery and Suzanne Jackson's gallery. Gallery 32, and Samella Lewis's Contemporary Crafts gallery--? Do you think they really had a significant impact on either your career or the career of any black artists, in terms of showing people that weren't well known or just giving black artists an outlet? You said that the Watts Towers [Arts Center] was one outlet for black artists to show.

PURIFOY

One thing I didn't strive for while I was an artist was reputation. I didn't want, I didn't need a reputation as an artist, except to let it be known that I was in fact an artist. And I repeat, art was a vehicle. So the black artists' galleries, Alonzo [Davis's Brockman Gallery], in particular, did not help my career. You know, I wasn't concerned about a career in art . That ' s when I dropped out. However, he gave me an opportunity to express myself through that one-man show. *Niggers Ain ' t Gonna Never [Ever] Be Nothin' [All They Want To Do Is Drink + Fuck]* . I wanted to do that very badly. And visual arts is somewhat like performing arts: once you get an idea you have to implement it, and you need an audience to tell you if you were on the track or not. So that's what that exhibit did for me, and he made his gallery accessible to me for that show. However, I'd shown there several times before in group showings. But Alonzo was quite particular about who exhibited there. We showed things at the Watts Summer Festivals that nobody else would show, including Alonzo.

MASON

Like what?

PURIFOY

Like church art.

MASON

What's that?

PURIFOY

Folk art. You know. Things that people do for church decoration. We called it art, but Alonzo wouldn't touch it with a ten- foot pole. But we'd show it. We'd show anything you bring us and show it a very prestigious way. I would have to say that the festival linked itself to overall community art more than any other particular entity. I don't take credit for that so much as I attribute it to Tommy Jaquette. To put on the Watts Summer Festivals every year for nine consecutive years, at which time I participated with the art exhibits-- He had to beg me every time, because I was busy doing other things, but every time I'd break down and do it. There was no pay, but we made these sacrifices in order to do the festivals. So we were the major outlet. We went to schools and encouraged

teachers to have students produce things for us for the-- I'd talk to artists every day, "Do something professional. Do something unique." They just rallied around. Everybody participated, except a few like Curtis didn't.

MASON

You mean Curtis Tann?

PURIFOY

No, people like that didn't participate, but everybody else did. Everybody participated. And a few years we took in some art from out of the community, too, as well, black and white. What else did I want to say about the festivals? It was usually six days. And we had problems in Watts because of the riots. Nobody wanted to come to Watts anymore. So we had to promise them if they'd come they'd be safe. In order to make sure they were safe there in the area where we were displaying, at the Will Rogers [State Historic] Park auditorium, I stood there eight hours a day, six days during the week, and made sure there was order. All I had to do was turn my head and whatever was happening stopped happening. We had absolute order in the auditorium. People who were afraid to go to their cars, we would escort them to their cars and make sure that they were not harmed. Because black people were desperate, you know. They'd just come up to you and say, "Give me your money," you know, "and let's don't have no bones about it." And the cheapest way out is to give them your money. So naturally, people didn't want to come, and we had to promise them that they'd be safe. So we had good attendance, and we sold quite a bit of stuff. As curator, we took 10 percent--that's all--of everything sold.

MASON

Did you show your own work out there?

PURIFOY

Oh, absolutely, absolutely. Yeah, I showed "[66] Signs of Neon" for several years. It was a wonderful experience. I don't regret at all participating in the Watts Summer Festivals. It gave me a good feeling that I could do that and I could create order where there was no order. Absolute order, I mean. I felt good that I could command that of the Watts audience. They had respect for us, for the artists, because--

MASON

Well, you knew most of the young people.

PURIFOY

We were doing good. We were doing good things.

MASON

Did you ever show at Suzanne Jackson's gallery or Samella Lewis's gallery?

PURIFOY

There wasn't enough time. She [Jackson] was only open a year. It was a nice, clean gallery, but small. But a clean, beautiful structure, nice building, whatnot.

MASON

What about the other black art shows? Like "A Panorama of Black Artists" at the [Los Angeles] County Museum [of Art] in 1972 and ["Contemporary Black Artists of America"] at the Whitney [Museum of American Art] in '71. How did you feel about participating in those shows when there was so much political controversy around the black arts show and what is black art and--?

PURIFOY

I'm afraid I wasn't there in spirit. I'm sorry, I just wasn't there. A lot of things that bother other people didn't bother me. I was protected in one way or another from all the trauma connected with denial and rejection. It didn't faze me. I was busy. I was very busy. The peace of mind that involvement brings is just phenomenal. I haven't been at that place before or since. So I was not there half the time, or half the time I was gone somewhere else, cloud nine or someplace. I was just having a ball. Life was good. I was exactly where I wanted to be, doing exactly what I wanted to do. Absolute freedom.

MASON

Then you said you did some protest pieces then, because--

PURIFOY

Yeah, it was tongue-in-cheek, because other guys were doing-- It's just like now. I did *Tar and Feathers*, that's one I wanted to mention. That's not complete. The feathers on it there--

MASON

Okay, in the slide.

PURIFOY

The pillow hangs off of it, so it's not complete in that shot. But I did *Tar and Feathers* with no serious thought of protest. Now, it's expected that a collection as big as mine of a hundred pieces is supposed to have one protest piece.

MASON

Because you're black.

PURIFOY

Yeah. Or something. [laughter] So *Barrel and Plow* was kind of like a protest piece, but not serious. I've done one as recently as a couple of weeks ago, but only because I was reading about David Hammond and his escapades.

MASON

What were you reading about?

PURIFOY

Well, the Malcolm X thing.

MASON

The Black Emergency Cultural Coalition that was going on in New York in the seventies, his connection with that? Or something more recent?

PURIFOY

No, it's the article you read.

MASON
Oh, in *Art in America*?

PURIFOY
Yeah.

MASON
Oh, okay. No, I just saw it. I didn't read it.

PURIFOY
Oh, okay. It's a great article. David permeates the whole book. They've got his picture in there this time. I didn't think David would ever get old like me, but he did. He finally got old. Suzanne never got old.

MASON
Suzanne Jackson?

PURIFOY
Uh-huh. She looks just like she always did, beautiful. I saw her last summer, I guess.

MASON
But you never did any protest pieces in the sixties or seventies.

PURIFOY
Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes.

MASON
Oh, okay. What--?

PURIFOY
I did lots of them.

MASON
Okay, what did they look like? Well, could you talk about the ones that you mentioned. *Tar and Feathers* and *Burial Ground*, and how they're protest pieces, and then how they relate back to the ones that you were doing in the sixties and the seventies, or if they do at all.

PURIFOY
Protest is protest. You have to develop a theme that strikes people. Something that's current and recognizable by all. Like Malcolm X, everybody knows Malcolm X--that's what David did. They eat it up. But I want to say something about protest art in general: protest art is probably one of the highest expressions of sentiment or deep feeling. So if art is about feeling, then protest art is legitimate. But I don't think one who has nothing to protest should do protest art. I have nothing to protest. I have less now than I ever did. I am not angry about anything. I promised everyone that I would resolve my anger, and I did, and therefore I have no need to do protest art. I think protest art falls just short of the creative process, just slightly short. It's identical with political art, as expressed by Cuba and other countries at large-- just a little bit short of the

creative process. I'm interested in the application of the creative process. Not the thing itself, the application of it. And the application of the creative process does not include protest or hostility. There's nothing in the pure creative process that's hostile. It has no extremes. It's neither hot or cold. It's not either angry or pleased. It just is. That's what the creative process is about. So when you do protest art and call it creative, in a sense it is creative, because you think of something that strikes somebody as being the truth, and that's supposed to be creativity. But there's creativity and there's creativity. There's lord and god and master. They all have their separate places, but one is higher than the other one, and one's lower than the other two. So in pure creativity-- Which is what I'm interested in, it was applicable to me. It resolved my basic problem. Then it did not include protest. Protest falls just slightly off the creative process, so to me it's undesirable. I only do it to get rid of my prejudice. That's the only reason I do it. If you make a life's work out of that, you're the one who suffers, not your public. I've been wanting to say that a long time. [laughter] I finally got it out. I would get a lot of opposition when the average black person says, "Look around and see how often you're discriminated [against] . Can you go to this golf club over here, or can you go to the White House and do this and that? Just look around you, boy, and you'll find reason to do protest art or protest in some overt manner." I have to agree with them, but I don't have to do it if I don't feel it. If I've transcended it, then I think I need some applause for that, but I don't expect it from a hostile public that gets its kicks out of seeing other people hurt. I might take that back. I'd take some of it back, but not all of it. If the public encourages protest art because it makes somebody feel bad and guilty, I think there should be other means by which to solve that problem and not use art to do it with. And keep it clean, uncontaminated, as is, for our posterity, for our children that are coming along. They need to resort to something that's uncontaminated. There's nothing left but art. It's the cleanest discipline we've got or ever had. You'll notice the profound philosophers of our times and any times refuse to analyze art. Even the Freudians don't do it.

MASON

Well, Freud tried to do it. I mean, he wrote his essay on da Vinci and--

PURIFOY

Tell me about that. I'm not aware of that.

MASON

I haven't read it.

PURIFOY

I'm not aware of it. I'm not aware of it.

MASON

It kind of spawned a whole movement in art history to try to psychoanalyze the artist through particular symbols in his work. And it usually--

PURIFOY

Not the artist's art. The artist and art are different.

MASON

Right, exactly. [laughter] That's where they get into trouble.

PURIFOY

I don't know anybody who'd choose to analyze art but me. I've spent \$10 million of the state's money trying to do it, and it was premature. I'd rather say it can't be done, because it has to be analyzed to be utilized.

MASON

Well, what criteria would you use to analyze art, exactly?

PURIFOY

Art itself. The art process consisting of the discipline, and the discipline of art is nothing more than what makes art. It has its own rules. You make art this way. You deal with vertical or horizontal lines, you deal with baselines. Then you're dealing with this or that. You're dealing with ground lines, you're dealing with organic shapes, or what are you dealing with? You use that to analyze art and to understand to what extent it 's applicable to human beings or to what extent human beings are governed by these processes, or affected, for that matter. You've heard people say, you know, "I don't know what it is, but I know what I like." That's for lack of knowledge of the art process. This applicability is my concern, but it has to be structured first before it's applicable. We spent most of our time trying to see to what extent it was applicable to learning and teaching.

MASON

This is when you were teaching at Cowell College and Immaculate Heart College and the other places?

PURIFOY

Well, I was trying to implement it, but it was at the California Arts Council that I had money to research.

MASON

What happened then in your hiatus, when you stopped making art?

PURIFOY

Well, I was trying to use my degree in social service administration--to use all of my education--to see if art would be applicable to mental health. To what extent it was we still don't know. I convinced my agency how if they were going to use therapy on black people, they should make it short-term, because black people cannot utilize long-term anything. I mean poor people, not black people.

MASON

Did you try to work with a particular program that was already in place there?

PURIFOY

No, I created it.

MASON
You created it, okay.

PURIFOY
We created art and drama, art and visual arts.

MASON
So during the same period you went to Cornell [University], then, to work as an artist in residence, in 1973.

PURIFOY
No, that's a misprint.

MASON
Okay, when did you go to Cornell?

PURIFOY
I never have been.

MASON
Oh, I'm sorry. That's in your resume there. Okay, so when you were at the Central City Community Mental Health Facility, were you working with the same kinds of people you were working with at the other mental health institution?

PURIFOY
In Cleveland?

MASON
Yeah.

PURIFOY
No. No, they weren't the same kind of mental health-- Mental deficiency is one thing when acquired, but another thing when you're born with it. We were dealing with hydrocephalics and--

MASON
I'm sorry. What kind of people?

PURIFOY
Mental deficiencies in young children. But that's different from mental deficiency that's acquired through trauma.

MASON
You said you're not sure what came out of it exactly.

PURIFOY
I'm not what?

MASON
You're not sure what came out of it. You're not sure whether any of your programs were successful there, is that what you were saying? In other words, when you left, you felt like you left in the middle of something, or did you feel like you had done what you set out to do when you had started?

PURIFOY

No. There weren't enough knowledgeable people there to implement the program. It turned out to be just a social service program that dealt with social problems, not mental problems. We had drawing, dance, drama, and whatnot. A program to pass the time. Nobody got well.

MASON

What about your own self and your own development during that time?

PURIFOY

Well, I got a big charge out of using all of my resources directed at one specific task. I was able to apply my social service degree, my acquisition of social service, as well as my knowledge about psychiatry and psychology, as the case was, as well as my knowledge about art. It all went together easily in my own mind. But to implement a program around it, you need people who are also knowledgeable and believe in the idea. That wasn't practical. They weren't willing to hire eligible, qualified people. So it just became that I was another social worker, doing the job of a social worker, that's sitting at a big desk in a big office, waiting till somebody had a complaint. We got the implication that it would work, and by now we know that it works, that art is therapeutic, but there's still some kinks in it. We still aren't certain about art as therapy. There are too many doubters, doubtful Toms, who believe in a direct approach not an indirect approach to mental health.

1.9. TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE TWO (SEPTEMBER 22, 1990)

PURIFOY

Now, what my input was-- We had weekly meetings of staff people to receive input about one patient or another. My beef was that you were educated in the white institution where they told you that psychotherapy works on people. But with all your knowledge about psychotherapy, you know that a person with some kind of schizophrenia would have to go years and years before he had any signs of getting well. But black people have a short attention span--that's what I was trying to convey to you--and they cannot use long-term therapy. They'll go crazier. You're just making them crazier. Well, after talking four years of that, I finally got through that they needed a short-term program. They eliminated the hospital beds, and they started really to work seriously about getting people well. That's what my input did. That was the level on which I was effective, but no other. When I left, I just fell out of touch, because I was into something else. I don't know what they're doing there now or what they did over the years. I really don't know, but I derived a great deal of gratification from the experiment.

MASON

How long was it before you felt that you were able to go back and look at it in the way that you 're explaining it now? You said that you derived gratification from it, but now you 're saying that when you look back on it there were a lot of problems.

PURIFOY

Well, I don't harbor problems. I find solutions. That's what I'm good at. You see, I was looking for a vehicle by which I could find ways to use art as a tool to change people. When I couldn't do it at Central City, I joined up with the state arts council, and there we designed programs that attempted to integrate the arts into the learning process.

MASON

You were a chair of the art in education subcommittee? What kind of programs did you try to design? Who were some of the people that you worked with there? Just how did it work? How did the commission work when you were there?

PURIFOY

Well, I remember sitting up nights when I first got on the program in 1975. I think it was '75 or early '76. Eloise Smith--Page [Smith] 's wife, whom I have referred to, from Cowell College at [University of California] Santa Cruz--was made director at the same time I became a member of the council. Governor [Edmund G. "Jerry"] Brown [Jr.] had reorganized the council to include artists only. We had nine members, and we were all artists. Among them were Gary Snyder and Peter Coyote, with whom I sat to design a battery of programs for the arts council. Outstanding among the programs that I participated in designing were programs that heretofore had not been heard of funded by an arts council. They were called "Artists in Communities," "Artists in Schools," and "Artists in Social Institutions." We actually placed artists in these institutions and schools and communities to work directly with the community, with people, with students and so forth. There were three separate programs that I participated in designing. A fourth program had to do with alternatives in education. Attached to it was a research component where the object was to explore the possibility that art can be integrated into the subject matter. It was called "Integration and Correlation of Art Through Education." This was the fourth entity, in addition to "Artists in Schools," "Artists in Communities," and "Artists in Social Institutions." To go back a ways, to explain more clearly what these programs meant, was that we actually put artists in prisons and social institutions to work directly with prisoners. The results were phenomenal, particularly in prisons. At present these programs still exist. They were done twelve, fifteen years ago.

MASON

What were the artists supposed to do in prison?

PURIFOY

Well, the artists were supposed to attempt to integrate or correlate the art into whatever was happening, the process. In the case of drama, the problem that the institution was facing was what we created the drama around and in what we enabled the inmates to participate. Now, this was done reasonably successfully in the prisons, but in schools there was seldom the application of art to education. It was art in education, not art as education. The differences are that art in education is art paralleled with education. You teach art and then you teach education. Art as education is that you teach them simultaneously. We made this distinction, but the artists were never really able to apply the latter, art as education, integration, and correlation, into the ABCs. "Artists in Communities" was reasonably successful, between "Artists in Schools" and "Artists in Social Institutions." The program was fashioned much around what we did in Watts. We designed programs that put the problem in the streets. Put it where it belongs, where everybody can see it. We designed art projects like murals and whatnot, subject matter relative to what was going on and what needed to be solved as a problem. So it was reasonably successful, and they still use murals as a media. These are the three basic programs, funded each year to the tune of several million dollars--not each, but in toto, all together. The last word I got was these programs were worth a million dollars or so. This fourth program was a research project. It was an extensive project that had artists in schools, just like in the "Artists in Schools" program, except there was a real serious attempt to integrate art into education, to teach them both at the same time. It is alleged that poor people--particularly black people— can learn quicker and better if art is integrated into the subject matter. Chicanos can. If you've got a problem-- a language problem-- it 's better to teach the language through art than directly. So this was actually going on in ten schools.

MASON

So you think it's--

PURIFOY

It's a research project which included ten schools.

MASON

Okay, but you don't-- You're saying that it's something that's racial? It's not just that kids learn better through art — it's that black kids learn better or Chicano kids learn better? Is that the distinction you're making?

PURIFOY

All kids learn better. All kids learn better. But some kids don't need-- Their intelligences are such that they don't need to have a tool through which to learn, other than learning itself, direct. Some kids learn better if the learning is indirect. In other words, if a kid hates school, doesn't like to come to school, he'll come to school if he's going to be in a play. Now, this play is teaching

about Lincoln, so he's learning history at the same time. That's integration. That's where it's integrated according to subject matter. This was done in the research projects but not generally in the other "Artists in School" programs. We would place, on an average, thirty to forty artists a year--new ones. The old ones could reapply for two consecutive years or three consecutive years, and then they'd have to drop out and let somebody else come in. So the money was well spent and still is being well spent, but it's most visible in institutions and prisons. The prisoners who utilize this program don't come back. It helps to overcome drugs and whatever.

MASON

What was the big problem with the schools? Why didn't the "Artists in Schools" project work? Were the schools resisting that kind of integration? Because before you were saying that they thought of it more as recreation.

PURIFOY

Well, generally, if the program was in a school, it needed a school-accepted program, because they have to pay part of the salary of the artist. They have to pay one-third of the cost of the artist's salary. So generally, there was one person or principal who was in favor of the program, but if the teachers aren't in favor of it you don't get any cooperation, the artists don't get the cooperation from the teachers. There's prejudice, discrimination, segregation, and ostracization. The artist is in strange territory. So they have to mend their way, use creative process, become one with the unit or with the teaching staff. So that's one reason it didn't work. The other reasons were that the artists needed to be oriented to the idea, because they weren't used to it. They oftentimes had never heard of integration and correlation of art into education. This should have been one of the criteria by which we selected the artists, but there were so few artists who even knew about education-- Till the program needed to have been revised, if not abandoned, in terms of what it was designed for. So it never reached its goal. And still, till today, it's not. In four years, we've used up all the money for the creative research project called "Alternatives in Education." We used up all the money in four years, and then we spent another year to collect the results and analyze the results and in supervising and so forth.

MASON

Did you publish the report, or was it just an internal document?

PURIFOY

We got reams of data. Publication? No. Because there were no results. The problem was that there is no testing method designed to determine if art in fact can be used as a tool for learning. One or two institutions attempted to design a tool that would test for integration, but they weren't sure. The variables were of such a nature that you create a great deal of uncertainty. So we could say that the program was premature. Not that the state squandered \$10 million. No, I

couldn't put that in the record, but I can say that since we designed that program, a lot of people have become convinced that we need something to encourage kids to come to school. So they turn from sports to art often, in many schools. Sports has served its purpose for a long time, but it's short-lived. The results are short-lived. Art has a more lasting potential to impress children that you in fact see something unique in the world every day, something you didn't see before, although you pass it daily. That's what art education teaches one to do, to see differently and to feel differently about what you see. To verbalize what you see in ways in which a listener can understand. Lots of kids can't do that even after finishing high school.

MASON

Well, you can see how important that is for kids growing up in places like Watts or other communities, because there's a place where visualizing things, looking at things, is definitely blunted or stunted because--

PURIFOY

[inaudible]

MASON

Yeah, that's true. I mean, you don't look at--

PURIFOY

You're taught.

MASON

Yeah, you don't look at these people, because you know this guy's a drug dealer, and you know you don't look at that interaction or you don't look at these buildings, because they're all burnt out, or you don't look at things because they're supposed to be ugly, and you're kind of tuned out .

PURIFOY

Even to a sunset. You know, like appreciation, teach art appreciation. But to what extent it's transferable is what our problem is. So we can teach a child all we want to about recognizing a Picasso or recognizing a Rembrandt and so forth, but how do you transfer that to enjoying a sunset? Looking at and appreciating a sunset is a far cry in a poor community and/or black one. The kids just don't learn to appreciate the simplest things because they can't see them. They're too busy with something else, whatever they're busy with.

[laughter]

MASON

Okay, one last question and I think we can stop for today, unless you have something to add. In this hiatus, when you weren't making any art, was that a conscious decision that you made or was it something that just happened because you felt like you were expressing yourself in a different role?

PURIFOY

That's a good question, because it gives me the opportunity to explain the reason why I was looking for another vehicle to see to what extent one single person can effect change in the large world that we live in. I thought I 'd found another vehicle other than art . I thought I'd found the California Arts Council as a vehicle through which I could be effective, communicate my ideas. It didn't work through art. At least it was premature through art. But I thought a more direct approach would be through a state arts council where they had money to design and implement programs. So I thought I had found my life's work. It was easy for me to give up art and never anticipate going back to that, because I could spend the rest of my life trying to find a means by which one can synthesize the left brain with the right brain and come up with some kind of profound concept about how people learn what they need to know to exist in the world. But after eleven years and \$10 million, this too I used up without fully realizing my objective to use art as a tool for learning, as a tool for change, as the case is, when you're not in school. I know how it helped me, so I figured I could pass this on. The council had the money to do it with, and I had the spiel to convince them that they ought to be doing it, they ought to allocate the money to do it with, which they did. We were satisfied that the idea is an excellent one. Somebody is going to do it one of these days, but while we were doing it, it was premature. Other people over the country were also experimenting with it, and some people in other countries were experimenting with the idea. But none were necessarily successful as such, profoundly successful, that is. It's such a wonderful idea that we are certain it will come to pass one day. The Rockefeller Foundation spent millions of dollars on the art in education concept. The foundation is spending moneys to determine to what extent art can be utilized for learning, but not as a tool necessarily. They have a program that's designed around art in education, parallel with, not taught at the same time, simultaneously. I think simultaneous teaching of art and education is a lot more effective than the parallel teaching of art and education, which I hope the [J. Paul] Getty [Trust] people will learn about at some time. That's why I came back to art. I had nowhere else to go after education. I am not particularly sure-- I mean, I'm not particularly-- Well, I can admit defeat on a level where I'm not struggling with the idea anymore. I'm not looking for a vehicle anymore. I'm closer to doing art for its own sake now than I ever was, although I don't believe in it as such, just because of circumstances. The people don't dig what I'm doing out here. You know, they don't like junk art. [laughter] So that makes me doing it for its own sake, because I can't look forward to selling it anywhere. But I'm at a place now where that-- I'm not serious at all. I'm not overly concerned about it.

MASON

Okay. Well, we can maybe talk more about that tomorrow .

1.10. TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE ONE (SEPTEMBER 23, 1990)

MASON

Today is Sunday, September 23, and I'm talking with Noah Purifoy. We just wanted to clean up a few loose ends before we start to talk about your move out to the desert. We want to talk a little more about the different organizations in Watts that sprang up in the sixties and how they were related to each other. And you want to talk more about Judson Powell.

PURIFOY

Yes. I wouldn't want this interview to end without emphasizing what an important role Judson Powell played in the projects we designed. I would also like to mention particularly Sue Welch, Lucille Krasne, and Debbie Brewer, who were participants in the project at Watts and the Watts Towers [Arts Center] . But particularly Judson, who went on to assist me in the finding and the management of "[66] Signs of Neon." As I stated yesterday, I believe, around 1968 or '69, the "Signs of Neon" exhibition actually no longer existed in the form in which we had been displaying it all those years prior. As a result of that, I had taken another job with the Central City Community [Mental] Health [Facility], and Judson Powell had gone on to try to create a community center in Compton called the [Communicative] Arts Academy, I believe. I didn't participate in any way in assisting Judson to design the project. I understood that he had inherited from some politician in Watts or someplace \$40,000 to design a community program. So he proceeded to do that. In the meantime, I started working for the California Arts Council, and Judson applied ultimately for funds to run his project. But because of the complicated system which is common with most bureaucratic agencies connected with the state government, we were unable to fund Judson 's project. I was very unhappy about that.

MASON

I was just wondering if you could explain a little more why he couldn't comply with the requirements for the funding.

PURIFOY

The most I could do in terms of assisting Judson to write a proper proposal was to advise him about the guidelines and the various components of a proposal, which were clear in our guidelines, stating precisely the kind of information one must provide in order to get a grant. Oftentimes people did not comply with this because they thought they had a better method of writing proposals, which wasn't the case. Because of this and other reasons, primarily reasons that had to do with our system of selecting proposals-- We had a committee to select proposals and reject proposals. The ones who complied with the guidelines more exactly were the ones that were granted, and the others were not granted from year to year. Now, because of this system we weren't able to

fund some worthy people, particularly blacks and Chicanos who had vital programs existing in the community, simply because they didn't have the sophistication necessary to write a proper proposal to get funds. This concerned me all the years I was on the council. As a result of that, a couple of years before I left--which was 1987 probably, '86, '87, into 1988--the council was trying to devise some means by which they could reduce the guidelines, or rather subdue the guidelines, to a point where black people and Chicanos who had vital programs could qualify. We tried for years to fund American Indian projects without any success. We even implored an American Indian on the staff to advise us, but we weren't able to get to those people. It ' s very unfortunate that the very people who need the assistance most have not been funded by the state arts council up to the time in which I left, which was 1987 or '88. Now, regarding projects in Watts-- Aside from Judson's project, which happened late in the seventies rather than the sixties, there was-- Westminster [Neighborhood Association] I believe is the name of the community agency which resembled Karamu House in Cleveland more than any other organization because it was socially welfare oriented, as well as an accompaniment of some art projects.

MASON

I'm sorry. What do you want to say about that?

PURIFOY

Socially oriented, meaning that they were concerned about the social and physical welfare of the people--and the financial welfare of the people--as well as the aesthetic welfare.

MASON

But weren't all the projects concerned in some way with that aspect of the community?

PURIFOY

No, no. The project that we had in Watts, the Watts Towers, was not specifically concerned about the welfare of the person in general. Our concern was the teaching of art and aesthetics, primarily. However, at heart we had strong feelings for the people, and we had projects that linked themselves to the well-being of the community, such as cleaning up the street, painting the houses, and being concerned about the next-door neighbor, as the case was. We were down on 107th Street, and we had neighbors next door and across the street and so forth. So we were all friendly and whatnot and shared what we had, but it wasn't a community project in the least.

MASON

Okay, so how did Westminster go beyond that?

PURIFOY

Well, Westminster was partially funded, I believe, by the state and the city. I'm not sure. But anyhow, they were kind of a social agency that had some art projects. Their emphasis was primarily on the social and physical welfare of the community rather than the aesthetics. But it resembled a community art project similar to the one that we had been familiar with in Cleveland, Karamu House.

MASON

Who was the director of Westminster?

PURIFOY

I don't recall who was the director at the time, but I think it still exists.

MASON

Now, what about Studio Watts?

PURIFOY

Well, Studio Watts was short-lived.

MASON

That was on Grandee Avenue.

PURIFOY

Yeah, yeah.

MASON

How far away?

PURIFOY

They emphasized drama more than the visual arts, drama and poetry more than the visual arts, as the case was. You asked me earlier about to what extent these organizations cooperated with each other. We didn't. I want to mention a few. There were more, there were a lot more, but I don't recall them at the moment. There was little or no coming together except during the festivals from 1966 till 1970. Each year all of them would participate in the Watts Summer Festival. So that was the time that all the organizations came together to make one large one-week-long event for the community.

MASON

I was saying the other day that I was confused about the different Watts festivals, how your Watts festival that you had over in Will Rogers [State Historic Park] auditorium was different from or connected with the festival we associate now with the Watts Towers jazz festival. Well, the Watts Towers Music and Arts Festival.

PURIFOY

Maybe it will become more clear if we could separate the various events in terms of years. In the sixties, that was a time for the annual yearly festivals ultimately managed and implemented by Tommy Jacquette. The other major component, the art component, was managed by me, with the assistance of Judson Powell and others. Those were the only events happening in Watts in the sixties. There were no other public events, events that involved all the

people. In the seventies, when John Outterbridge became director of the Watts Towers Arts Center, he started, I believe--I'm not certain--the drum festivals, etc., the music festivals in general. This was taking place in the seventies on the premises at the Watts Towers . Now, the summer festivals were given at the Will Rogers Park, so these were two separate facilities that were frequented by the people and whose setting would lend itself to these events. So again, the Watts Summer Festivals in the sixties were at the Will Rogers Park. The art exhibitions were at the Will Rogers Park auditorium, and nothing else was happening in the sixties of consequence. These very small organizations would all come together, as we said earlier, and participate in the festival, but they themselves were not giving a community event, an event that involved the community. No special organization in Watts at the time or anywhere nearby was giving any special events, except the summer festivals. In the seventies, John Outterbridge had begun the music festivals, and there are no summer festivals now taking place at Will Rogers Park. There were just the music festivals in Watts in the seventies and eighties. Those are the only public events that I can recall at the moment. They were separated by years more than by events. They did not come together at any one time because they were given at different times.

MASON

I wanted to ask you how you would account for this kind of art boom in the sixties, or the kind of arts explosion in the sixties, where there were all these art projects going on and your projects using art to educate people, whereas it seems in the fifties things were a lot quieter and artists were kind of underground and sort of suspect. I'm wondering if that's your perception of things, and, if so, how would you account for that transition?

PURIFOY

I understand your question to be asking why all these art projects in Watts particularly. Is that what you're asking?

MASON

Well, yeah. A lot of them were in Watts, but just the whole California Arts Council. That started in the mid-sixties. Then there were things going on in other cities, in Chicago and New York. But especially in Los Angeles, there seemed to be more of a boom in the sixties, whereas the fifties seemed to be a little more quiet. Do you think there were just more artists here working or — ?

PURIFOY

No, I don't think that was the case. I think we just came out of the woodwork. We were back there somewhere doing something. But I think as a result of the nationwide riot having started in Los Angeles, in Watts, and then spreading over the country, it made people in Los Angeles and the vicinity feel guilty sooner than the people in other cities as the result of the events, particularly

connected with discrimination and segregation. I believe that art became a boom because people were feeling guilty about their isolation and estrangement from each other in general . I sincerely believe the riots brought on those kinds of feelings in people in general, particularly in Los Angeles, if not the whole state of California. As a result of their feelings, I imagine they said to themselves, "I want to do something." In fact, I've heard this echoed often during the holocaust and those times in the sixties. "I would just like to do something," they would say. These are mostly white people talking. So they came from Beverly Hills and here and thither, all over the place, to Watts to do something, bringing their skills with them. And the result was the Watts Towers Arts Center, as the case was. People came from everywhere to help us do what we were doing, whatever it was we were doing. I have snapshots of crowds of people on that one little street involved in carrying food for the kids that were doing the work and all that. I think they just felt guilty that they had been so separated from what was going on in the community at large. They just thought they'd come and participate or see if they could. So as I said, they brought their skills with them and corralled us, so to speak, and started a lot of projects. I can't think of any projects that didn't involve a goodly number of volunteers that came from outside to offer their assistance as well as dollars, moneys to assist in the development of programs. I think this was evident all over the country. When I was in Washington, D.C., with the "Signs of Neon," at the Gallery of Modern Art, I experienced the identical same thing, persons wanting to utilize art to demonstrate their feelings for each other, so to speak. As I said before in a previous interview, I was asked to develop some projects there in Washington, D.C., because they too have had a lot of debris as results of the rioting there. So I think that comes pretty close to my opinion regarding why the upsurge of art. It's just that I think that during hard times we turn to the aesthetics as relief, and rightly so. It was extremely violent times in Watts, but maybe-- I don't know what would have happened if we had not had the art projects and whatnot- -to what extent the people getting involved might have prevented further crime . I don ' t know. I really don't know. I know that Watts was slow in building itself back up. Even till this day. Watts is still a blighted community, so to speak. You didn't ask me what resulted from the efforts, but if you were to ask me what were the results of the tremendous effort that was poured into that community during the riot-- Although I was there, I could not tell you, because I don't know what would have happened if we had not had it. I know we involved a few people-- considering the large population--that otherwise would have had nothing to do, the drama class, for instance. Those kids were just ripe for some kind of mischief. But as a result of Steve Kent working with the kids and all, we not only got them to participate in drama, we encouraged them to go back to school or stay in school, as the case was. So

those are just little things that happened as results of the riot, I'd say, and as a result of people coming to give a hand .

MASON

You also wanted to mention your trip to Africa, to the arts festival, in the late seventies.

PURIFOY

Yeah. As early as 1975, I would say, I started getting communications from what was called FESTAC. I've forgotten what FESTAC means. It means something in particular [World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture]. I have some literature on it, but it's not available right at the moment. To anticipate a trip to Africa was a little confusing, to say the least. However, during the course of two years, I received correspondence from FESTAC, located in Washington [D.C.] and New York, I think. I complied with every request, meaning that you have to submit certain slides of your work and you have to have certain health certificates and you have to submit birth certificates. You have to submit a whole bunch of things when they take a responsibility for you going to a foreign country. I complied with every request, always with a degree of trepidation. What I mean by that is I had seen one too many Tarzan pictures with black people with large disk lips and spears and shields and whatnot. Savages, so to speak. I didn't want to go to Africa to see that. I was hoping I wouldn't see that if I went to Africa, and yet a free trip to Africa was something you just couldn't afford to turn down. So I just sat down and made every effort to qualify, and finally the day came when they asked us to meet up in San Francisco and board a plane from there to New York and to Spain and then to Africa. I had already shipped my stuff ahead of me--that is, my art work that I was going to display. And I had a companion [Ann Noriega] , also, who had become eligible for the trip. We boarded a plane in San Francisco. I don't recall quite how we got from Los Angeles to San Francisco, but anyhow we boarded a plane and headed for New York.

MASON

Do you remember which pieces you sent over there?

PURIFOY

No. No, I don't remember. I don't think they asked for more than two. I sent two pieces, I think. But the pieces I liked, you know. In 1977 I wasn't doing art then, so I didn't have anything new that I'd done that year or the year before, but I still had some pieces around decent enough to send to Africa. We were not the first artists to arrive in Africa. There were several other planeloads of people. I think the plane that we were aboard could carry up to a hundred people, I'm not sure. But the total number of people at the festival in Africa was several hundred, coming on two ships at two different times from all over the world. They were supposed to be all black people, but they weren't all black

people. When I arrived in Africa, I was amazed to find that Nigeria looked just like Los Angeles! They carted us to a compound already designed for us to live in, and they were apartment houses made of concrete, one-room structures with a bath and all. Some of them were incomplete, but nevertheless they were fairly comfortable. Except for the heat. I doubt seriously if I got more than two or three hours of sleep per night, because there was no air-conditioning in the apartments. Because there were so many people there from all over the world, it was a total involvement. The people who were supposed to take charge were not always present, so there were many times when I had to make plans on my own to get to see what I wanted to see. I was mostly interested in their art and education, so I visited the university and the museums. Those were places I went on my own. But FESTAC had a big arena where everybody met every day. That's where the exhibits were, and that's where the people came to discuss different ideas and things like that. It was a great experience.

MASON

You said you went to museums and then there were these discussions. I'm just wondering if there was any particular thing that stands out in your mind when you went to the museum. I guess in Lagos [Nigeria], you know, was there a particular piece of artwork or anything like that that stood out in your mind or in these discussions that took place among all of these artists? Was there a particular issue or a certain discussion that maybe kept coming up that everybody was interested in or that struck you?

PURIFOY

Unfortunately, I don't have my notes with me or some literature I brought back from Africa. I brought a whole bunch of film back, a lot of data on the events that occurred. But the answer to your question is yes, there's one thing that stuck out in my mind most of all, and it didn't have anything to do with art. It had to do with politics. FESTAC was highly politically oriented. In fact, the commander, the potentate, the high chief, you know, would come on the premises of this big arena and lecture to us, because we were asked to come at a certain time of day two or three times, we were asked to all come together. The first night we were there we came together to sit in this big auditorium. Although I didn't fully understand the emphasis that was placed on the politics, it was purely political. FESTAC was designed for that idea. It's to isolate, separate black people from white people, and through this separation demonstrate that black people constitute a greater population in the world than white people and that they- -black people- -can become leaders of the world. That was the overtone of FESTAC. That was what I interpreted. It was a political event.

MASON

So it was something to foster black nationalism or maybe black internationalism or something.

PURIFOY

Yeah, that's the way it felt to me. But I admit that I didn't thoroughly understand it, because I wasn't interested in politics, neither then or now. That's an interesting question, though. I never said it to anybody because it was of little concern to me, but those were the overtones .

MASON

But even in spite of that, I mean, was everything--? You said you got to do some things on your own, so everything wasn't orchestrated.

PURIFOY

Was not orchestrated?

MASON

Yeah, because you said you got to do some things just through errors. You got to do some things.

PURIFOY

Well, I didn't get to go to some major events that occurred, like some parties that were given at certain people's houses that were recognized in the community and all that. But I did go and visit some community people and saw the condition in which they were living, in little huts and whatnot, just like in the movies. You know, that's the kind of condition in which some of them were living out in the rural communities. I marveled at how healthy the community looked, but when I started visiting the homes of some of the people I learned that they hide their cripples. They don't permit them to come out in public, and that's why everybody looked so healthy. I would come out there- -

MASON

You mean it's just for the festival.

PURIFOY

No. They hide them. They hide them all the time. They're ashamed of the cripples. So when I went to these villages, there they were, hobbling about. It's just like anywhere else you go. In appearance the communities look healthy and vital, but they had their health problems just like everyone else.

MASON

So your interpretation was that Nigeria was trying to promote itself as the leader of black people all over the world.

PURIFOY

I got that feeling. I really got that feeling, because they had just struck oil and there was evidence of money all over the place. They had started to build a hospital and for some reason stopped. All the exotic and costly equipment was lying out exposed to the weather. I was unhappy about seeing that. Acres of equipment. Beds, you know, exotic beds that do funny things, fold up in the

middle and all that. That bothered me a great deal, because it just indicated the absence of management. I didn't see a single white person in management in all of Nigeria. Not a single one. If I saw one, he was some type of mechanic or something, dealing with some complicated instruments that otherwise they actually didn't have the skills.

MASON

So was that good or bad that there were no white people in management positions?

PURIFOY

I can't comment whether it was good or bad, because I didn't try to determine whether it was good and bad. My impression was, "Good, they got rid of them." But when I saw the waste, underneath that waste was poor management. I said, "If the presence of white people means good management, they need to get back a few to get this city on the road, because this is absolute waste." Millions of dollars worth of equipment just deteriorating in the sun. They stopped building the hospital for some reason or another. Generally, though, my stay in Africa was extremely pleasant. The communications with the people there were superb. I saw the resemblance of my whole family, immediate family unit. Women that looked just like my sisters and men that looked just like my brothers. "I know where I come from now," I thought. "I come from somewhere around Nigeria, because the people look so much like me, flat head and all." [laughter] I was more than pleased with the general demeanor and deportment and behavior, I've been in an auditorium where there was a row of kids twenty or thirty deep, and one adult has only to turn around and look and they're all as quiet as a mouse. Every adult is a parent in Africa, and every child belongs to the community. So since I must have been in my early sixties in 19-- No, in my late fifties in 1977 —

MASON

Sixties.

PURIFOY

No, I was in my sixties. I was looked upon as a father person. After dark I was carted to beer joints and had beer bought for me all evening. Some person who looked upon me as a father person and would hang around me all day the next day to see if I would drop a few words of wisdom and so forth. I didn't necessarily encourage that, but it was interesting to observe it and experience it.

MASON

Does any of this experience come out in your later work? Either an object that you picked up there, maybe, or some relationship?

PURIFOY

No. I brought some ebony back, chips of ebony wood, a big block of ebony wood. I carted it all the way back to America, six thousand miles. And a club.

MASON

I'm sorry, a — ?

PURIFOY

A club. You know, an adz type of hammer, a stick that an adz fits in, where they chop wood and fasten wood. Those are the only two souvenirs I brought back. But I could have brought back a whole population of Africans who wanted to live in America. It seems like every African wants to come to America. There were some youths from Chad--which is not far from Nigeria--and they were having a little war there, and they didn't want to go home. They wanted to stay in Nigeria or come home with me, as the case was. [laughter] I didn't develop any lifelong friends of this sort visiting Africa, but it certainly turned my life around, because ultimately I knew the source of my identity. And the Tarzan pictures that I've seen, I will lay them to rest, because Africa is as fully civilized as the rest of the world.

1.11. TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE TWO (SEPTEMBER 23, 1990)

MASON

Did you use the ebony wood and the club in your work?

PURIFOY

Uh-huh.

MASON

Which pieces did you use that in?

PURIFOY

I can't remember specifically because I used up slivers of it very sparingly, but I distributed it throughout my works for quite a while. That's when I started back to work, which was a couple of years ago. I kept it. And I got the big ad on one of my things that I showed at the [California Afro- American] Museum on Expo [Exposition Boulevard] .

MASON

Okay. Okay, all right. So you're still on La Brea [Avenue], then. When did you move to Arlington [Avenue]? No, you just had your studio on Arlington.

PURIFOY

No, I lived there. The house on La Brea I lived in for thirty years. I liked that place because a lot of things happened there over the years. I'd go off to Santa Cruz and spend two or three months and come back and find the place occupied by my friends and all clean and spic and span. I finally concluded the place didn't belong to me, it belonged to the people who frequented it. A lot of delightful experiences happened there, and a lot of artists came through simply because that was a meeting place for artists over the years.

MASON

People like John Outterbridge?

PURIFOY

Yeah. [tape recorder off] I think I would like to mention again and include in my discussion my companion, Ann Noriega. She was a dress designer. At least that's what made her eligible for the FESTAC. We were traveling partners and had experienced our visit to Africa together more or less. I didn't want to conclude about Africa until I mentioned about Ann, because she's been a lifelong friend. Now what?

MASON

We were talking about La Brea, and you said that--

PURIFOY

Oh, yes. I came to Los Angeles in about 1950, '51. I lived in central Los Angeles for eight or ten years, and then I moved to a little space, a little one-room apartment on La Brea, in about 19-- Oh, it must have been '58 or '59. It was attached to a garage, so there was unused space that I ultimately expanded into a three-room apartment and a studio in addition. So I had made the place very comfortable, from a one-room apartment to a three- or four-room apartment. It had a garage attached to it, so that was the space I utilized to build these extra rooms . Since most of the events of one nature or another happened to me while I was on La Brea, this house became a center for the community artists, for the most part. Because here was a place we could discuss our lives in connection with art. We could plan for the future here, or, as the case was, we could re-experience the past and plan for the future. So here was a place where I had my most profound spiritual experiences as well as art experiences. I would go away for two, three months at a time up to [University of California] Santa Cruz to teach something or go out of state with "Signs of Neon" and come back and find that the place had been occupied by friends who cared for it equally as much as I did, or as well as I did. After my stint at Santa Cruz, students would come from Santa Cruz on weekends and spend the weekend there, some of whom I did not know or had not met while in Santa Cruz. So the place became a center for people rather than for artists as such. A real delightful experience. Mrs. Chew, who owned the place, a Chinese woman. Oriental woman, whom I made friends with over the years, decided to sell the place and go back to China. So I had two weeks' notice to move. My friend Dorsey Robinson, a longtime friend, lent me his assistance, and he carted me all over town looking for a place to move, mostly downtown L.A., where we could find a loft or something that was suitable for an artist, so to speak. We finally found this place on Arlington, which was extremely expensive according to how much I'd been paying. I'd been paying under \$200 a month for this space where I was. And it had a big patio, I forgot to mention that, and a garden in back and all that. An extremely pleasant place to be, although it was

on the busiest street in L.A. . Because of the trees that surrounded the place, it was totally isolated, and I could scarcely hear noise from the street. The sirens and whatnot were almost not audible. The freeway was not far away, and I could scarcely ever hear the drone of the cars there. So it was a retreat or haven. When the time came to go, I did not regret leaving somehow. I don't know why. Maybe because it wasn't the place it used to be. The artists, after spending ten, twelve years on the [California Arts] Council, stopped coming, and I was more or less isolated there, without much going and coming. When the time came to move, I didn't regret it much. It's just that I was a little leery about paying nearly \$1,400 a month for rent. But it was a wonderful space upstairs in an old Masonic lodge on Arlington in Los Angeles. I had a studio and a gallery, which I made, and living quarters all in one space. Across the hall was an artist who occupied the whole across-the- hall space. At both ends were also studios where artists would come frequently. So all in all there were six of us-- six artists there--and we began to establish a great camaraderie in exchanging ideas.

MASON

They were all assemblagists?

PURIFOY

No, no. No, we were all doing different things, quite different things. I mentioned Mary Bonnie because she was my closest neighbor, right across the hall. She was doing exotic things with an oriental motif. You know, kind of oriental-like things.

MASON

Paintings or collages?

PURIFOY

Paint, paint on wood. I just mentioned her in passing because she was closest and we spent more time together. We had an open house, and I sold a few things, enough to pay the rent, but eventually I knew I would have to move. My first alternative was a loft downtown where I could get space for half the rent, but even at \$600 a month it was still expensive for me, having retired and all, drawing Social [Security] income. However, business begun to pick up and I thought I could make it if I hustled. But upon reflection, I am not a hustler. I am not used to hustling my work. And so, as a result, I chose to move to the desert with my friend Debbie Brewer.

MASON

Let's talk about the gallery that you had there.

PURIFOY

The gallery on Arlington at the old Masonic lodge?

MASON

Yeah. Did you have a name for it?

PURIFOY

Yes. I began to put out brochures, and I had some cards printed up. It was called the Gallery at the Old Masonic Lodge. I thought that was quite a poetic name for it. The open house was an exciting evening. There was lots of food and all my friends came. Virtually all of my friends came, meaning non-artists and all. And open house was virtually open house. The Masonic building-- All the upstairs floors were utilized for artists, as I have aforesated, and everyone had his door open that day. There were a lot of goings and comings and a lot of oohs and ahs. I was the only one who sold anything that day, of course, but it helped toward the rent. But as a result of the open house--for which we sent out invitations and all-- there were a lot of people coming back from time to time after the open house. And my friends came back, too. Many bought stuff that they couldn't even afford to buy.

MASON

How much were you selling things for?

PURIFOY

Well, the price kind of went up. I had small things for as little as \$150 — well, really \$90 to my friends--but other things went up to \$5,000, for one piece. That is, a triptych set, a piece called *Beige, Black, and Tan*, sold for \$3,500, a three-panel unit. So I had a good day. Now, considering that I hadn't had anything to drink or smoke, after everybody left, I broke out a quart of wine and I got myself a pack of cigarettes, and I stayed up all night. It was lots of fun. It's re-experiencing the art world after having been away for so long. Now that I'm in the desert, it's a whole-- It's quite a different life-style.

MASON

Can we talk about that? We've been deferring it all day. [laughter]

PURIFOY

Yeah.

MASON

So finally.

PURIFOY

Yeah, quite a different life-style. My friends were quite sympathetic about my moving, and they bought stuff when they couldn't even afford it. I had enough money finally to move to the desert, bring all my stuff practically, and in addition money to build a studio. So I started out to build a studio almost right away. By wintertime-- In fact, it was last August that I moved here. I think a year ago today we first met, you and I. On August 1, I believe, you came. So I moved here a year ago August 1. And three or four months later I built a studio. It was all finished, as finished as it was going to be, and I had begun to try to start work. I wasn't sure I'd like the desert. I made visits out here from time to time to see my friend Debbie and to assist her with her new house and

all . But every time I came, except for one time during the spring, when all the desert was blooming, I had felt forlorn and sad for some reason or other. Because of the vast space and the Joshua trees, it just gives the impression of desolation and sheer poverty, actually. The earth is poor. It won't bring forth green stuff. That's what I miss most of all being here, since everything is brown here or beige or purple, as the case might be. But having lived here for a while, despite the severe weather- -very hot in the summertime and very cold in the wintertime--I've come to like it. As I said before, I look up less often in anticipation. What that means is that when I was in L.A. as an artist, there were a lot of comings and goings, so every little noise I'd hear-- As you know, most artists are extremely sensitive to noise, because they spend quiet times in their head. All the time it's quiet in their heads, and the least drop of a pin- type noise can become extremely disturbing to the thought process. Here in the desert, the rabbits, the birds, the scorpions, the lizards all run quiet. You can see them for long distances, but you can't hear them. The birds squawk, the quails squeak, the buzzards buzz, or whatever they do- -honk- -and it's a haven for wildlife, because I live six miles from downtown Joshua Tree, the only town this side of Yucca Valley, except for Twenty-nine Palms. To go to the store, I go six miles, give or take, if not thirteen, to Yucca Valley. But I always enjoy the trip, because it's quiet and pleasant and you hardly encounter any cars on the road. On some roads it's so infrequently used they don't even have centerlines or markers. I have learned to live here, and it's rather pleasant.

MASON

Of course, the big question, the obvious question, is, as an assemblagist, how do you adapt to the desert? How do you find materials to work with?

PURIFOY

Well, it's quite different here when it comes to finding materials. Everything here is recycled. They have a swap meet every Saturday and Sunday in Yucca Valley, and you'd be amazed at the stuff that is exchanged there, because it's stuff that people in Los Angeles throw away. They recycle here, resell, because everyone is in a state of developing something here. It's a pioneer country, where the garbage-- You take it to the garbage dump yourself, so there's no garbage day as such where you go along the road and pick up stuff people throw away. There's no such thing as that. At the garbage dump, you're not allowed to rumble through the trash to get to refurbish things and whatnot, so found objects are hard to come by here unless you buy it. I have bought most of the objects that I've used for the work I've done so far. I'm working on a piece of-- I have two and a half acres here, incidentally, that I'm living on, and I have plans to develop the whole two and a half acres into a large art piece. I've begun to do that already, just kind of shaping it up. But now I have a pretty good idea of what two and a half acres are. It's big, I tell you, when you're

thinking about spreading it all with art. I already have a fifteen-by-five-foot piece of sculpture complete on one end of the lot.

MASON

What's the name of that?

PURIFOY

I haven't given it a name yet. It will probably end up being named *Tinker Toy*, because I got bells that tinkle all the time in the wind. I'm not sure. But anyhow, it's a Mondrianic-effect-type thing that I made, separate pieces of sculpture to sit inside of. It's a walk-through, kind of an environment thing, like I've enjoyed doing, for the most part. Flat things are kind of out for me here. However, I do them just to take up the time, because I have to work on three or four things at once in order to make anything go.

MASON

Like some of the pieces that you have here in this living room are pieces that you just did to take up time, or--?

PURIFOY

All this stuff I did last year and the year before. All the stuff you see hanging here I did either on Arlington or at La Brea. The new stuff is all out in the studio, and I've only got two pieces out there. One's finished. It's a protest piece, incidentally. *The Hanging Tree* it's called. I'll show it to you when we go back out.

MASON

Okay. Could you describe it?

PURIFOY

The Hanging Tree? Well, it's kind of a pun, like I said earlier. If it had a second title, it would say, "He was merely a boy and quite harmless, and he was also a clown. Can't you see that? Did you have to kill him after all?" That would be the title if it were not *The Hanging Tree*. So the description of what I just said was that it looks like a figure--male figure--hanging from the tree, but he's got on multicolored pants, multicolored jacket, and the color all around him is high color. It's a delightful piece to look at. If you didn't know that that was the title, it would be quite a pleasant hanging. That's the piece that's already finished. I'm working on another piece that may have a title by the time it's finished, but I don't know what it will be. And in addition to that-- See, I have to do several things at once. In addition to that, I'm working on a big piece of sculpture eight feet tall by eight feet long, different from anything I've ever done. That's that white piece that I'm working on with the curlicues and whatnot.

MASON

Could you describe that, the material and how it was different from the other things.

PURIFOY

It's a combination of found objects, canvas, paint, and wood. I found an old bentwood chair on the premises when I first came here, a rattan- type bentwood chair. It had been in the sun for years on end. I'd seen it here. It occurred to me that that could be a piece of sculpture. So I stripped it down and started using pieces, and it began to formulate this shape. I can hardly describe it because it's different from anything I've ever done before. It's purely organic, with shapes moving in and out, having all the characteristics of a piece of sculpture, and yet it could be a painting as well, because it's a combination of canvas, wood, metal, and paint. I'm nearly finished with it, or half finished with it, or two-thirds finished with it. But in order not to mess it up--that is, overwork it--I have to be doing two or three other things at the same time, so that when I get it to a certain place where I'm delighted with the last thing I did, I have to let it set for a day or two and sense whether or not if I did this or that next or if it occurred to me to do thus and so as the next thing to do-- So invariably it will strike me as something to do, but if I don't let that something that strikes me to do gel, it will be the wrong thing. Therefore, I'd mess it up. So in order to safeguard myself from messing up things, which every artist is capable of doing, I have a tendency to work on several other pieces, minor pieces. Nothing fantastic, just a minor idea. Not a major idea. It's no big masterpiece, it's just a minor idea. Two or three of them. Now, since I work so fast, even though I have all the time in the world out here in the desert, I also do gardening in the interim. I plant cactus and desert plants. I have built awnings around the place to create shade. You have to water the trees and whatnot. So I stay busy from morning till night here. And it's a rather pleasant place to live forever at.

MASON

So fundamentally, I guess, how would you say your work that you've done here is different from the flat work that you have hanging in your living room that you said was done on Arlington, in terms of--? Well, you've talked a little before about how there's a kind of tension in your work between pieces that you want to do for yourself and pieces that you want to do for a market .

PURIFOY

Yeah, I did mention a split that I consciously designed, so to speak, or implemented or acted out, as the case might be. Previously when I was doing art, I'd have a tendency to do something that pleased me with no intention of pleasing the public. Then I would do something that I know is pleasing to the public, and in that way I am trying to be practical in that I know that this piece will sell and this one may not.

MASON

I'm trying to understand how that works for you. For example, here, would you say that you made any of these pieces to sell, or were they all works that you wanted to do?

PURIFOY

There are no examples here of what I'm talking about. However, the piece of sculpture outside, the large piece that's in the studio that I'm working on now, I can't imagine that piece in somebody's house. So that kind of piece I would make to show. Now, those little pieces that I'm making in order to take up the time while I'm not doing anything else, I would be making to sell if I were in a community where people would make this distinction.

MASON

So it has to do with scale, then?

PURIFOY

No. It has nothing to do with scale so much as it has to do with quality. Whether it fits over Mrs. Jones ' s mantelpiece or not or headboard or not or it goes in her kitchen or not or in her hallway or not. I have a sensing (since I'm also a student of interior design) of what Mrs. Jones wants. So maybe that's why I was successful with selling things my last stint in art, because I had a sensing about what goes in the house, what goes with the couch, and what goes in the dining room, etc.

MASON

Does that have to do with color or--?

PURIFOY

Oftentimes color, yeah, and something that's more or less compromising, I'd say, pleasant to look at, with no political or social overtones whatsoever. [laughter] The average person who buys stuff doesn't want to be reminded of the problems of the world in their setting at home. I can't much blame them, of course. Life has taught me the difference between the kind of art that carries a social message and the kind that doesn't. In fact, I'd prefer to do pure design. Pure design sells better than protest, for sure, but pure design often doesn't outsell the portrait or picture that looks like somebody I know. Having been working in interiors for a few years, I have a keen sense about what goes with a house and what does not . A collector wouldn't have to think of this, however. He wouldn't have to think about the color of his sofa and whatnot, but Mrs. Jones does, who's redoing her house at \$10,000 to \$100,000 a throw. If she's doing her living room and she plans to spend \$50,000, I don't think she'd go for the protest piece to put on her wall. That's the point. So as a consequence of my knowledge of people's tastes, I developed this split where I do things to sell and I do other things to show, if that answers your question.

MASON

So take this piece, for example. What's the name of this piece with the sun?

PURIFOY

That has no name. That's untitled.

MASON

How would this piece be different from something that you would make to sell?

PURIFOY

Well, first, this is a big piece. This piece is eight feet by four feet, and the couch is six feet long and four feet deep. I mean, three feet deep or twenty-six inches deep, etc. So this wouldn't go with the couch--it would extend over the end. And Mrs. Jones does not want a picture to extend over the end of her couch, because she wants to emphasize the couch, not the picture. So that's eight feet, and Mrs. Jones wouldn't put an eight-foot sofa on one wall. She'd turn the corner with it. Pictures don't turn the corner. I'm saying this with tongue in cheek. [laughter] And Mrs. Jones may have an eight-foot sofa, too, on one wall, without it turning the corner, because she can well afford it. But I don't think she'd hang this picture over that couch. I think she'd come closer to hanging a thinner one that--

MASON

Maybe like this one.

PURIFOY

Well, it could be eight feet long, but it most certainly wouldn't be four feet wide. It would be more spindly, like twenty-six inches by seventy-two, or eighty- four or ninety-six. Size and all makes a difference. However, people are more inclined to buy oil paintings on canvas than collages or assemblages. You'd have to have a unique house to buy an assemblage in the first place. If Mrs. Jones is so inclined to put one in her house because she wants a conversation piece, she comes to me. I seldom use canvas. I use mostly wood, I paint on wood. I'm just trying to describe what's most likely to sell in this day and time and what is likely not to sell in this day and time. As an artist I'm well aware of that, and I paint with it in mind. No matter how superficial I may sound, that's what I do, because survival comes first and survival transcends superficiality any day.

MASON

All right. Is there anything else you want to add?

PURIFOY

No. I think we've done well.

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