

African-American Artists of Los Angeles: Cecil Fergerson

Department of Special Collections

University of California, Los Angeles

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1. Transcript

1.1. Tape Number: I, Side One November 29, 1990

Ferguson

Where do you want to start?

Mason

Well, we usually start off talking about your family background and your childhood. We always start by asking when and where were you born and then go chronologically through that. So when and where were you born?

Ferguson

I was born in the state of Oklahoma in a town called Boley, Oklahoma. Boley, Oklahoma, is an all-black town in the state of Oklahoma. As you know, Oklahoma didn't become a state until 1908. But after the Civil War, many black people moved from the South into other parts of the country. Oklahoma was one of those places where a lot of black people came because it was still a territory. And it was an Indian reservation, too. And what I gather from listening to my folks is that one of the main reasons why they allowed Oklahoma to become a reservation-and a lot of black people went into that territory-was because the land was very poor agriculturally. But many black towns sprang up in Oklahoma around the turn of the century on up until probably the 1930s.

Mason

What year were you born?

Ferguson

I was born in 1931. My mother's folks came to Oklahoma around the turn of the century and homesteaded in Oklahoma. Not right in the town of Boley. It was about twelve miles outside of Boley, which was a place called Childsville, Oklahoma. But Boley was the name of a little town near there. The reason why I was born in Boley was my father came to Boley in around 1913, 1914.

Mason

What are your parents' names?

Ferguson

My mother was Jewel Kirksey [Ferguson] and my father was Henry Ferguson. And as the story goes- Because I never met my great-grandfather, because he died in 1930. But as the story goes, his name was Randall Kirksey, and he was Irish or part Irish or whatever, but he- They really were from Louisiana, and he had a black woman [Mary Kirksey] for a wife. And because of racism and all the problems of the South, they were never able to have a good life in Louisiana. So they moved from Louisiana to Texas and then eventually up into Oklahoma, where they homesteaded some land there, which is still there as part of that- The family still owns it. But there's nothing there now but the cellar. In Oklahoma, if you're building a house, the first thing you built was a cellar, because that's tornado country. And the cellar is built out of the mud from the ground in Oklahoma, because Oklahoma has a lot of adobe. So they would build their houses basically out of adobe, you know, making large bricks and all, assemble them, and put a roof on it, etc. We lived in Oklahoma City at the time of my birth, but my folks then went to Boley from Oklahoma City. My mother and father were married in 1930, in October. She was pregnant with her first child, which was me. But they had gone to Boley for a July 4 picnic, and during the picnic the- In Oklahoma, the weather changed [snaps his fingers] like that. All of a sudden, tornado-like clouds came up, and it began to rain, and when my mother was running for shelter it induced labor pains. This was on a Saturday. My father had to go back to Oklahoma City to go to work. The place that any man would leave his pregnant wife would be with her people rather than go to Oklahoma City, where he couldn't look after her. So he left her there on the farm with her father and mother. He went back to Oklahoma City on the fifth, which was a Sunday. I was born on Monday, July 6, 1931. It was strange, too, that in 1970, when I was going to go to Japan for the [Los Angeles County] Museum [of Art] for the *Art and Technology* show as a part of Expo '70- Of course, you needed a passport to go out of the country. And when I wrote back to Oklahoma to the capital to get my birth certificate, my name wasn't on the birth certificate. It just said "Baby Ferguson." And the reason for that- Since my father was away in Oklahoma City, a midwife delivered me, an Indian woman, and when the doctor came through with all the necessary papers to see me about the birth of this little baby- Since my father wasn't there, they hadn't named me yet. They were waiting for my father to come back to pick us up and to name me. When my father came, he named me Cecil. But that was never turned in to the-

Mason

To the county?

Ferguson

To the county, right. So for my birth certificate, I didn't have a name on it until 1970, [laughter] which is a pretty interesting story.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

We lived in Oklahoma City-I did-from 1931 to 1939, and during that period my father and mother had two other children.

Mason

What are their names?

Ferguson

Jewel Dean Ferguson at that time-she's Jewel Dean Tillman now-and Joyce May Ferguson, who is now Joyce May Bowie. Jewel was born in 1933, and Joyce was born in 1935. My father was a mechanic. He worked for a place in Oklahoma City called Greenlease Chevrolet Company, I think. And later on in life I found out about the Greenlease people. I don't know what year it was-it was in the fifties or forties-but that was a famous case when some people kidnapped the Greenlease's son or something and killed him for ransom. I think eventually these people were executed for that crime. That just rang a bell because my father worked there. Well, my father- Well, you know, back then it was hard in those days, especially for black men, which is nothing unusual. My mother was a domestic, you know. And, of course, I was too young to really understand, but I used to hear her say that she worked in different people's homes in Oklahoma City for like one dollar a day and carfare to help supplement my father's income.

Mason

What economic level would you put your family at?

Ferguson

Poor. [laughter] When my father was working, I think he said he started off at six dollars a week, and I think when they fired him in 1938 he was making twelve dollars a week. For some reason they let him go. By that time he not only had a wife and three children, but also his father and mother lived with him. Because my father was the oldest child of two sets of children by Doc Ferguson, who was my grandfather on my father's side- My grandfather on my mother's side was L. R. Kirksey. My grandmother's name on my father's side was Classie Ferguson. Her maiden name was Gayle, Classie Gayle.

Mason

That was her real name?

Ferguson

Classie. I always loved that. She was born in Louisiana. My mother's maiden name was Hicks. Her mother's name was Hettie, Hettie Hicks before she became Hettie Kirksey. I have pictures of both of them, my grandmothers. I have a picture of my grandfather on my mother's side with Hettie and my mother's two older brothers [Webster Hicks and Pat Hicks]. The picture had to be taken before 1912, because my mother was born in 1912, and she's not in the picture. So I know he only had two children. And as the story goes- Black families, up until radio and television, part of their entertainment was storytelling, mostly all black families, and you got a lot of your history by sitting around listening to the old folks talk. One of the stories was of my mother's grandfather, who was [Dick] Hicks. He was Indian. And his wife, I can remember she was- They said she was Indian, but I can remember she was real dark-complexioned. They do have some real dark-complexioned Indians. Grandma Hicks, as we referred to her. But he had been a cowboy before the turn of the century, way before the turn of the century. He was driving cattle from down in Texas and then way up into Kansas. He had passed through this country which was lonely, and he loved the country so much, he came back and settled. Plus, as the stories go on, they had many black cowboys-that we know now-and as they would drive these cattle up into Kansas, into Missouri, of course, all the women that they encountered on the way up there were usually Indian women, so that's why many black people from Oklahoma have Indian blood in them.

Mason

So in Boley, you said it was all black, but Oklahoma was an Indian reservation. So black people mixed a lot in Oklahoma? Or were the Indians kept away on the reservations?

Ferguson

There were all kinds of towns in Oklahoma. And then Oklahoma became a state in 1908, but there were a lot of territories, too, a lot of land that was settled with- I think they had something called the Freedman Act. I have the whole history of the town in my library; I just haven't had time to read it.

Mason

Well, we don't need to-

Ferguson

But it's very important. Because as you get older, you never know what motivates you about doing certain things, you know, and a lot of it has to do with your history.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

And you really don't realize it until you get older, right? I became an activist during the 1960s, and perhaps I was just waiting for something to come along so I could be an activist, because my grandfather was an activist.

Mason

How so?

Ferguson

Oh, first of all, by moving into Oklahoma-right?-he helped establish an all-black town. I used to hear stories about how they didn't allow any white people to come to Boley.

Mason

How did they manage that? [laughter]

Ferguson

With guns.

Mason

With guns?

Ferguson

And how they had to use force to be able to vote after they became a state, and how my grandfather and his brothers carried guns to the voting place, you know. These are stories that you hear, right? And then I heard stories- My father's father had two sets of children, and my father's mother was around the same age as my grandfather's oldest child by a previous marriage, so that means by the time he had my father he was an old man. Because as the story goes, he was born a slave, which means he had to be born before 1865. He didn't die until 1939. But he had two sets of children, which I understand now wasn't that uncommon for men during those days to go through four or five wives, because many black women died young in those days-a lot of them from childbirth because of poor prenatal care and poor conditions. So men would lose wives sometimes at twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven years old. Then they would turn around and become involved with somebody seventeen, eighteen years old and go through the same-

Mason

I guess they needed lots of kids to work on the farm and whatnot. [laughter]

Ferguson

Yeah, to survive. That was not only true of the black community, it was also true of the white community. The white people from Europe, they didn't send off to Europe for forty-year-old women. [laughter] To survive that long trip to come to America, they sent off for women fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years old. And even after they settled in this country, a lot of their brides were seventeen, eighteen, nineteen years old. I guess it's ironic that women outlive men now when prior to that period they died young. I met a woman once in the seventies-because I was active in black history, especially California black history-and somehow she had heard about me. She called my home one night and said she'd like to speak to me, because her father was a hero during the

Civil War, and he had earned a medal at a very famous battle, a place called Cherry Hill or something. And what he had done was- During the Civil War every regiment had a color barrier. When this white boy was killed in one of the famous battles, he grabbed the flag and went back up there and held it up. Well, he was very fair himself complexionwise, so naturally they wanted to make a hero out of him until they found out that he was a black man. Because during the Civil War, black men could fight for this country, but they got no benefits from that, from being in the army. Also, they weren't recognized as heroes or anything. And she had fought for years to try to get his medals, right? She thought I could help her. When she talked to me on the phone, I'm going, like, it's almost impossible for a man that was in a war before 1865, and he still has a daughter living, right? You think about that, you know. Because he was born like in 1830-something, 1840-something. I went over to her house anyway, out of curiosity. And she opened up the door- A very spunky lady, you know, well up into her eighties but together, right? And we had a long evening. She showed me letters that her father had written in the 1860s and the late 1850s, actual letters. Well, as the story goes, her father had married an eighteen-year-old woman when he was in his nineties who bore him three girls. She died before she was twenty-five, and I think he lived until- He didn't die until the 1930s sometime. So that was very interesting that it wasn't just a story. You know, she had proof!

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

I mean the letters and-

Mason

How did she think that you could help her?

Ferguson

Because I was an activist with black history, and she wanted to open the case up again. We write letters and- I'm very sorry I didn't get involved with that- and I lost touch with her, you know-because I'd like to have a part of that history now. And she had been an activist during the 1920s. She was part of

the [Marcus] Garvey movement in New York. It would have been kind of nice if I had kept up with that history, because it's so important.

Mason

Yeah, that is interesting.

Ferguson

Whereas, at the time, I was having some marital problems myself, you know, and it slipped through the cracks. Because what I did at one point in my life- I was so appalled at the fact that no records in Los Angeles showed that black people lived here until the 1940s, you know. Not in the libraries, you know.

Mason

Certainly. When you take that tour downtown that they give you about old Los Angeles, they don't mention anything.

Ferguson

No black people. And the city was founded by black people. So I began on my own, on my off days, to go around to the pioneer citizens in their seventies and interview them on cassette tape, and I started putting that history together. And what grew out of this was- I founded a group called- As I found out that black people founded Los Angeles, I started a program called "Night of the First Angelenos" where once a year I would honor a black pioneer citizen. This particular event was held at the University of Southern California.

Mason

Okay. Well, we can talk more about that in depth as it comes up. But I want to hear more about your-

Ferguson

Early childhood?

Mason

Well, your grandfathers and their activism.

Ferguson

Okay. Now, as the story goes, my grandfather- How they really got into Oklahoma was- They had lived in Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, and finally into Oklahoma. and I started wondering why they moved so much. But the story my father tells us is that when they were in Louisiana he had given my father a horse for his birthday- This horse my father called a single-footed horse, but what he really meant was it was a trotter. You know, like Dan Patch. You've heard of the famous Dan Patch trotter?

Mason

No. [laughter]

Ferguson

Well, you've heard of the racetrack, the trotters?

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

The trotters, the horses that gait a certain way?

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

Dan Patch was a famous historical horse that was a trotter. Owning a fine horse in the South in those days was a very important part of the culture. That's why the early jockeys in this country were black men, you know. The first Kentucky Derby winners were black people. Isaac Murphy, Earl Sande- they're all black people. Because the plantation owners would pit this horse against other plantation horses, and then their slaves would ride the horse. Of course, when that all became the sport of the kings, all that changed. [laughter] This man wanted to buy this horse from my father. Of course, my father didn't want to sell the horse. So since the man couldn't buy the horse, he took out his gun and shot the horse. He killed him. And they said for weeks and weeks and weeks my grandfather mourned over this. But my father said in his mourning, though, he was always getting this wagon ready, you know, putting in the goods and stuff. He was going to take a trip. Then he came

home and told his family that he'd be home late that evening, and at about ten, eleven o'clock they were going to leave Louisiana and I think go into Arkansas first. And in those days, women didn't question their husbands; they just did what they said. So she got her children together, which was three boys and one daughter. And when my grandfather returned to leave Louisiana, he was soaking in blood. Of course, no one questioned him. They just got in the wagon and headed for Arkansas, and they stayed in Arkansas for a while. Then they went into Texas, you know, and my grandfather kept moving till finally they ended up in Oklahoma. For a long time they didn't find out what had happened. But as the story goes, my grandfather went into the stockyard of this white man's plantation and slit the throats of most of his livestock real quietly-you know, his cows, his pigs. He killed them up and came back and split. But he never thought he was safe until- That's why he kept moving and ended up in Oklahoma. But by this time he was an old man, getting along in age. By the time my father got married in 1930, he could no longer run a farm, because you needed children around a farm just to survive. There wasn't anybody but him and my grandmother. So that's why he eventually came to live with my father in Oklahoma City, because they could no longer take care of themselves on the farm in Boley. So they moved in with my father; being the oldest child, they moved in with him. My grandfather on my mother's side- This is interesting, too, because the- On my mother's side they were Kirkseys. They were all light-skinned people. My mother's father, he had five daughters and about six sons, and it seemed like his daughters were like the prize of that whole community. Everybody wanted one. And my grandfather was a minister who thought that there wasn't anybody who could have a woman but him. [laughter] Surely you weren't supposed to have any of his daughters, right? And although he'd been a minister, later on in life I found out he really did cause a big injustice, because they married the first thing that came around. Because if you were a female- And in a lot of those towns during that period, sometimes you got trapped and never got out of a certain position unless some man came and rescued you. So I imagine whole lots of black women during that period didn't marry for love; they just married to get away from home. But his father, Randall Kirksey, I understand, this Irishman- My mother used to always kind of halfway brag about our Irish blood, right? And of course, many black men during that period, they wanted a woman who was light-complexioned, etc. Most of my father's people were real dark-

complexioned, like more African-style, and my mother's people were more Anglo stocked. You know, Kirksey. Although Fergerson is a Scottish name. But there's a story hooked up with that, too. My grandfather was something like six or seven years old when they abolished slavery-my father's father. When he left the plantation, he disliked his slave master so much that he didn't carry the name of the people who owned him; he adopted another slave name. [laughter] That's why it seems strange that my last name is spelled F-E-R-G-E-R-S-O-N, and most Fergusons spell it G-U-S-O-N.

Mason

So he changed the spelling? Or he took a different name?

Fergerson

He took another name but didn't know how to spell it.

Mason

Okay.

Fergerson

So he did his own spelling, and it came out E-R-S-O-N. Most people, I imagine, spell my name G-U-S-O-N. And of course, there were always problems back then. This white man loved this black woman so well that he traveled halfway across the United States so he could-

Mason

Live with her?

Fergerson

So he could live with her, right. Because my mother had an uncle who passed for white for fifty years. He didn't become black until the sixties when it was all right.

Mason

Oh. But you knew him? Or you knew of him?

Fergerson

I knew of him. After the sixties I knew him because he moved down here. He was an old man, right? And somehow I could never be friendly with him, as hard as he tried, because I was- It was that period in my life that I just didn't like to be identified with anybody white.

Mason

So he basically denounced the whole family.

Ferguson

The whole thing. He moved away from them. Many young black men during the early 1900s- They could leave home because they could catch a train. And you'd get tired of work, you know, having to work long hours. The fathers got all the money. So they would jump up and leave. They had a thing during the early part of the century called hoboes. And by being light-complexioned, he ended up in a white hobo camp. He told me a story one time, after he came back to his family, after being an old man- His name was Manning Kirksey. And of course, I'd always hear stories about him, because my mother knew him as a young girl growing up. She loved all her people. She used to get so disturbed with me in the sixties, you know. "Your [great-]grandfather was white," she said. "[You] can't hate white people." [laughter] And I didn't hate white people. She never understood that. You know, I don't hate anyone. I said, "Well, Mama, since I never knew him-" Because he died in 1930, and I was born in 1931. As an individual, I probably could have liked him; I wouldn't have had a problem. But anyway, as the story goes- He [Manning Kirksey] said he was in this hobo camp, right? And just for survival, since they thought he was white, he just played it on out. But it was as a part of this camp that he decided he'd become a white man. But anyway, he said early after the first night in the hobo camp, the next morning, when they awakened- And one thing the hoboes would do would be to go into the towns and beg for food or work or whatever to get money so they could continue on their journey to Chicago, New York, or wherever they were going. He said this guy who had become the spokesman for the camp, like the king of those particular hoboes, right, he told the guys that morning, "Now, when you go into town, we're going into the nigger neighborhoods," he said, "because the niggers will help anybody." [laughter] And as he told me this story, I thought back to my own childhood, you know. You know, we were dirt poor. My mother would feed

anybody who came to our door, no matter what color. If they needed food, she could always find something to- And basically black people are that way, you know. To hear it lately, probably nowadays they're not as good-hearted as they once were. [laughter] But they always kind of looked up to Randall Kirksey because of his denouncing his whole ethnic background in his love for this black woman to move to Boley. That was on my mother's side. On my father's side, all his brothers married very fair women. And my father's brothers and all, they were very militant black men-right?-so much so that my father and his brothers hardly ever worked for anybody else. They always created their own jobs. And once my father left Oklahoma, he never worked for anybody else again in his life.

Mason

What kind of jobs did they have?

Ferguson

Cars. See, because the car was very big in the early 1900s, right? They learned how to work on them. They learned how to-

Mason

So just self-taught?

Ferguson

Self-taught. You know, to detail, you know, polishing and washing and- And they dealt with that all their lives. They were their own bosses. In fact, when I started working at the County Art Museum as a janitor, all my uncles and my daddy, they were just put out with me. "How could you go do that?" They were more militant. I never could understand my father, because my father wouldn't take anything off anybody white and his brothers either. If another white man would say something, they'd fight like that. [snaps his fingers] Yet still they all like fair women. [laughter] It always was kind of strange, you know; that kind of-

Mason

So what do you think about that? I mean, why do you think that is?

Ferguson

I don't know. I don't know. I've thought about this for years, you know. I guess they took another position when it came to women as opposed to the men. And I guess in the 1900s, marrying a very light-skinned woman was some kind of status. I don't know. I know my mother was. There's a picture of her on the wall over there. And all her sisters were just like that. [laughter] And they all married black-complexioned men. My father and his brother married two sisters. My father's brother, McKinley, he married my mother's sister, Mary [Kirksey]. But I understand that wasn't anything unusual for a small community, where you become double cousins and double whatever. But I was there in 1974. I hadn't been there as an adult, really. I went to the cemetery where most of my ancestors on both sides are buried, except the ones that came West when we came. And it was real nice, because those cemeteries in country towns aren't like cemeteries in the city. You really don't realize you're in a cemetery, you know. Most of the cemeteries were on church grounds, near the church. So that means that when you lost a family member that you really stayed close to them, because every Sunday you come to church they're right there-not like the city where you've got to go to the cemetery.

Mason

Yeah. [laughter]

Ferguson

But anyway, in 1939, when my father lost his job, he decided that he couldn't find work in Oklahoma City. This was 1938. He decided around October that he was going to go to Texas and try to find an apartment.

Mason

Now, what was the educational level of your parents?

Ferguson

Eighth and ninth grade, you know. My father and all his brothers always said that they finished high school, but they considered finishing high school like ninth or tenth grade. Because I've seen the school that they went to in Boley. In fact, it's still there, except it's not used anymore. And it's funny, too. In country towns, when people leave, they abandon them. They just leave;

furniture, everything, is still there. Sometimes it stays there for twenty, thirty, forty years. And he always says he finished high school, right? But high school might have been like the eighth and ninth grade.

Mason

What about your mother?

Ferguson

My mother said she finished high school, too. But all my grandparents read, write, you know. My grandmother died when she was almost eighty [years old]. She could read and write. Sometimes you think that today they've got young people who can't read. I mean, it's not- But on both sides, they were very religious people.

Mason

What denomination are they?

Ferguson

My mother's father was a CME minister.

Mason

What's CME?

Ferguson

CME was an offshoot of the African Methodist [Episcopal] Church that some black people were doing in a certain period. They didn't want to be known as Africans. They preferred being referred to as colored.

Mason

Oh, I've never heard that one. [laughter]

Ferguson

So CME was the Colored Methodist [Episcopal]. It doesn't exist anymore because they just changed it to something else when "colored" wasn't very popular during the 1950s and 1960s. So it's no longer referred to as CME. And my father's people were Baptist. But when my mother married my father, she became a Baptist. My father really wasn't religious, but he was just brought up

in the Baptist kind of religion, which was- There was a strong Baptist belt all in the South. So when my father went to Texas to get this job-and he was gone a couple of months-then, sometime in January, he called my mother and told her to sell all our furniture and most of the stuff and he was coming to get us and we were going to Texas. He was going to come and get my mother, his three children, his father, and his mother. We were all moving to Texas. And my mother did what he said. We moved in with some friends of the family to wait for my father to come get us. But in the meantime- My father was supposed to come like on a Saturday night, and instead of Saturday he shows up on a Thursday, and all of a sudden all the plans were changed, because he had- The job he had gotten in Texas-in Dallas, Texas-was a job with another black man who drank a lot and didn't come to work, so the inspector would- This white man hired my father in his place. But this man was one of those bad men. And you've heard of the Dallas specials and how cheap black life was in a lot of cities, where they killed each other every Saturday night? He came and approached my father like my father took his job rather than approach the man who gave my father the job, of course. He came at my father with a Dallas special knife-you know, a long knife-and my father hit him in the head with a tire tool. What a tire tool was was a tool that you took off tires with-right?-made out of iron. He sent him to the hospital. And the white man who owned the tire shop told my father he'd better leave town because he had a lot of brothers and they would kill him. So my father left and came back to Oklahoma City after telling my mother she had to sell everything. Two days after he was in Oklahoma City, my grandfather-his father-died. Another dilemma-right?-because now he has to be buried and the whole trip. So he had to contact all the sons and daughters-

1.2. Tape Number: I, Side Two November 29, 1990

Ferguson

It just so happened that his [Ferguson's father's] baby brother, who was named William Ferguson, had come to California in the early 1930s. So he came home for the funeral. They had the service in two places. They had a service in Oklahoma City, where my grandpa was named deacon of the church, and then the interment was in Boley, because you didn't have to pay to be buried in Boley. You know, men would dig a hole and bury you. I can

remember that service in Boley right now like it was yesterday, and I was only about six years old. Me and my grandfather were very close, because I was with my grandfather and grandmother all the time because my mother and father both worked. So I spent many hours with my grandparents. They told me later on that I was his favorite. He spent a lot of time with me. I remember when we got to Boley it was raining, and if you know anything about the mud in Boley, it's like adobe, right? When it rains, it's hard to get from one place to another. I can remember the service, you know, the end of the service and all. My grandfather was literally lying in this pine box-not like a coffin; it was a box. And I remember he had on a blue suit, and the rain was falling in his face. Then after the service I saw the men close the box and lower him into the ground. I was about fourteen years old before I really got that out of me. I used to wake up at night screaming up until I was a big, big boy, because if you- You're not old enough to remember what early black funerals were like. I mean, they would be hours long. [laughter] I mean, they used to pray you right into heaven and back out again. [laughter] And they sang all the sad songs that they could. It's not like now where it's over in fifteen minutes, right? The preachers were really stars at the funeral. That coupled with all the rest of the things stayed with me for a long time. But anyway, when they returned back to Oklahoma City, my father's baby brother said, "Why don't you come to California with me?" He said, "That's a land of gold, you know."

Mason

What was he doing out here?

Ferguson

Working for himself. He had a car business, what you call a car route, where he went by every morning in Beverly Hills and the rich neighborhoods and wiped off people's cars for four dollars a month.

Mason

Four dollars a month?

Ferguson

A month for each car, which was a lot of money in those days. You figure you have twenty cars, that's eighty dollars.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

Most people weren't making eighty dollars a month. And then, in between that, he would polish cars for five dollars or wash them for fifty cents. He had a very good business. So he said, "Why don't you come to California with me where you can begin a new life?" He gave us all these things about the streets lined with gold, sun shines all the time, you know. So my father had nothing to lose. He had no job. You know, he had a wife and three children and his mother-which was his baby brother's mother too, right?-plus my uncle- The reason he had went to California to start with- He had gotten some thirteen-year-old girl pregnant, and they had put him in jail. My father got him out of jail awaiting trial, right? He ran off to- [laughter] He ran off to California, where, in the meantime, this woman bore a child named Betty Ferguson, who lives here in this city now. She runs a nursery on Florence [Avenue] called Betty Blue's.

Mason

What would they have done to him? Just make him marry her?

Ferguson

Oh, yeah. I don't know. I don't know if they had laws that strict in those days. So he went by to see his child, and her mother-who had gotten married and had three other children by then, and was having a hard time-she asked him if he would take Betty to California with him and raise her for a while. So he said, "Yeah." So my uncle, his child of two [years], my father's family-that's five-and my grandmother, we crowded into a 1937 Pontiac and headed for California. And when we got to the border of California- You know, at one time they closed the borders of California. They wouldn't let you in unless you had a benefactor, because many people were coming from Oklahoma, Missouri, and Kansas, and all through that country, because they had that Dust Bowl.

Mason

Right. This was the height of the Depression.

Ferguson

In the 1930s, right. And that's why a lot of those white people that came through there and a lot of black people, too, who were migrant workers ended up in Arizona, because they couldn't come into California. We were allowed- We weren't even stopped because my uncle had California-

Mason

Tags?

Ferguson

-tags on his car, right. So we came into California and-

Mason

Do you remember anything about the trip?

Ferguson

Yes.

Mason

Like what do you remember?

Ferguson

My trip through racist America to reach California: I remember my mother frying chicken all night the night before we left.

Mason

Wasn't that a lot of chicken! [laughter]

Ferguson

Because, you know, you couldn't stop.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

And I remember my mother trying to give all of us some kind of orientation about the trip and how evil white people were in certain places and that, if you wanted to go to the bathroom, don't go wandering off, because they had

white and black bathrooms. We had never experienced any of this. And for a seven-year-old the trip was beautiful, because I had never been out of Oklahoma, right? And to be traveling across the country, it was beautiful for me. It takes about three days, you know. It wouldn't take that long if you came straight through, but when you had as many people in the car as we had, we didn't just rush. We came, then, to Central Avenue and Twenty-first Street, because my uncle had rented a two-bedroom apartment upstairs on Twenty-first and Central, which was the heart of the black community in the 1930s and 1920s. Central Avenue was like Broadway for black people. My uncle had a wife there waiting for him. Her name was Zelma Fergerson. I can remember that as we went upstairs and settled- Strange thing about it, I heard my uncle say it never rains in California, and when we got here it was raining. [laughter] And there wasn't any gold on the streets, either. There are two things I can remember about that first day in California. I had never seen the milkman with the truck driven by the horse. I'd never seen that in Oklahoma City. It was fascinating that the milkman would walk from door to door and the horse would just follow him. It was strange. And then the horse was so trained that by the time the horse got to a place where the milkman had run out of milk, it was time to get some more and continue, right? Then another thing I can remember is that once we got upstairs and settled- My grandmother drank Pepsi-Cola soda water, and she chewed brown tobacco, and her supply had run out. The apartment was right over a store, so my grandmother sent me down to buy this Pepsi-Cola and this piece of brown chewing tobacco. And when I went down into the store, some Orientals ran the store. I had never seen oriental people before in my life. And they were talking in their language, right? I ran out of the store and left. [laughter]

Mason

You were frightened?

Fergerson

I was frightened.

Mason

What did you think they were? You just didn't know?

Fergerson

I didn't know, right. I'd never heard that before, and I'd never seen anybody who looked like that before, you know. We lived in-

Mason

Were there a lot of Asians that had markets and things over in the black neighborhoods then?

Ferguson

Yeah, especially from like- You know, Little Tokyo was right down on Twenty-first Street, was near there. A lot of black people had businesses, too, because of segregation. You know, they had all kinds of businesses on Central Avenue: night clubs, flower shops, theaters, beauty shops, shoeshine stands, markets- In fact, sometimes now I think it was better then than it is now. They had more of a community. They had four or five big churches right in their own community. Sometimes I don't know about integration at this point. I'm sure it will get better. We lived there about three months, and then my uncle and my father bought two houses on Imperial Highway in Watts. Because Watts in those days was like really a beginning for black people. You could buy nice homes in Watts with limes. Although the community was basically white immigrant Europeans and Spanish people, they had a pretty good black community and wide-open spaces. We moved in there and just loved it, you know. We lived there until 1942. No, we lived there until 1940. We only lived there one year because my uncle and his wife busted up. And since my uncle was established in California, all the deeds and things were in his and his wife's names, because my father had no credit good enough anymore. Although my father went to work for his brother in his car business, his wife was so bitter about the divorce that she wouldn't sign the necessary deeds to give the property to my father. My uncle moved to Santa Monica and left us. [laughter] Within a couple of months they put us out of the houses on Imperial and we moved to 1674 East 114th Street, which was one of the affluent neighborhoods in Watts at that time. Our neighbors were doctors, musicians- Across the street was a man named Joe Comfort, who was the bass player for Nat King Cole's trio. On the next street, adjacent to our yard, was Dr. Curtis King, a very prominent black doctor, who would eventually build a hospital on Hooper [Avenue] and Vernon [Avenue]. And down the street was

Miss Johnson, whom you might hear about. Now, she's still living. She's ninety-three years old. But she was a movie star and-

Mason

What's her first name?

Ferguson

Varcina- Not Varcina. One of them, though, was Johnson. Frida. Frida Shaw Johnson.

Mason

So your father had taken over the car business then?

Ferguson

He had established his own.

Mason

Oh, okay. And that's how he was accepted into this neighborhood, because he had his own business? Or was he accepted?

Ferguson

He could pay the rent. [laughter] Because people moved, you know. People, they'd live someplace, and then the rent would come due and they couldn't pay it, and then they moved-

Mason

Moved someplace else. No, I was just wondering how these doctors and these professional people-

Ferguson

Well, they had so many covenants in L.A. Have you ever heard about the covenants in L.A.?

Mason

Yeah, they were restrictive.

Ferguson

Where black people could and couldn't live. So professional people and all- You know, in our neighborhood we had all kinds of affluent people. Sometimes Florence Avenue referred to a street rather than a whole community, right? Of course, for us it was beautiful. And at that time I went to 111th Street School in the 1940s. We were settled down pretty good. And then, of course, you know what happened on December 7, 1941.

Mason

Pearl Harbor?

Ferguson

Pearl Harbor. And by that time, I had established friendships with a lot of Asians-Japanese young people, you know-because the Japanese had-

Mason

From school?

Ferguson

From school. The Japanese ran large farms all over Watts, vegetable farms. One of the incomes of people my age was to pick beans on Japanese farms and all that sort of thing. I can remember December 7 because these newspaper boys were walking up and down the street, you know, "War Declared," right? People were going out to the front of their homes buying a paper. And the war came. Of course, now, when the war came, it was no longer necessary for my father to work, and one of the biggest mistakes that he made in life was to take a job in the defense [industry]. He should have remained with his business.

Mason

What kind of job was it?

Ferguson

In the shipyards and the airplane factories. People made a lot of money. The whole neighborhood changed. Nightclubs sprang up. You know, people had money. Also they transformed Watts from a country town to a metropolis because of the Pacific Railway. It goes to San Pedro, Long Beach. And the navy

and the army guys, you know, in a year- My father made a lot of money from 1941 to 1945, but he saved none of it. You know, he just-

Mason

So why was it a mistake, then, to work in the defense industry?

Ferguson

Money often changes people. You know, you start staying out a lot, getting involved with a whole new facet of life, start to drinking probably. He just changed. And when that war ended, the jobs went, too. Now, you've got an influx of hundreds and hundreds of black people and white people who had migrated to this state. They came so fast that they couldn't even provide housing for them. People would live in the streetcars, would live on the ground, were living in tents.

Mason

You started to say something about the Japanese kids that you knew when the war started.

Ferguson

When the war started with the propaganda machine, you know, people who had once been your friends became the enemy. And that's one thing that really impressed me as a youngster was how they used that machine to turn people against people with slogans like "A slip of a lip might sink a ship." And then they flooded the community with these paintings and illustrations of Japanese people with fangs hanging out their mouths and carrying off nude white women. I mean, that art is still around.

Mason

Where would they be? In the stores?

Ferguson

In the stores, newspapers, magazines, you know. One family who had a store on 116th [Street] and Wilmington [Avenue], they also had a nursery, and they were the family of the notorious Tokyo Rose. I know you must have heard of her. She had come to California in the 1930s, educated at UCLA, then went back to Japan for a trip, and they wouldn't let her out of the country. They

forced her to do a little broadcast to the American servicemen. So they persecuted her family, you know. And they took the Japanese stores and farms and things, they just took all that, and put the Japanese people in concentration camps. Of course, if you know anything about history, you know about that, the internment of Japanese people out of California, Oregon, and Washington, all down the West Coast. Because [Franklin D.] Roosevelt and the gangsters up in [Washington], they used for an excuse that the Japanese would try to occupy California first-right?-and they didn't want a fifth column in California. But I found out later on in life that that wasn't why they did it. They did it because the Japanese people had come here in the early part of the century and they had turned all the West Coast into valuable agricultural country, you know, and they wanted their land back. So they just took it. Because California right now is the leading agricultural state in the United States. People don't realize that when they think about California. They have the best rice, the best cotton. They always think about the South, rice country and cotton country. I mean, Southern California is the San Joaquin Valley, all up in there. You know, the grapes and the agriculture, big in California. The Japanese people helped to develop a lot of that land. Because they're great rice growers in Japan.

Mason

So what happened to your friends that you knew in school? They just disappeared one day?

Ferguson

They just- You know, we started treating them strange.

Mason

Oh, so it really affected you, this propaganda?

Ferguson

Oh, sure. You know, you're young and impressionable, right? It didn't affect me as much, you know, because I always was a strange kind of a child. As I think back now, I kind of maintained my friends over that period. They started treating them pretty hostile. Of course, they all moved away, anyway. And a lot of that farmland that they once owned- Like there's a housing project in Watts

right now called Jordan Downs. That was a Japanese farm. There's a park in Watts right now called Will Rogers Park-103rd [Street] and Central-that was a Japanese farm that reached from 102nd Street all the way down to 107th Street. It was beans and other Japanese farms. There was another project in Watts now called- It's right now what Martin Luther King [Jr.-Charles R. Drew Medical Center] hospital sits on. They built a project there during the war years called Palm Lane. But that was a Japanese farm.

Mason

So was there any outrage in the community? I mean, when you went to church, did the minister say, "This is terrible"? Nothing?

Ferguson

Everybody was caught up in the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, you know. Many people now believe that they allowed that attack, that they knew about it way in advance, but they allowed it to become a sneak attack, because that was the way America could get into the war. Because Roosevelt was saying up to the last minute, "We don't want a war." And Roosevelt was the poor man's president. You know, my father loved Roosevelt. [laughter] You know, because Roosevelt instituted all those social programs after the Depression of the 1930s. The CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] camps-

Mason

Yeah. So was your father politically active? Was you family active politically when they were here? Do you remember?

Ferguson

They always were involved politically. Like they understood that you had to vote. There was no question that once I became twenty-one, you vote. Because being from the South, they understood how important it was for black people to vote. They knew how important it was for black people to be educated. My mother and father thought teachers were gods. I had started school in Oklahoma with all black teachers and then moved to California with all white teachers. It didn't matter to my folks. They thought teachers were gods, and they thought teachers were your way out. Education was your way out of any dilemma. So if a teacher did something to me at school, there was

no way in the world I'd come home and tell my parents, because they would beat me up and then take me back to the school and tell these teachers to deal with me by any means necessary. [laughter] So if I and a teacher got into it in school, that was the best-kept secret in the world. My folks never knew how much damage those teachers were doing to us in school.

Mason

Like?

Ferguson

By leading us into careers as service troopers. You know, they wouldn't encourage you to become professionals. They encouraged you to become carpenters, plasterers, never doctors, lawyers. And no thought of congressmen, senators- [laughter] No way. Then that war ended in 1945. And they had built all these projects in Watts because of the covenants. It was easier to build them in Watts rather than fight the covenants. But they didn't want to have any unrest at home while fighting the war at the same time, so they built all these- They didn't call them projects during that period, they called them defense homes-low-income houses. And they were nice. Probably Jordon Downs, Palm Lane, Imperial Courts- When they first built them, they were like three- and four-room houses with community baths in the middle of the complex, where you would take a bath and use the bathroom. The houses didn't have that in them. But they built them like [claps hands together]- prefabbed them for the war effort. Then, after the war, they rebuilt them. In fact, they built those things three times. People don't know that. I never lived in one of them, because we always had our own house. During that period there were many white and black people that had never lived in houses that good. Now, even a whole lot of white people moved from the South, too, during that period who were no better off than black people academically or economically, you know, and they moved into them. But they were more mobile because they could move into other communities-like Huntington Park, Compton-because they were white. But when the war was over and all the jobs disappeared- And you've got to remember that these people came from agrarian society-you know, farming. Most of them were in agriculture. And during the war, they really didn't learn any skills. Because one of the things about World War II was that- What made us a powerhouse during

World War II, and what made us able to produce all these things for war, was when they instilled the assemblyline concept, you know, where you do the same job day in and day out. I stood on this side with a bar, and you stood on that side, and grrrrrrrrrr. But you didn't learn any skills that way. And the few skill jobs that were learned were learned by the poor white people.

Mason

You say it was learned?

Ferguson

By the poor white people.

Mason

You mean they learned it?

Ferguson

They learned more skills, or the skills there were. They got the better jobs, whereas the black people just worked on the land. So when the war was over, these jobs all disappeared, and what jobs were left over, the whites got them, and the black people were left with none.

Mason

Did your mother work during the war?

Ferguson

My mother worked as a domestic her whole life. When she first came here, immediately she got a job for Loretta Young. And after leaving Loretta Young, she got a job for John Wayne. And then, after that, she- It wasn't until the 1960s that my mother quit doing domestic work and went to school and got a license to be a day care center person. God. You know, God bless her. I love her so much, but she really enjoyed being a domestic. [laughter] She really enjoyed working for those people.

Mason

Well, I guess she got to rub elbows with the rich and famous?

Ferguson

With a lot of people. In a way it helped me and my brothers and sisters, because by my mother working as a domestic, we never were locked into that area. She always found some way of bringing us out of that area, you know. She'd take us to work with her. She used to work in this neighborhood where I now live. So we could see another side of whatever life was about, right? And white people, you know, I guess they had an easier time with my mother because she was so light. She looked like one of them. But they never treated her like a domestic in her own mind. At a very young age, I couldn't tell the difference. If you worked for somebody, you worked for them, right? They never gave her a nickname. It was always Jewel. Well, she always referred to them as "Mrs." and "Mr."-which used to bother me as a young person. You know, I always thought they didn't have any respect for her. And people younger than her- Well, you know, that whole domestic trip.

Mason

Yeah. Well, how did your father deal with that?

Ferguson

He hated it. But it was-

Mason

Income?

Ferguson

Yeah. Because she used to always try- After the war, when my father lost his wartime job, he went for a long period without work. My mother used to always try to get him work with her boss, you know, doing something around their house-handyman or something. My father never could deal with that. Women basically are more into security for their family.

Mason

I agree.

Ferguson

And men are in this culture into ego, and especially if you're that way. My father insisted on- If another man called him by his first name, then he'd call you by your first name. That didn't set too well with a lot of people that you

worked for. He was constantly getting into trouble, and behind that he started drinking more and more. Same old trip as right now in 1990. Now that I'm older, I can see it. [Note: Ferguson added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.][The horrible racist treatment black men had to endure to keep a job. Since your children are shielded from this racist behavior, it is impossible for them to understand why their parents act a certain way, especially black men.] When you were younger, you- Kids are basically the most selfish people in the world. Their whole thing is "Make me happy." [laughter] They don't care how you do it, just "Make me happy." So he couldn't get jobs, right? By that time, the job that they had when they first came to California became industrialized. You know, they started having car wash places-automatic, right?-and did away with what he and his brothers knew how to do.

Mason

Were you working?

Ferguson

No. When the war was over in 1945, I was in junior high school. Of course, we never had too many problems economically, because on my father's side we came from a family-oriented society where everybody looked after each other. My father and brothers had that, you know. If it came time for graduation and I didn't have certain things to deal with that, my uncle would deal with it. We come from that close-knit kind of family.

Mason

So was your job then watching your two sisters to make sure they didn't get into any trouble?

Ferguson

Well, my father was basically- Because I was the oldest, right? I used to hate my sisters. [laughter] You know, as you get into puberty, you start resenting the fact that you always have to look after your two sisters. I had a brother who was born in 1943-he was also born in the house-so then I became like the parent for all three of them.

Mason

What was your brother's name?

Ferguson

David. He lives in Louisiana now. Because you know, we got into our teens, and we started going to parties and things, you know. We had a curfew. I had a curfew of midnight, but my sisters had a curfew of eleven, you know, which my mother quite conveniently instituted, because I had to bring them home. By the time I got them home, there was nothing I could do, right? And then, when my sisters started getting to be thirteen, fourteen, they knew that I couldn't leave a party without them, so when the time came when they knew they had to go home, they'd go hide. [laughter] And I'd better not come home without them, right? And by the time I rounded them up- Of course, once we got home my mother never blamed them, [laughter] which made me dislike them. I was so glad when they got to be sixteen and seventeen, when they could date and deal with their own thing. It freed me up. But by that time I was almost getting ready to get out of high school, because when I came from Oklahoma here I was in the first grade. I came from a black school in Oklahoma, and the work they were doing in California in the second grade I had had in almost like pre-school. Because my grandmother taught me to read from the Bible. I had good reading habits and all that. So they put me in the third grade. That's why I eventually got out of high school when I was sixteen, because I skipped a whole year. I didn't go to second grade at all; I went to third grade. Sometimes that can be damaging, you know, because-

Mason

You feel different.

Ferguson

Different, right. You're not with your peers. And sometimes you're going to feel that effect way down the line. But when I graduated from high school- I went to Jordan High School, where the senior and junior high school were combined. So when prom time came, I had to invite a ninth grader to the prom with me, because none of the tenth graders and eleventh graders and twelfth graders would come out to the prom with me. I was just too young. Just that one year when you're in high school makes a whole difference. When I got out of high school, by that time my family was kind of fragmented a little

bit. We all still lived together: my grandmother, who was getting up in age; my mother and my father were having a lot of problems; and me and my sisters were reaching puberty. My sisters were interested in boys, and I was interested in girls. And we had my little brother, who we all had to be interested in. But we were doing all right as a family. My father was having lots of problems. He and my mother's relationship deteriorated altogether. I graduated from high school on June 17, 1948. I missed being the valedictorian by a very few points; a girl beat me out. Of course, once male children get to be men, your parents want you to go on with school, but it's also time for you to go to work, you know. So I entered into Compton [Community] College-it was a little JC [junior college]-and set out to find me a job. Another friend of mine [Willie Woods], whom I had met in the seventh grade, we went downtown looking for a job. Of course, we had no experience in anything. And during that period it used to be that black people were always telling young black men to get a civil service job.

Mason

Yeah, the post office or something.

Ferguson

Because of security-right?-that whole thing. They started a lot of young black men who had some initiative, you know. But their mothers thought they were doing the best thing for you to be secure. So they encouraged you to do that. No one encouraged you to get into the private sector. So he and I wandered downtown into the Hall of Records, and we both applied for janitorial jobs with the County of Los Angeles, because that's the only thing we thought we might be able to do. We took a test. Passing was 70, and I made 70. To this day I think they gave me passing.

Mason

I can't imagine what was on the test. It was just for-?

Ferguson

The academic part I had no problem with.

Mason

Okay. But this was a test specifically-

Ferguson

The practical was-

Mason

-for the janitorial job?

Ferguson

The janitorial, right. I didn't know how to get gum off terrazo. I had never dealt with that. [laughter] The academic part I had no problem with-math and all that. But on those problems I must have made zero. I'd never heard of TSP and- But I passed. To this day I think they gave it to me. See, we're talking about 1948. The war hadn't been over but about two good years, so a lot of the men hadn't came home yet. And those men that did, they didn't want to take any job making \$150 a month, which was all right for somebody like me who was still at home.

1.3. Tape Number: II, Side One December 13, 1990

Mason

Last time we met, we left off just as you and your friend applied for janitorial jobs. You had taken the test, and you thought that they had passed you not of your own- You didn't know much about janitorial work. So you thought the academic part was okay, but the other part you didn't know so much about. But the one thing we didn't- This was after you went to the community college, right?

Ferguson

No. This was-

Mason

Or it was before?

Ferguson

This was right out of high school. Summertime. I graduated in summer.

Mason

Okay.

Ferguson

You know, in June. Willie and I had met when I was in the seventh grade, because that school [Jordan High School]-I think I told you this before-was a junior-senior high school, and we had been friends all through high school. Of course, on graduation night I'm not quite seventeen-wouldn't be seventeen until July 6. You're out of high school, and your life changes, you know. You think about all the things you want to do. I wanted to go to school, because education in my household was like pumped into you, you know, that that was the only way out of the so-called neighborhood or circumstances. I hate to use the word "ghetto." I hate that word.

Mason

But you said that you were living on 114th Street in Watts, which was, you said, sort of fairly upper-middle-class, middle-class.

Ferguson

Yeah. That's why I said it wasn't a ghetto. I mean, the whole community wasn't a ghetto. This word ghetto grew out of the sixties, when people started calling it ghettos when it was just a nice community, right? But still we were poor, you know. Not poor, poor, poor-not welfare poor. You know, everyone had to work. If I wanted to go to a movie, I'd earn money to go to a movie. It served my folks two purposes: it taught you work ethics, and my father [Henry Ferguson] always thought that if you earned something, you enjoyed it better. [laughter]

Mason

Did your parents have any particular expectations as far as your career was concerned? Or they just wanted-

Ferguson

Well, they tried to point you- In those days, you know, doctor, lawyer, teacher, right? I kind of wanted to be a teacher. I mean, that's strange that I wanted to be a history teacher. I loved history, and that was my goal, to be a history teacher. And I knew Compton [Community] College- I knew my folks couldn't send me to college because they couldn't give me money. And then I had two

other sisters and a brother still at home younger than I. So I decided I'd get a job and attend Compton College and then maybe later on go to a university. So it's Friday night and everybody's happy and everybody's kissing each other. We'd completed not these three years of school; we'd completed six years of school, right? Probably started out in B7 with a class of three hundred. And our graduation class from Jordan High School in 1940 was the largest ever graduated from Jordan High School, which was sixty-four people. At the time, you don't think anything about it, right? But you start out with three hundred, and then, when graduation day came, it was sixty-four. Of course, at that time I didn't think anything about it. I didn't think about what happened to the other young people. They just kind of disappeared, and you really weren't concerned. Because during high school they always kept new people coming in at the seventh grade, right? It wasn't like a senior high school by itself where you could keep track of everybody. And everybody came from the community that you'd seen- By being at a senior high school, you could know people six years older than you. You could know people six younger than you because of the time span you've spent in this high school. And then Willie and I were real good friends. "So what are you going to do on Monday?" "We're going to a party tonight, though, you know. Everybody is going to go to a party tonight." Now, my curfew even on graduation night was twelve o'clock, because my mom was concerned. [laughter] But I was going to stay out till two [o'clock] that night, you know. I didn't have a girlfriend. I had this girl who liked me, but I never knew her till almost graduation night. Her name was Frances Garner, and my name is Cecil Fergerson. So all through high school, we'd always sit near each other-F and G, because they had you alphabetically, right? And I guess I daydreamed about some other girls. You know, in high school you think about the popular girls who liked all the football players or that sort of thing. I never paid Frances any attention. We were good friends; we talked all the time. Another friend of hers brought it to my attention that Frances was in love with me, see. [laughter] And since I didn't have a girlfriend in my life, not a *girlfriend*, I decided to call her up. You know, she was very delighted. That's down the road a bit. But anyway, on graduation night she came and kissed me on my mouth, you know, and that was- My head was spinning all the rest of the evening. But anyway, I told Willie we'd meet up at the 103rd Street [train station], where they just put the [Metro Rail] blue line back in. In those days, they called that the old Watts local. The red car went to

San Pedro and downtown, and the Watts local went to Sierra Madre and then back to Watts, and it was housed in Watts. So I said, "Well, I'll meet you there on Monday at the train station. We'll go downtown and look for jobs"-not knowing what to look for. But we wandered into the Hall of Records. At that time the job applications were at the Hall of Records downtown. And they had job bulletins on the board, jobs that were available. We didn't qualify for any of them, me or Willie. The closest one we could qualify for was a janitor. So I said, "Well, I'm going to apply for the janitorial job, Willie." And Willie said, "Well, I ain't going to be no janitor." He said, "I think I'm going into the service." Well, prior to graduating from high school, in 1947-48, they instituted a thing called the National Guard, and they were going to get a lot of young black guys. You know, you go to meetings, they give you thirty dollars a month, and you play soldier, right? And uniforms and money. So everybody from my neighborhood was joining. So I came home and told my dad that I thought I might join, you know. And my dad, who was very race conscious, said to me, "Cecil, you ought to think about anything that the white man makes attractive to you. Why would he give you thirty dollars a month to play soldier? He won't pay for your education. You can't get a job. Why is he so nice to you for playing soldier?" He said, "If I were you, I wouldn't join that thing." You see, none of us ever fought for the country, you know, or had been in the service. He said, "If I was you, I'd take another look at that." So I didn't join the National Guard. And most of my friends who graduated with me and guys from the neighborhood, they were all joining the service. There wasn't a war on, you know.

Mason

It was like a club, I guess.

Ferguson

Like a club, yeah. But I went on down and applied for the job. Within two weeks I got a notice saying I was number twenty-six, but I was offered a job at [Los Angeles County] General Hospital. So I went out to the General Hospital, and they hired me as the janitor to the General Hospital. It just so happened that a lady lived across the street from me. Her name was Val Davis. She worked in the laundry at the General Hospital. She had been there for years. She made something like ninety dollars a month in laundry. So I told her I'd

been hired at the hospital, you know. She was very happy for me and said I could ride with her, except that she had to be at work at seven o'clock in the morning, and I didn't have to be there till eight, which meant I would have to leave home at six something with her and go wait to begin my employment. But General Hospital is a long way from 118th Street.

Mason

Where is it, or was it?

Ferguson

It was over in East L.A. You know, it's called [Los Angeles County-]USC Medical [Center] now. That's the hospital. One's a red building, and there's a newer building. We referred to the red building as the "old hospital" and the other one they built in the 1930s as the "new hospital." So I would ride with Val to work. Then, of course, she got off at three o'clock. I didn't get off till five, so I had to catch the streetcar home. And to catch a streetcar home, you had to ride a bus downtown from the hospital, get on the fast car, and ride to 103rd Street. It just so happened I lived on 118th Street, and there was another stop at 120-something called Springdale, which took me closer to my home. So I began employment. They put me on a ward to work. And I was very uncomfortable with all the sick people, you know. Sick people would ask me to do favors for them like, if I go out, to bring them things back. And I don't know whether I should do this, because I had been brought up to be very obedient to older people. I was just miserable, right? And finally a janitoress, an older woman, you know, she saw that I was having this big problem, and she pulled me to the side and said, "Young man, you can't do that. Just ignore them and do your work, because you might bring them something that makes them sicker."

Mason

What were they asking for? Like cigarettes and things?

Ferguson

Gum, candy, cigarettes, you know. I couldn't buy cigarettes myself, right? And drinks. [laughter] So I was on this ward. Boy, it was terrible. I mean, all these sick people, you know. I didn't have much work to do, physical work, but the

mental drain- So finally this white man who had hired me came up and said, "We've got a new job for you, Cecil." You know, I was like, "Well, thank you!"

Mason

How long did you work there?

Ferguson

I mean, a new job at the hospital.

Mason

Oh, okay.

Ferguson

He took me off the ward. So he took me upstairs to a place called the furnace. Of course, I didn't know what the furnace was about. There was another older man there; he was about seventy-something. Because, see, when I started, there were a lot of employees held over from World War II, who were older men. Like all the young men were off to the war, right? So a lot of older men got those jobs until the duration of the war was over. He was one of those people who was still there. So he showed me what to do. The job seemed simple. But I didn't know that they burned everything that came out of the hospital-everything. So the man said, "Well, your job, kid, will be- I'm going to dump these cans, and I'm going to slide them over to you, and all you have to do is flip them up, put them in this water, shoot this water over here, and rinse them out." But this man had one mission in life: to kill me. [laughter] I mean, he just kept cans stacked up, you know, and I'd be dealing with- Sometimes the furnace would stop up, and the smoke- You had to wear a mask all day long, and this gown, you know, and you'd be sweating.

Mason

It must have smelled awful.

Ferguson

And he would eat food from the trays that they bring down, with the boiled eggs and stuff. Well, he would eat, right? I was like, wow! [laughter] You can imagine to somebody not seventeen-right?-going wow! And he treated me so badly. You know, he wasn't good to me. But he was an old man, so I just took

it. Every now and then the furnace upstairs would break down, and you'd have to go out in the back and use the old furnace, which meant that you had to put everything on the ground and then shovel it up into the furnace. That's where he would send me all the time by myself. [laughter] Those guys would bring those trays down there with like a motor thing. They'd bring the trays and just leave them, and then I'd have to burn it, right? Sometimes I'd have four or five trays there. So one day I said to myself, "I want to be enterprising." Instead of putting the tram's stuff on the ground, I was going to pull a tram up to a furnace, take my holes, wet all the paper down in the front, and shovel the trash from the tray into the furnace, so there wouldn't be-

Mason

Two steps.

Ferguson

Two steps, right. I set the whole backyard on fire. [laughter] And they didn't fire me, right? I just knew I was going to get fired.

Mason

You were hoping, maybe. [laughter]

Ferguson

Maybe, yeah. Everybody understood, right. I didn't know then that it was hard to get anybody to do that job. I didn't know that at that time. They had found the perfect young patsy, right? So they said, "Junior, you've got to put it on the ground and shovel it in." And another man was there named Leonard Jones. He said to me- That first time he had said it. I ended up working with him for many years afterwards. He said, "Lazy men always do the hardest work. Remember that." And I said, "Yes, sir." So one day we were up there, up at the top of the big furnace. Boy, it was hot and it was sweaty, and my nose was running and I'm dying, you know. All of a sudden, I looked at that hole in the ground, and I took my gloves off and my apron off and my mask off, and the old man said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm going home!" [laughter] "I'm going home. I can't cut this." So I went downstairs to see the white supervisor. Of course, he tried to talk me out of quitting. He said, "Why don't you go on back to the furnace and work a little longer, and I'll try to find you

another job?" "No, I'm not going back there." He said, "Let's walk over to the other hospital." So he walked over to the other hospital, where the boss of the whole maintenance department was, a man named Newton. I'll never forget him: real red-looking man, heavyset. They had like this game, you know, that they must have been through many times with other people. "Oh, what's the problem, Cecil?" And I tell him my problem. "Well, let's see. We might have a job on a waxing crew in about a month." At night, you know, the waxing crew. "So why don't you just go on back to the furnace, and I'll work you into the waxing crew." I said, "I'm not going back to the furnace." [laughter] "I'm not going back to the furnace. That's out. I quit." He said, "Well-" So we got back to his office. This guy, for some reason, he told me, he said, "Don't quit, young man. Resign. Because if you quit a county job, it will be hard for you to get another county job. Just resign, and then you can work for the county again." So I said, "Resign, quit, it doesn't make any difference to me," right? And I hadn't made a payday, not a big payday. You know how you start and they give you- So he closed me out. And I said "Well, my money, you know." He said, "No, you have got to come back on the twenty-fifth [of the month] to get your money, because they pay every tenth and twenty-fifth." I mean, I didn't know. I thought they had the money right there in the safe, right? Give me my money, right? He said, "No. You can't do it that way, Cecil. The only way you can get some money is you have to get this voucher from me and go downtown to the city hall and have them give you a closing out." I said, "Fine with me." So I went down there. I waited all day. Finally, they gave me my check, which wasn't that much. I was only making \$173 a month. I got home around six o'clock in the evening, which with the daylight savings time is not too late, you know. When I got home, my mother [Jewel Kirksey Ferguson] said, "Cecil, there's a letter here from a place called a museum, and they're offering you a job at the museum." As a janitor, right. I said, "Mama, I don't want to be a janitor ever again." I said, "I'm going to school in September, and I'll find something to do." She said, "Why don't you just go see about it, Cecil." You know your mom, especially in those days. You know, civil service jobs- Your mom tries to set you into that direction, right? She said, "Why don't you go down in the morning and just look at it. It can't hurt anything. You aren't doing anything." And I know my mom. She wasn't asking me; she was telling me. So there wasn't any point in me saying that I wasn't going to do it, because that was my mama, right? And she was the lieutenant

general. [laughter] She really was the general. My father was a lieutenant. [laughter] So nine o'clock the next morning, I put my little clothes on, my little tie, and my hair parted to the right, and I went down to the [Los Angeles County] Museum [of Natural History]. When I approached the museum, you know, it's this big old place that I hadn't- The only buildings I'd seen that looked like that were like the school or college. I'd never been there. And the rose garden is sitting there. Right across the street is USC [University of Southern California], you know. And I'm saying, wow! So I go inside, and a man named [James] Armstrong-he was an Irishman-he said, "Yes, we have a job, but I'm supposed to interview an older fellow." He's saying, "I'll give the job to either you or him." He said, "Why don't you come back at about two o'clock, and I'll have a decision." It's only about ten thirty in the morning. So I said, "Now, if I catch the only streetcar-" Because to get to the museum, you had to catch the Watts local to Vernon [Avenue], then transfer to the V-car, which ran down Vernon to Vermont [Avenue] and went out to [Los Angeles] City College-the old streetcar system. But it had a stop at Exposition [Boulevard] and Vermont, and you just walked over to the museum. So I said, "Well, no point in my going home, because by the time I get home it will be time to come back. So I'll just wait. And I know I'm not going to get the job, because if it's between me and an older fellow, I know they're going to pick the older fellow. But at least I have something to tell my mom when-"

Mason

So at that point, did you want the job after you had been there?

Ferguson

I didn't want it.

Mason

You still-?

Ferguson

I was just going to play it out so I could tell my mom they picked the other man, right? [laughter] My mom could tell when I was lying, you know. My mom always could tell when I was lying, so there wasn't any point in doing that. So I waited till two o'clock and went back. He said, "You have the job."

This was a Thursday, I think. He said, "You work on the swing shift, and your off days are Mondays and Tuesdays." Wow! From four to twelve. I got to catch the streetcar to and back from work, which made me get home from work around two o'clock in the morning, right? And I'm thinking about enrolling in school, right? I had to go to school; I was just waiting for it to open. He said, "Can you start tomorrow?" We were having this big dance in Watts that Friday, and I told him I couldn't start on Friday. So he said, "Well-" See, he wanted me to start Friday so he could work me into that Saturday and Sunday shift. He couldn't find anybody who wanted that Saturday and Sunday shift. And then again they had the perfect patsy, right? Me! [laughter] I didn't know that at the time. He said, "Okay, then you come Monday." Years later I thought about that. Some things are just meant to be, you know. He could have said, "Do you want to work or not?" and not given me the job, right? So I said I would come in Monday. So I came in Monday, and he introduced me to a man named William McKinley Martin.

Mason

So this guy Armstrong was just the personnel director?

Ferguson

He was the supervisor of all the maintenance department: janitors, electricians, carpenters. He lived at Hancock Park, where the new museum is. They had a caretaker's house there. Part of his deal was that he got free rent. [laughter] It was really a fine mansion-looking [house] probably built in 1800-something. Of course, there wasn't anything out there then. There wasn't a bank-there wasn't anything but the May Company [department store]. There wasn't anything on the side of the street. Wilshire [Boulevard] was like a ghost town in those days.

Mason

It's hard to imagine.

Ferguson

Because the museum maintained that because it was part of their department, right? So when they had dirty jobs like cleaning something, they would send us over there to go down in the tar pits and do stuff. But that's

further down the road. So I met this man, William McKinley Martin. He was named after President William McKinley. He was named after one of the presidents that was assassinated. He was a janitorial-working farmer. He wasn't a farmer. They called him a janitorial-working farmer. He wasn't very friendly at the time. He said, "Okay, Junior. How are you doing?" You know, he started calling me "Junior" right away. And you came in, you know- It was a Monday, right, and he went upstairs and showed me some things I had to do. He had about three other black men who worked for him, all much older than me, and I began to work with them. I really didn't have anything in common with them age-wise. So I just worked with them during the week and sat there and listened to them tell all kinds of lies about women and gambling, which I knew nothing about, so I'd sit there wild-eyed and listen to all this crap. [laughter] Out of eight hours, we had about three good hours of work, and the rest of the time was just goof-off time. This ought to be a perfect, perfect place. Since I'm going to school in September, it would be a perfect place to be. Then, on the weekends I'm by myself, because I'm the only one that got to work Saturday and Sunday from four to twelve. It was pretty good during the wintertime, but in the summertime it was terrible, because-

Mason

Hard on your social life?

Ferguson

Because you'd look out the window, and all the young people from USC were holding hands, and in the nighttime they'd come to the park and neck. And they've got these big windows at the museum where I had to sweep at. You know, I was just- [laughter] I could look out and see them. And all I could do was communicate with Frances by phone, right? And in those days most parents wouldn't let their daughters go out in the week, although she had finished high school the same time I did. But her father was a preacher, and he liked me. He knew my dilemma, so he would let me take Frances out sometimes on my off-days, which helped a little bit. But the rest of your social life- Now, at the time I thought that was a terrible thing to do to a young man. But later on in life it was a blessing, because it took me off the streets on the weekend until I could mature. I didn't know how good it was then. Because I was catching a streetcar. But within a year, I had my own car. The first thing I

did was buy me a car. But still, it took me off [the streets] Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. I was at work when night came, you know, so all the bad things that happened in the community, I'd just hear about them.

Mason

Like what?

Ferguson

You know, dope, picking up guys, taking them to jail-my friends who I would normally be running with in the summertime. And school hasn't started, right? "Did you hear about Joe or Bill or-?" Because I ran with that element. Because I made up my mind earlier in life; I didn't do some of the things that would be a little safer-running around with them-than the other. [laughter]

Mason

They were probably the ones harassing all the other people-

Ferguson

They controlled all the other people. So now I've got to learn how to sweep, mop, clean bathrooms. One problem I had was cleaning a commode with my hands. I said, "I'm not going to do that. Give me a brush. I'm not going to do that." Mr. Martin said, "According to the code in the book you have to use your hands, so you can do a good job." I said, "I'm not going to do that, Mr. Martin." So he and I had problems from the jump. He would get down there and show me that he's doing it, why was I too good to do it? "I'm not going to do that." So September came, and I entered school. Jordan High School had poor counseling, you know. I knew what I wanted to be. I knew the kind of classes I had to take. But no one told me that if you hold an eight-hour job and you don't have a car or anything, you've got to spend two to three hours commuting. It would be best just to take a few units at first. You know, and not carry a-

Mason

Full load?

Ferguson

A full load, right. But I was carrying a full load, and I was catching hell. I managed a C average. Studying hard, you know, but I'm ripping and running. You know, I go to school at eight, leave at three, go to work, get off at twelve, get home around two, get up at seven, go to school. I'm doing pretty good. My love life is going down the drain, because some of the time I take out my girlfriend I go to sleep. She's getting mad. [laughter] And by this time, I'm starting to get to know the older guys the five days that I'm working with them. And they said that they play poker, they play coon can, they play all that stuff, you know. They talk about houses of ill repute, you know, in Los Angeles. I grew up in Los Angeles. I don't know anything about that, but it sounds exciting to a young man. And then, in 1949, six months later, I had me a car, and I was the only one who had a car in the whole group. So I used to pick up everybody and bring them to work on the five days I was there with them and then take them all home at night. But being young, you don't see what they're doing to you, because you just want to belong to this older group. So you don't mind, right? And we all lived in generally the same area. And then they started stopping off at bars at night. They would go see this bartender and tell him, "Is it all right if we bring Junior in?" And he said, "Sit at the back table," because it's after midnight. So that means I started getting home at four o'clock in the morning, because I'm all excited about all this new life, right? One day they paid the barmaid to sit on my lap and confuse me. That I didn't know about, right? [laughter] She just did a terrible job on me. And then they all laughed at me. But they were older men, you know, and I was taught to respect older men. That's when I came in contact with words like "Uncle Tom." I didn't know what that meant. I'd hear them talking with each other about how the thing you have to do is always keep a white man white.

Mason

What do you think they meant by that?

Ferguson

I would ask. See, I would sit there and listen. And then one of the men who was a little different- He had more compassion for me, right? I'd go and ask him, "What's Uncle Tom, Mr. Jones?" He said, "Oh, you know, that's some nigger who brown-noses the white people and sells out other black people."

Mason

You'd never heard that from your father?

Ferguson

No. As I grew up in Watts, it sounded like a snitch to me. I knew what a snitch was, and I knew we had ways of dealing with snitches in my little community. You'd deal with them violently-not kill them, you know, but beat them up terribly, right? Somebody goes to rat on you to the man, you know- He said, "You notice how Mr. Martin, every time he talks to white people he shows all his teeth and laughs when something isn't funny?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "That's what they call Uncle Tomming." I said, "Okay. So I can't do that." One time Mr. Martin told me, "Look, Junior-" Now, we get there at four; the building closes at five. That means everybody's gone home after five o'clock. But sometimes you have to do certain things between four and five, because technically you're there to work between four and five. So he told me, "Now, Junior, if you're going from one place to the other, always put a broom in your hand and walk fast." [laughter] Now, he really thinks he's giving me good information so I could survive. In his own mind, he was thinking that he was making it so I could survive and keep my job. But on the other hand, he didn't know what a terrible impact that would have on somebody as young as me, right? He was starving me on one end, but he's saving my job on the other. I mean, I didn't realize all this then, you know. I'd just go like-

Mason

How was he destroying you?

Ferguson

Keep a white man white.

Mason

Oh, he wasn't being sarcastic?

Ferguson

No, he was being truthful. "Put a broom in your hand and walk fast." Like he was jiving with somebody. Refer to white people as "Yes, sir" and "No, sir." You know, "Don't wear a hat inside the building." I mean, he was just-And I came home and told my dad, right? My dad said, "Don't you do none of that."

He said, "You're not going to be no janitor. If you say, 'Yes, sir' and 'No, sir' to somebody white, I'll kill you."

Mason

He really said that?

Ferguson

My father? Yeah. He meant that. He said, "The words are 'yes' and 'no,' and you walk fast if you want to walk fast. And you walk wherever you want to walk. And if you decide to wear your hat, you wear your hat." So I had some problems on the job. Then, by coming at four o'clock, I used to see other black guys there, you know. I used to wonder what their jobs were, you know? And then I started questioning, what were their jobs? They said, "Well, most of those guys you see had been janitors, but they had created another position in the museum called museum helpers that paid about ten dollars a month more than janitors, and they had promoted some black janitors to museum helpers. And the museum helper's job was primarily to help everybody in the museum, put up exhibits, you know. They did all the painting, all the nasty work, but none of the skill jobs."

Mason

It was a day job?

Ferguson

It was a day job. And the senior helper was a Jewish man named Henry Bukowski. They said, "It's hard to get that job, Junior." I said, "But I see on the board they have shipping clerks and preparators and curators." They said, "Forget about that. That's white men jobs." Wow! "Okay." They had an old white janitor at night. His name was Leo. He was the only white janitor that they had. He worked the midnight shift. I thought nothing about it at the time, except he worked the midnight shift, right? Of course, later on in life- Since he's white, they put him on the shift where he can't be seen doing janitorial work, right? Well, Leo died, and I said, "I'm going to ask for that job, twelve to eight"-you know, twelve at night until eight o'clock in the morning.

Mason

Because you were still in school.

Ferguson

I'm still in school, but school is getting shorter and shorter, because I'm staying up later, you know. I'm getting more into romantic life. I'm missing days, you know, and getting bad advice from the guys I work with. How I could get two jobs and make as much money as somebody with school. And then I said, "If I get this job at midnight, there's no chance that any of my friends will come in and see me doing janitorial work." [laughter] Because I'm on the midnight shift, right? Because my dad told us about how terrible it is being a janitor-you know, all my uncles and stuff. So I said, "Midnight shift would be perfect because you don't have that much work to do." So I got the midnight shift job, and I got the museum to myself. I was the only one there besides a guard.

Mason

So the whole time you've never come in contact, really, with any of the main museum staff?

Ferguson

At that point, very few. Just the guys I worked with. And since I didn't know how to Uncle Tom, you know- I'd see white people, you know; I just didn't have anything to do with them, right? I'd just get in the wind, right? I had no reason to carry on a conversation with them or anything. So I got this midnight-to-eight job. It was a blessing in one way, but it was a curse in another. Because I knew I could sleep on the job once I got there, you know, so you'd have a tendency to burn the candle on both ends. [laughter] You know, rip and run-make it to work at twelve, a little work, and get three or four hours sleep. About that time, me and Frances had busted up, and I had met a little girl [Dolores Cash] who was just going into high school, and I fell in love all over again. But I used to rush so I could get home in the morning and take her to school every morning. [laughter] And then I'd pick her up in the evening, take her home, try to get me some sleep, and go to work that night. I was all busy with her till eight, nine o'clock at night-whatever her folks' curfew was-and it was taking a toll on me. I started walking around in the museum. The museum was science, history, and art, you know. The museum became fascinating to me. I became fascinated with the museum. You could go from art to history and then to these big bones of animals that roamed the earth millions of years ago.

Mason

So how did they have that set up? In different wings?

Ferguson

Different departments, different wings. They had what they call habitat groups, and they had a floor on the second floor for the art, and then they had a whole wing for the- I think it's still there, the same one that's still there, with the big elephants and tigers and all that, which is really housed in the old museum, which was first built in 1908. I found that out by going through their files. Because I think the president then was Theodore Roosevelt. They had a photograph of him coming to Los Angeles and visiting the museum in 1908, 1910 or something. And it wasn't called Exposition Park then; it was called Agricultural Park. The [Los Angeles Memorial] Coliseum wasn't there then. USC was there, the rose garden, the armory, the museum. The rest of the things weren't there during that period. I just dove into that, started reading all that. I'd get through with my work- I wasn't paying art any attention because art really wasn't fascinating to me, because you'd walk around there and all you'd see was all these portraits of white folks. [laughter] So that really wasn't interesting to me at the time. One day they said that I had to go back on the swing shift for a while because they had a special show coming to the museum. And they had another thing happen in Exposition Park; that was that the Freedom Train was coming to Los Angeles. I had no idea what they were talking about. And they said an exhibit was coming to Los Angeles called *The Berlin Masterpieces*, which didn't mean anything to me. And then I heard them talk, you know, and I knew about Hitler, of course, and by listening I found out that these were paintings that Hitler had confiscated during World War II and hid in the salt mines in Holland. They had retrieved the paintings, and they were going on a tour all over the country. And the Freedom Train was a train that they would send around the United States with all the legal documents-the Bill of Rights and all that. And, you know, right there on Exposition were tracks, and they parked it out there. And the first day I came to work, boy, I saw all these people. I came inside, you know. And they had all these army personnel with the paintings.

Mason

The two things were-?

Ferguson

Happening at the same time.

Mason

They were part of the same show?

Ferguson

No. One was history and one was- All departments always fought, you know. But in order for the paintings to travel, the army had to be with them. The whole time the exhibition was there, army personnel stood by each painting.

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Ferguson

They wore white gloves and stood at attention. And they set up barracks there in the museum. The soldiers lived there.

Mason

Really? [laughter]

Ferguson

Inside the museum.

Mason

Oh, my God.

Ferguson

And of course, we were there from four to twelve p.m., right? And, you know, soldiers are crazy. You know, this is after World War II-peacetime army, you know. Soldiers get drunk, you know.

Mason

Before Korea?

Ferguson

Before Korea, yeah, in '49 I think. They'd come down to our house and bring whiskey, you know. The guys would get drunk with them. And then the guys would cook up food, like gumbo and stuff. And you know how white people are: "This is all good food!" You know, a lot of southern people are in the army. And one of the guys who worked there was the brother of the guy who was now the senior helper, who was a black man named Willie Knox, because they had made a preparator out of two white boys: Henry Bukowski and another white boy named Cosgrove. They had given them preparator jobs.

Mason

So they had graduated from-?

Ferguson

From the helper. They named Willie senior helper. He had his own little crew now of black people that were helpers. And his brother [Sam Knox] came out here, and he had gotten his brother a job as a janitor. Willie and him were Creoles, you know, who look white. So this old army sergeant who had been in the army for years- At one point we had to go back to work. We had a real big cleaning problem-all those people coming through the museum-but sometimes we would just push the trash on the freight elevator and just bring it downstairs. I mean, people were standing in line for blocks to get in to see that show. So I was fascinated by that. And even every night when I'd clean up, I'd find a one dollar or two, sometimes five dollars. [laughter] When you change your money so fast, they drop it in the trash, and cleaning up, I'd find the money. Of course, I wasn't going to turn it in; I kept it. One night after we were all- Willie's brother drank real heavily-right?-and sometimes he'd get so intoxicated he couldn't work. So other guys would just say, "Cool it." So he was still in the little place we called the dollhouse, where we'd go dress. And this old white soldier, who had been so friendly to buy all of us whiskey and stuff, he was there with Sam by himself. He was drunk-right?-and he thought Sam was white. So he told Sam, "How can you stand all these niggers all the time?" And Sam- We heard all this screaming. We ran in. Sam's drunk. He blinks his eyes when he's drunk. Well, he's got this white boy, and he's got his knife out, and he's mad. He's going to kill him, right? It wouldn't be too cool to kill army personnel. [laughter] Then they'd know they'd been doing all that drinking at night, and bust the whole thing. So they calmed Sam down. And

the white boy still didn't realize. He's drunk, right? Sam looked like a white boy to him-you know, he's light-skinned. You know how easy white people are fooled about what nationality black people are. And I was sitting there watching all of this. Later on that night, that white boy just came back and apologized. "God damn, I'm sorry." [laughter] And they accepted it. I said, "Wow!" You could imagine. I'm about going on nineteen now. I'm going like, "Wow. Just that he's saying he's sorry, and that's the end to it. They go back to drinking and doing whatever they were doing." So I started watching the bulletins around there, you know, and would see certain jobs.

Mason

So what lesson did you learn from that? You were saying that it struck you that they just accepted the apology.

Ferguson

I started thinking about the things that black men must have to go through just to survive. Because all those guys there had two or three jobs. Of course, I was still living at home, so it wasn't necessary for me to have- I still lived with my folks. Those men were taking care of families. So they had other jobs when they came in the evening. They'd come off another job, or they'd go to one when they'd leave there, just to survive, right? So things come on the board, like a pharmacy helper came on the board. I said, "Ah, this is my way out of this janitorial stuff." So I go down to take the test for this pharmacy job, pass it. They fail me on the interview. And I look experienced. I'm not thinking about it; I just accepted it. Then jobs come up at the museum-shipping clerks and that sort of thing, you know-and I file for the jobs, make good scores, and then I'd fail the interview. I still don't know the politics of the whole thing, right? I just had to wait my turn or whatever it is. A helper's job came on the board, so I filed for that, and I made number one on that one. [laughter] And another guy I knew-his name was Walter Wilson, who later on became a packer at the museum-he had just come there and worked in the janitorial department. So he's older than I am. He took the test, too, and he ended up number three. Well, when the results came back to Willie Knox, everybody was surprised that I was number one, because I hadn't discussed the job with anybody on the job, because I didn't know anything about that process, right? I just went and took the test. But now they've got to deal with me, because I

work there, right? And then I didn't see how they prostituted black men, you know, make them all compete for one job, make them almost start disliking each other for that period. I didn't know about all those things yet. I mean, it's so vicious. So Willie Knox-I called him Mr. Knox then-he called me to his office. I don't even know him, but he knows of me. He said "Junior, I see you're number one on this test." I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "Well, you know that I can pick any of the first three that I want." I said I didn't know. He said, "Well, I'm going to pick Wilson. But the next time they have a job, it will be yours. I'm going to pick Wilson." So I said, "Okay, sir. No problem." So when I got back to the other janitors, they're telling me, "Well, you know why he picked Wilson? Because they're drinking buddies." [laughter] All kinds of crap, right? Ah, well. Nothing I could do about it, right? So it's getting to be in the 1950s, and now the Korean War is on. The draft is on, and they made that National Guard I told you about part of the regular army and shipped them off. And they're getting after the guys- I'm still going to school. So I tried to get a school deferment. They turned me down. So I was coming home from school one day, and I stopped up on 103rd Street before going to work. I was around the pool hall, and I was listening to the guys saying, "Did you hear about Mark? Did you hear about this person, that person?" all from my little community who had gotten killed in Korea. So I said, "Well, this is no place for me." [laughter] So my oldest sister [Jewel Fergerson Tillman], she had a friend. Her name was [Laura] Lorraine Vaughn, whom I eventually married, by the way. But she was a friend of my sister's. And her sister [Dorothy Vaughn] could type. So I went by her house, and Lorraine was there. I wrote this letter to the draft board, and I asked Lorraine if she would get her sister to type it for me. By that time my mother and father had split up. So I asked for deferment on the grounds that I was the only support of the family. I wrote this sad letter, right? Dorothy typed it for me, and I sent it off to the draft board. About a month later they sent me [something] back, and I was reclassified 3A from 1A. And what was so funny was my mother had no compulsion about opening my mail. [laughter] You know, she'd open my mail up. Naturally, if it's from the draft board, my mother wants to know what's in the mail, right? And she had told my sisters that I had been reclassified. But they wanted to make a joke out of it. So when they saw me, they said, "Ha! Ha! You're still 1A."

Mason

Oh, no! That's terrible.

Ferguson

They were making fun, right? There's an interesting part of that story. Prior to that, prior to me going and writing that letter, my grandmother [Classie Gayle Ferguson] had moved in with my father's youngest brother [William Ferguson]. I grew up with my grandparents-I think I told you that before-and when I had any problems, I used to always go tell my grandmother about these problems. So I went by the house. My grandmother always could tell when something- I either needed some money or I had some problems. She said, "What's the matter, Cecil?" I said, "You know, this army thing, Grandma. They're killing our people." And my grandmother said, "Yeah, I know about it." She said, "But I took care of you." I said, "What do you mean you took care of me?" "Well, I had a long talk with my master last night about this army thing," referring to God as her master, right? She said, "I discussed it with him, and he said, 'You've got nothing to worry about because he's got nothing to worry about.'" At that time I had not written that letter. My grandmother, you know, she's real religious. I said, "God ain't down here; it's the white folks [who are] trying to send me off to the service," right? [laughter] And I got that deferment. And even after writing letters to the draft board- You know, the draft board was in your community, and the board was made up of your neighbors and stuff. It just so happened my draft board had basically white people on it. It was on Main Street, because hardly any black people lived on Main Street in that district at that time. So the whole draft board was basically white people. And they had you come in and tell your story to them before you could get your deferment.

Mason

But they didn't know you, so they didn't know whether you were telling the truth or what.

Ferguson

No. But I'm just saying, I didn't expect them to give me the deferment. Why should they, right?

Mason

Okay. So what is 3A? I don't know.

Ferguson

Well, my mother said that my grandmother took care of it with her master, right. Naturally she would say that, right? But I knew I didn't go into the service. And a lot of guys who put in for deferments got turned down. Either God did it or I was at the right place at the right time or whatever. So it's early 1951, and everything's pretty good. I'm making pretty good money, you know. By this time I've gone back on the graveyard shift. I've got me an extra job. I've quit school. I got an extra job at Douglas [Aircraft Company]. I'm making all kinds of money. I'm saving money.

Mason

So you just quit school because you had had enough of work and then going to school?

Ferguson

Enough, and frustrations and partly from getting into an older crowd, you know. I was a late bloomer, actually, when it came to, like, life. So now I'm just beginning to bloom. You know, women, life, my mama not telling me what to do. And I really wasn't getting any good advice from anybody but my mama. You know how that is.

Mason

Just one more question: What did you study in college? You said you wanted to be a history teacher. So you majored in history?

Ferguson

Uh-huh.

Mason

And you studied the whole-

Ferguson

That led up to that. I had French, psychology- I think I've got the thing in there someplace.

Mason

Oh, that's okay.

Ferguson

Because I don't throw things away. And my little girlfriend that I was in love with- We had busted up, because she had graduated from high school, and her mother told her that, since we had been going together so long and she was so young, she should go out with other guys before she decided to marry me. Because I was going to marry her, you know. And when she went out with other guys, I was destroyed. [laughter] I just never forgave her. And while I was going through my crying period, my sister's friend, Lorraine, called me up and asked me to take her to a party. So I took her to this party. And when I got to this party, all my friends were there. We was [inaudible]. I met another girl who asked me to take her home. So I could have asked my sister's friend, "Could I could take you home?" But I asked to come back and take this other girl home, and she said okay. But when we got to the house, she [Lorraine] wouldn't get out of the car. [laughter] Well, she confessed her love for me. She'd been in love with me for- And she had sat through Frances and she had sat through Dolores, and she wasn't sitting through anybody else, right?

Mason

Oh, my goodness. [laughter]

Ferguson

So we ended up getting married from that little cleansing of the soul or whatever you want to call it. It's in the fifties. It's now '51. We didn't get married right then. We had this nice house- Best house we had lived in in a long time prior to first coming to L.A. I really loved that house, and everything was good. I was working and taking care of my family- Because of the two jobs, I had no problems. But the [land] lady- Her son and his wife had busted up in Buffalo or something, and he was coming to California, and she wanted to give him the house that she said we could live in forever. And I had saved up some money to buy me another car. So I decided that I was going to buy me a house, because I wasn't going to have my mother have to move around anymore. So I bought a house like on Eighty-ninth Street in 1951. I think I was about nineteen. But prior to that- I forgot to mention this- when I was going

down to the museum to look for the job, you'd transfer at Vernon Street, and you got off at Vernon, and there was this box there with a picture on it.

Mason

There was what with a picture on it?

Ferguson

It was this box with this picture on it. It was like a jukebox, but it had a picture on it, right? I said, "Wow, what's this?" And in the picture was Louis Jordan. And you put a nickel in there, and it would- Rather than just listen to music, you could see it, right? I said, "Wow!"

Mason

How could you see it?

Ferguson

It was like an early thing for television. It was one of the earliest things in television that came out real early, but I just never had seen one before. So when I got to the-One day-I was working at the museum a few months- Willie Knox had all the guys come over to his house to see a baseball game. I said, "See a baseball game?" And he said, "Yeah. You can come too, Junior." So I went over to his house, and he had this little bitty screen, twelve inches, and he put a magnifying glass in front of it. [laughter] Have you ever seen those?

Mason

No.

Ferguson

Early television?

Mason

They must have one at the museum.

Ferguson

Yeah. [laughter]

Mason

But I've never seen one.

Ferguson

He had a magnifying glass with it. Jackie Robinson had just gotten to the big leagues, you know, and everybody was sitting around and rooting for Jackie every time he'd come up. And they were selling televisions, but I wasn't exposed to them. But I went and bought one. It was a Tele-King. I bought one in 1950. You know, it was the first television that came to the house. I just thought I'd mention that. So I bought this house in '51. By this time, I had gotten the helper job at the museum. Willie Knox liked me for some reason. And Willy Knox was the kind of man who didn't like to ever go to work and get paid. He liked to show up in the morning and then leave and go drink all day- you know, drink beer all day. And in me he found somebody who he could leave the job to and it could get done. I'd mix all the paint- By this time, they had this terrible fight on in the museum, because the exhibitions department didn't want to fool with art shows. They wanted to do the science shows and the history shows- you know, all the making of cases and- Because the art wasn't anything, right? So they reduced it down to where the helpers, which were the black guys, did all the art shows. You know, we could do all the painting, hang all the pictures. They wouldn't fool with it.

Mason

So you would just hang things wherever you wanted to?

Ferguson

No, they had curators. But the guy who was head of the exhibitions department, he had been there so long that-

Mason

This is Valentiner?

Ferguson

[Dr. William R.] Valentiner was a chief of- How did you hear about him?

Mason

I've read of him in some journal or something.

Ferguson

The director was a man called Breasted, James [H.] Breasted [Jr.]. His father had gone into King Tut's tomb. Dr. Valentiner was a chief curator of art. He was an old man then. But he was like one of the foremost- If he'd say something was authentic, it was authentic, right? And I understand that later on in years there were a lot things he said were authentic that were-

Mason

We had started to talk about what you were saying, that nobody wanted to deal with the art, that all the black guys got to be preparators, and then there was some-

Ferguson

They were helpers; they weren't preparators. Later on I found out the reason why they created the helper job, which was that anytime they wanted an art show, they used to get all these janitors and things to go paint and do the shows. This one white curator [James Byrne] thought that it was demeaning [to the art] for the janitors to be handling the European art and stuff. So he suggested they take some of the janitors and make them helpers so it would look better. [laughter] And give them a little raise, right? And the thing that amazed me when that came down is how these black men started competing against each other for just ten dollars a month or fifteen dollars a month or whatever it was. It almost broke up friendships, right? Everybody trying to get in position and talk to somebody they thought could help them get the-

Mason

Did they see it as a change in status, too? Or was it just the money?

Ferguson

Just the money. Just the money. Fifteen dollars a month meant a lot to them, because they came from the school where good white people look after you, you know. I'm putting this all in perspective years later, not at the time it's happening. You know what I'm saying. Because at the time it was happening, I was observing it, but I knew I didn't want to be a part of it. But I didn't know about the history of that. Because growing up in Los Angeles, as you [may be able to] see since you've been here, you could live in a community and never

communicate with another community, because Los Angeles is so big. And when you think about that, all over here is less than fifty years old, a lot over here. So you could be in a community, and all your needs were in that community, and you would never leave that community. One reason why I left pretty early on, I had to leave, was because my mother was a domestic. So we left a lot. So black people could easily be fooled that California was non-prejudiced, because it wasn't like cities in the East and the South where they were smaller and you almost had to come in contact with other races and that sort of thing, you know. So I lived my whole young life never being confronted with racism, blatant racism.

Mason

Except against the Japanese. [laughter]

Ferguson

Yeah, well, you kind of bought into the war thing with that. They took you on that survivor trip, you know. They made you believe that they were threatening all of us, [laughter] you know, by blowing up our own country. It became *our* country, you know. It's one of the amazing things that when they bombed- I told you about that part when they bombed Pearl Harbor and guys were going down the street hollering, "Extra! Extra! War declared!" The part I didn't tell you was that during that bombing of Pearl Harbor, they looked up there, and there was a gun going off, shooting down all these Japanese planes, right? And when the thing was all over, they wanted to run up there and find out who that man was who manned that gun so that they could give him a hero's welcome and everything. They ran up there, and it was a black cook named Dorie Miller. [laughter]

Mason

How did you find out?

Ferguson

When I got into history. See, all the information is there; they just don't make it available to you. You know, that information is right at UCLA where you work, but if you don't go look for it, you never know about it. They don't come and tell you about it.

Mason

Yeah, where is it? In the archives?

Ferguson

In the archives. It has to be there. It's part of- That's one thing Europeans don't do. They don't throw away their history. They just hide it. But it's there. I mean, Dorie Miller is there. So you can find him, I'll bet you, at UCLA. Dorie Miller was really the first hero of World War II. But later on a guy named Colonel Kelley got his plane off, and, as the story goes, he dove his plane into a Japanese ship. Have you ever heard that?

Mason

No.

Ferguson

Okay. And some people said he had no choice because his plane was damaged and the plane just ran into the ship, right? But they needed a hero for World War II, you know, for the propaganda machine, to get us interested in the war. So that was the hero, Colonel Kelley. But in essence, though, Dorie Miller was really the first hero. They gave Dorie Miller all the stuff, and they put him on a ship and sent him back out there, and he died mysteriously at sea. No one knows how. Now, I was seven, eight years old when the war broke out, but I got that history years later, when I became interested in it, which is going to be an interesting part of our conversation when we get to that. So I bought this house, got married and- It's in the 1950s, and I'm starting to get more and more- By being a helper, I'm more and more involved with the art. I'm not being paid for it, but I'm involved in it. And I was really fascinated with the French impressionist period for some reason. I guess because maybe their lives were parallel to mine- you know, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Gauguin was crazy. [laughter] Van Gogh cut off his ear, you know. Just something fascinating about those, about Paris, you know, Jack the Ripper, the whole bit. I don't know, I was fascinated by that. So I plunged in to learn all I could about that period. Then they had examples at the museum- not many, but some. Renoir, I liked his colors, you know, the bright colors. And Gauguin. I liked it when he went to the islands and stayed, before he got leprosy, you know. And I kind of liked the story of how he left England as a banker and married this

girl, you know. It was romantic for me. I just liked that period. So in 1958 or '59, or in the mid-fifties, art began to change in the United States in terms of its involvement. That's when I got on it myself. We started doing more art programs. The openings started getting bigger. The involvement started getting- The curators changed.

Mason

That was your impression working at the museum?

Ferguson

That was my impression working at the museum. Before, all the curators were- [laughter]

Mason

Snooty, yeah.

Ferguson

Well, it seemed like during the mid-fifties the curators started- Guys who went to school became art majors, you know. They weren't sons and daughters of rich people; they were more friendly, you know. And art began to change. They couldn't have an art show without me being invited because I did all the mixing of the paint, almost laid it out-hung it, you know. So I began to feel really important by- But my attitude hadn't changed any, right? Then a man named Richard [F.] Brown came to Los Angeles, and Richard Brown- What shall we call him? A liberal? [laughter] Yes.

Mason

I don't know what you want to call him.

Ferguson

You know what a liberal is? Anyway, he had the kind of personality where people liked him, right? I'm not saying he liked black folks, but he treated black folks differently.

Mason

Like how?

Ferguson

Speak to you, have lunch with you. Little things, you know. And the guys just fell in love with Richard Brown, because he- He could get them to work overtime late at night. You know, he just- But Richard had problems with the other part of the museum. So when they didn't want to do Richard's shows, he said, "To hell with them." He'd get all the black guys to do them, right? And then, when he came to Los Angeles, he decided he wanted to build a museum in Los Angeles, an art museum, and he set out to do that. The next thing that really impressed me was the van Gogh show. I already liked van Gogh. Then they had a van Gogh show that came out the same time that *Lust for Life* came out, the motion picture-I think it was 1959 or '58 or something-and when they opened the van Gogh show up- We had put that van Gogh show up, you know. And people were standing in line for two or three blocks to see van Gogh. Of course, I was very impressed with that, that people would stand in line.

Mason

Yeah, I mean the stories were that people in Los Angeles didn't have that much interest in art, but many people were interested in some things, I guess.

Ferguson

Hollywood did a lot, too, for *Lust for Life*. And Kirk Douglas was hot then, you know. I mean, I put it all together later on. And the movie economy, see, the movie economy- See, after World War II- I used to hear this all the time from most of the people who ran things, like new money and old money. [laughter] Well, the old money was into Winslow Homer, Sargent, European culture at some level, you know. Most of the museum's collection was- It wasn't a Rembrandt, it was from the school of Rembrandt. You know what I mean? So they didn't have a whole big collection of that period. Of course, they lean to the nineteenth-century French art, right? And all these people who made all this money during World War II, which they considered the new money- plus, there was a lot of money in the Hollywood colony-they began to buy French impressionists' work. A lot of it was phony. They said there was another guy in Beverly Hills that was turning out van Goghs better than van Gogh. [laughter] Because if you didn't have one hanging in your house, you didn't- I heard a curator say one time that Modigliani- this was when Modigliani was in the market-he'd have to have had to paint every day of his life, because he died at

something like twenty-six, twenty-seven years old. So, in other words, he's saying there's a whole lot of Modigliani fakes floating around, because he's easy to copy. And then we go into the 1960s. By the 1960s, I've got three children, and we're doing our shows, and I'm really having a good time. But the whole point to this thing is the museum. Black guys still can't do anything but be helpers and janitors. They can't be a preparator, they can't be a curatorial assistant, they can't be a curator. When I first went there, you couldn't be a guard.

Mason

Why is that?

Ferguson

They wouldn't hire you! See, the guard job was better than- The guard job was held down by old Caucasians that had been in the service, or old policemen and firemen, and they took them jobs to subsidize their pensions. Those jobs was better than what black men got as a helper or a janitor.

Mason

Because they had less work to do or-?

Ferguson

Economically. It paid more. But it was never attractive to me to be a security guard, even for the money, because it was an old man's job. You stood in one place all day. So I never wanted to be a security guard, not even for the money, because I wanted to be involved with the arts-you know, hands-on and doing that sort of thing. And then there were certain people with certain expertise in there. A lot of old Europeans worked in the museum when the museum was nothing but just this little old place to sit over here on Exposition Boulevard where a lot of weird people worked, right? It was like a society of its own. You know, nobody bothered us. They had shows, and the elite would come.

Mason

Did you go to openings and things?

Ferguson

I used to. Now, that's interesting. One of the duties of a helper, after putting the exhibits up during the day, you'd come back that night and serve.
[laughter] In a white coat, you'd serve coffee and cookies. That's all they used to have.

Mason

They didn't want your head to get too big! They wanted to remind you-

Ferguson

And we made the coffee!

Mason

So they were trying to remind you, do you think, even though you-?

Ferguson

Well, you know, we used to get four hours overtime for that-no money. They called it comp time. And you could get four hours off at a later time, right. And the black guys loved it, you know? I mean, it was a kind of thinking that was- You know, when I first worked there, William Randolph Hearst was a big name. I didn't know anything about him, but people at the museum called him "chief." You know, even the black guys who had been there a long time, they made like a national hero out of him. "Mr. Hearst this, Mr. Hearst that." And in the museum, they had a Marion Davies room. Marion Davies was a movie star-she was also Randolph Hearst's mistress. He had put this whole gallery together for her where the walls were velvet and the ropes were silk, you know. [laughter]

Mason

Lots of good taste.

Ferguson

So black guys who had been there a long time- See, they had one guy who had been there a long time; his name was Rudy Glover. He had started there in 1930. And they had another lady there named Mattie Glen, who had started there in the early thirties, like 1930. And what was ironic about it was Mrs. Glen stayed in my neighborhood. So when I came to work there, I found her there. Her name was Mattie Glen. Her folks had come to California before the

1900s, and they had homesteaded land in Watts. And the street her house was on was named after her family; it was called Glen Avenue. Later on they changed it to Mona. It's not Glen anymore, it's called Mona Boulevard now. When I lived there, it was Mona. But I found this out when I started researching for history myself. I lived right around the corner from her. There she was. I don't know how true this is, because I've never really authenticated this, but they said during the Depression in the late 1930s that they had to close the museum down because they couldn't keep it open, so the only two people who kept a job during that whole period were Mattie and Rudy, because the building had to be cleaned.

Mason

I am surprised they didn't get any money like through the WPA [Works Progress Administration].

Ferguson

It didn't stay closed long. You know, it was for a short period of time. Of course, Mattie and Rudy liked to talk about that. It did something for their souls, right? "Yeah, they closed this whole museum down, but they-" It gives some credibility for being a janitor, right? I mean, they used to tell that story with pride. I almost had pride for them, listening to it- right?-how important they were the few months they had to close the museum down. Then they started having lots of art shows in the fifties. I didn't know it at the time, but prior to 1945 the arts in the United States weren't that big. It's that post-World War II [period], when [Willem] de Kooning and [Franz] Kline and all those Jewish artists came from Europe because of the Stalin and Hitler thing, which they- They called it the New York School of painting.

Mason

Right.

Ferguson

And then the museum became active, you know. A lot of curators came, a lot of art historians came. They would lecture, and I would listen. I told you about the broom bit; that was earlier. But now I could go sit down and listen to the lectures. And Dr. Brown started talking about building a museum. And other

guys started getting jobs that came after me, like preparator jobs. And I was probably offered a job and wouldn't get it, right? And they would tell me that my attitude was bad, the black guys. See, the black guys did me more harm than anybody, really, because other people just coming in didn't know all this. But it's survival, you know. We've always done that. [laughter] And one day- Dr. Brown had a secretary who liked me. Her name was Jane Hoag. He eventually married her. She was asking me why was I still a helper, and I told her why, and she said, "Bullshit." This is getting into the sixties, you know, and the flower children and all those things were beginning to happen, right? She said, "Well, I'm going to talk to Richard." So one day he saw me- Richard Brown- and he said, "I want to see you in my office, Cecil." I came into his office, and he said, "One thing I want you to know is that I don't care whether a person is blue or green. As long as they know how to do a job, I will hire them." And I said, "How about black, Mr. Brown?" [laughter] He took a long, hard look at me, and he told me, "I'll see you later, Cecil." This was in the morning, and early on I saw Jane. She said, "Come on, Cecil, you're going to have lunch with me." We went over on Figueroa [Street] and had a pastrami. Right on the corner of Figueroa and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard there used to be a pastrami shop, across the street from the [Los Angeles] Sports Arena. She said, "Damn, Cecil! I'm trying to get you a job, and you alienate the man." I said, "I wasn't alienating him. He said green or red, and I just asked him, 'What about black people?'" [laughter] So they started to raise money to build this new museum, and they made a couple of guys preparators. I wasn't one of them. I was still a helper. And one of the jobs, you had to have somebody- Every time they had a fund-raiser, somebody had to carry this rendering around, this model of the proposed new county art museum, and that became my job. And that was a blessing, because I was in on all the meetings, listening as they talked about building this art museum. Finally they got everything out of the way, and they started building the art museum. It was completed in 1964. So the next time we meet, we'll talk about that period. And if I regress a little bit back, it will be all right, because you can put it into perspective when you go over it, because I might have missed some things leading into that.

1.5. Tape Number: III, Side One January 10, 1991

Mason

The last time we met, you were about to be promoted to art preparator, or you requested to be promoted to art preparator. You talked about going in to talk with Jane Hoag about that-

Ferguson

Well, in the late 1950s, the [Los Angeles County] Museum [of Natural History] became another kind of institution. Although the art department was a department in the Museum of Natural History- But the art museum hired a new kind of curator; a man named Dr. Richard F. Brown became, I guess at that time, the chief curator. And James Elliott was hired as a curator.

Mason

This is around the mid-fifties?

Ferguson

Late fifties. And they seemed to, at that time, represent a new kind of curator than I had been accustomed to.

Mason

What happened to Dr. [William R.] Valentiner?

Ferguson

Valentiner? I forget the year that he died, but I think it was in the late fifties. He was a real old man when I met him, a very nice man. He walked with his head straight up in the air, you know. I knew that people respected him a great deal in the art world. I could tell that by conversations that I'd hear around the education department and other departments. But the museum- The new curators who came at that time-James Elliott and Richard Brown as the chief curator-to me they weren't the kind of stuffed shirts that all the curators that I had been around up until that point had been. They were more open.

Mason

The last time you said that people like Valentiner and the old curators, they were European immigrants, whereas the new curators got their jobs more because of education rather than connections.

Ferguson

Well, I think that Valentiner and some of the people I spoke to you about being European immigrants, they were nicer to me than some of the homegrown curators that seemed to be the sons of rich people in America. To me they seemed like stuffed shirts, you know. They didn't want to communicate unless you were on their own level. But I'd say it seemed to me at that time the museum had a lot of people working in the museum that were from a European kind of background. Now, they were very nice, because they would share some expertise with you. Like I spoke to you about this man named Chappy who was a shipping clerk and a packer. Well, I would spend a lot of time with him, and he'd show you a lot of ways of packing and that sort of thing. But the curators cut themselves off. You know, they were just kind of like- That sort of thing. Highbrow. But in the late 1950s, I guess, the whole United States was changing, especially in the art world. I gathered that just by being there. We started doing a lot of art shows during that period. And I think I mentioned to you before, there was a battle between the exhibitions department and the art department, where the exhibitions department put the art department last on their priorities. So at that time, around the midfifties, there were only three people in the museum who were black who had any kind of job that wasn't janitorial or museum helper. They finally hired a man named Robert Fisher as a shipping clerk. You would think this would be like getting a senator's job at the museum, [laughter] because that was a breakthrough. And then in the art department they hired a black man to be an art preparator. His name was James [W.] Allen. The rest of us were either janitors or helpers.

Mason

You said there were three. You've given me two names.

Ferguson

Let's see. Jimmy Allen, Bob Fisher- Well, you might consider Willie Knox. He was what they called the senior helper.

Mason

And they were all hired when Rick Brown was there? Or this was before?

Ferguson

When Rick Brown was there. Well, Rick Brown didn't have anything to do with hiring them at that point. But because finally the senior helper at one point was- Well, I told you it was a man named [Henry] Bukowski. He died-he was Jewish-and Jim Allen got his job. The other art preparator-I forget his name now, but I'll think of it-he was Caucasian. He left the art museum to go back to school, to medical school, which left that job open. And the third person was a man named Louis Fuller, who became the art- No. He became the art preparator with Jimmy Allen when Bukowski died and this other man went back to school. Then we had two art preparators, and then Jimmy became the senior preparator. Louis Fuller was a preparator, and then we had a man down in the shipping department named Bob Fisher. Then, in the late 1950s, a lot of things started happening in the arts, I guess across the nation. We started getting a lot of dynamic art shows. At the same time, Richard Brown, who was hired in the fifties, I guess, he ended up in Los Angeles. Los Angeles needed an art museum.

Mason

Do you want to talk specifically about any of these shows? Like the Renoir show in '55? What was your involvement in that show? Well, you said the van Gogh show in '58 was important for you. And then the Monet show in 1960, and also how you- You mentioned before that when you worked at night, you would read and look through the files and things. How did that change when you started working during the day? Did you continue to do that?

Ferguson

Well, during that period I became a helper. Because of the fight between the exhibitions department and the art department, the exhibitions department would just get back in the background and just deal with the science and history exhibits, which threw us into working directly with the art department. And when they started having all these exhibits, like van Gogh and Renoir, we would work directly with the art curators. I became like the senior helper's right-hand man-Mr. Knox. I would work directly under him, which would entail painting all the galleries, installing all the exhibits, working with the artists and the curators as a helper. So then my interest in art became stimulated. To go way back to my beginning in the museum, where I would read these books,

now I could deal directly, hands-on, with the kind of art that I really liked at that time, which was the French impressionists. Some of my early shows were Renoir and van Gogh and Monet. Of course, Modigliani I don't think is from that period. What year did they have Modigliani? Did they have it? Because I forget.

Mason

You have the Modigliani show in 1961. And you also said last time that, because of the new money coming out of Hollywood, a lot of these people would start buying impressionist works. I was wondering if you think that's because they were being influenced by the shows-by these shows that were being put on by the museum-or did you think it was vice versa? I mean, do you think the people were influencing what was going on at that time at the museum? Or do you think the museum was influencing what people here wanted to buy?

Ferguson

Well, I think personally, as I look back now, it seems to me that when people get money-by whatever means-then their next thing is "culture." It seems to me every city when they start to grow- Let's take Orange County, for instance. They go to big-time sports, you know-like they have the [California] Angels and the Los Angeles Rams, who moved to Anaheim-and then their next move was an art institution. The culture is the next thing. And I think at that point, to my own thinking, in Los Angeles, these people who were the sons and daughters of the old money, which represented Los Angeles, they wanted an identity of their own. And by the museum's influence, through its new wave of curators who were into nineteenth- and twentieth-century art, created an interest of putting some of their money into art. Because art is a good investment. And I think Dr. Brown and some of the curators there were influential in getting these people to be more educated and seeing how important art is and getting their support for the art, which gave them their own identity, too. Because I think there had been a big involvement in buying art before that period, because art became like a status. This is my way of thinking. And there was lots of money in Hollywood prior to World War II. I think it was very chic to own nineteenth-century French impressionist art. I understand a whole lot of phoney art came out of that period, where they sold a lot of van Goghs and

Renoirs to those people. They were fakes and phonies. That's a matter of documented history, not just something I made up. And because of this new interest, Dr. Brown was able to- They formed the Art [Museum] Council at that time. They formed the Costume and Textiles Council under a woman called Stephanie Hope, I think is the name. And then the middle class or the rich started putting a lot of interest and money into art programs, like-I always make this statement or joke, or whatever you might want to call it, that at one time they could have an art exhibit and you could throw rice in there and it wouldn't hit anybody, you know, because of the [lack of] interest. And all of a sudden, with Renoir and van Gogh and those exhibitions that I named in my résumé- And the reason I list them in my résumé is not because I was the curator of the exhibit; I'm not even the curatorial assistant. I was a helper, but I was- Through the museum's own inter-problems, I was fortunate enough to be able to get hands-on in those exhibits. I got to catalog, I got to check lists. You know, we hung all the paintings, we painted all the walls, and that sort of thing. And the Renoir show- I love Renoir because of his colors. And, of course, I told you I love van Gogh, because I think I just fell in love with that whole period, because it kind of paralleled my own life. Paris was like Venice, I guess, to me at the time. And van Gogh was a character. And Gauguin was a character, and [Toulouse-]Lautrec was a kind of character. Not that I more or less identified with them, because they're Europeans and I'm an African American. It's just because they seemed exciting, and I was young, and it had to do with each other. By the time the Modigliani show came, I was very good at doing all sorts of things with the arts. So they assigned me to work directly with Vincent Price's wife, who curated that show.

Mason

What's her name?

Ferguson

I forget her name now, her first name [Mary Grant Price]. But I worked directly with her with all the painting and everything.

Mason

She was a full-time curator? Or was she a special curator?

Ferguson

No, she was a guest curator. Because Vincent Price was very instrumental in California arts at that point. I think he had been on an art quiz show on television where he'd won a lot of money answering questions about art.

Mason

What happened to [William Randolph] Hearst? Did he just fade into the background?

Ferguson

Well, Hearst died, you know.

Mason

But you were saying that he had a whole room dedicated to his mistress [Marion Davies].

Ferguson

Well, see, I think at one time, when the museum was first getting started, I guess the most serious collector was William Randolph Hearst. Because I found out through my own researching that William Randolph Hearst used to go off and buy rooms and warehouses of art in Europe and have it shipped to the United States-some good stuff, some bad stuff. I understand most of it wasn't very good. But if you know anything about the history of William Randolph Hearst, it seems to me that he was trying to buy culture. I don't know. But since he was based in Los Angeles through the Los Angeles *Examiner*- And Hearst's castle is in California, where he brought whole rooms and whole ceilings to Hearst Castle.

Mason

I've never been there.

Ferguson

And Roman bathtubs and all sort of things. But then, at the same time, I think that this actress who was his mistress- Marion Davies I think was her name. And, of course, with the museum being here in Los Angeles and the museum needing a patron, and William Randolph Hearst had all this stuff, all he couldn't get into the castle he housed in the museum. Because all the labels used to read "William Randolph Hearst" or "the De Sylvas" [Mr. and Mrs.

George Gard De Sylva]. That's another name that's- I think he was a Hollywood director. He did a lot of collecting. And then William Preston Harrison was a noted collector at that time who collected nineteenth-century French art. And other really important collectors were the [Paul Rodman] Maburys. The most I learned about the Maburys was that they were a family that owned a lot of real estate in Los Angeles. It seems that at one point Los Angeles had- One of the industries was olives or dates. They had large olive groves around Figueroa [Street] and Adams [Boulevard] and all in there. The Maburys owned all that, and they were connected with the museum, too, in terms of, like I was saying, say you're rich, the next thing you want is culture, right? So they used to have a thing at the art museum called the art annual. Every year, artists all over- That was one of the biggest exhibits that they had at the County Art Museum at one time-the art department. And the art annual was a exhibit where all Southern Californian artists would enter works, and then they had a jury to-

Mason

This was under Rick Brown or under Valentiner?

Ferguson

I don't know whether that was instituted- I think when Rick came here that was already in. But Valentiner really wasn't like a curator there; he was more like a consultant. He never was like a full-time curator there. Because before Rick Brown came, there was a man named Ross who was the chief curator, and before that it was another man. I forget his name. Or after him was another man who was- Valentiner was something like a consultant or something, or the-

Mason

He did mostly like fund-raising and that kind of thing?

Ferguson

No. He was just like the scholarly person, you know. Maybe they just gave him a job. You know, I don't think he ever worked directly for the museum as a curator. I think by the time Rick Brown got there, there was a man named Jean Delacour, who became the director. And Jean Delacour, I understand, had a lot of interest in the arts, too, so he became a friend to the- Because before

Jean Delacour there was a man named James [H.] Breasted [Jr.], who was an artist. And he was a history man, because his father, James Breasted Sr., was one of the men who went into King Tut's tomb. You see a lot of books written by the whole Breasted clan, I guess. And at that time, if you were black, you were kind of cut out of that unless you just took an interest in it yourself. You were kind of like, "I'm here as a janitor, and I want to be a janitor from now on" at first, right? There was nothing to motivate you like now in your time and generation. There really was no one to motivate you. You know, they never had any shows that had anything to do with black people. But as the 1950s going into 1960s wore on, and Dr. Brown had created all this interest in the sixties for the arts, then the arts started taking a different shape. And the closer and closer that they got to- When they finally saw they were going to build the other museum [Los Angeles County Museum of Art]- When they acquired the land and all the blueprints and all that, we knew we were going to have another museum. Then they started opening up jobs that were comparable to the existing museum, like art preparators, shipping clerks, security guards. And that's when Dr. Brown- I don't know whether he did it because of him, the person, or he did it to get back at the museum, but a lot of black people got jobs out of that period. Like James Allen became head preparator, and Louis Fuller became senior preparator. And Walter Wilson, who had been a shipping clerk at the other museum, he became a preparator, and James Kenion became the shipping clerk, and Claude Booker became a shipping clerk.

Mason

Oh, when did Claude Booker start working there?

Ferguson

Around the late fifties.

Mason

Okay. I guess he'll come up again later when we talk about the Black Arts Council.

Ferguson

Yes. Yes, he will.

Mason

So did you know him well then?

Ferguson

Very well. Not at first. Let's see. Claude died in '75, I think, December '75, and he was about thirty-six [years old] then. So I met him fifteen years before.

Mason

So you didn't get to know him until you started the Black Arts-

Ferguson

No, I knew him-

Mason

But I mean get to know him.

Ferguson

Yeah. I didn't get to know him- Well, you know, we semi-ran together. Because all the black people kind of like everywhere, like UCLA and everywhere, since they were cut out of so many other things at the museum, they naturally hung with each other. I think the only thing that separated me from, say, James Kenion and Claude Booker and Sidney Slade and those new guys who came during that period was the age thing. I was more or less identified with the older guys since I had been there since 1948. Although the youngest man in that group to me was James Allen, and he was twelve years older than me then. He had been in World War II. Everybody else was older. Then this new generation came in in the late fifties and sixties. Like Claude's been dead fifteen years, and if he died at thirty-six- When he died I guess I was around forty-five. I was something like seven or eight years older than Claude, enough so that I didn't run with him or socialize with him. We just knew each other on the job. So then they started working on getting this museum built. They started opening up some new jobs prior to coming to the new building, because there were a lot of things to be done at the museum so we could move all the art stuff from that location to this location. All the work that was at the museum had to be cataloged. Who knew the collection better than

anybody? The black guys who handled them. [laughter] I don't know whether that was wise on Dr. Brown's part or-

Mason

So you actually cataloged?

Ferguson

Helped catalog, yeah, because I knew where the stuff was. Because we had what we called a yellow room. The yellow room was for where the art was stored. And who moved art around all the time? So you just cataloged-

Mason

Did they get rid of a lot of stuff when they moved?

Ferguson

They did. They did get rid of some things. But I mean, this museum's collection was very poor in the early sixties. I mean, it's really a credit to the people in Los Angeles how that museum has grown in twenty-something years. I'll tell you, at one point I knew every piece in the museum's collection in my head, even the decorative arts, [which] was one of the biggest departments in the art department at that time.

Mason

So they weren't actively buying a lot of stuff? Like the Art Museum Council back then-?

Ferguson

The council, a lot of gifts- You know, it was a big effort with the people in Los Angeles, who had this need to be competitive not only economically with New York and the East Coast but to make some inroads culturally, too. They always referred to Los Angeles as a country city culturally. We didn't even compare it with San Francisco as a metropolitan area at that time. And most of this history I have to recollect, because at the time, basically what's not my own interest- The museum was just a job to me, right? I got promoted to a helper and then a preparator. And I thought I was riding on a cloud, cloud nine, because I got to have a job that, when I first started, was completely cut off for black people. I mean, it had nothing to do with education; it had something

to do with plain old racism. They were white jobs. But then a lot of things happened across the country, too, in terms of the Civil Rights struggle, in terms of black people making noise about being second-class citizens. It all has to do with each other.

Mason

How did that affect you then, the beginning of the Civil Rights struggle?

Ferguson

California is a very strange place, you know. I grew up here. I used to sit with my friends and watch the Civil Rights struggle on television. To a lot of us on the West Coast, it was like a giant television or a movie being played out, like it had nothing to do with us. It had something to do with the people in the South, right? Because a lot of black people in California, they had a bad understanding toward racism and that sort of thing, because out West was so far removed and Los Angeles is so big, you know. You didn't have to face ongoing racist things day in and day out. Racism is very alive in California, but you could live in a black community and never really come into contact with white people. And there were no Jim Crow laws then in Los Angeles, per se. They didn't have white bathrooms, white drinking fountains. You could ride on the bus anyplace, you know.

Mason

I guess it was just with the real estate that was restricted-

Ferguson

Well, it didn't bother black people, because they were so satisfied with their status, right? They had black communities, and you went there and lived. You didn't think about the fact that you couldn't get anyplace else. This was where you wanted to be. And you really didn't have a need to go into the white communities because everything was supplied for you in your own community. You know what I'm saying? So they lived like in a cloud, you know. Even when World War II came, and a lot of black people came to Los Angeles from other cities, mostly in the South and in the Midwest- Black people in California were threatened not by the white people; they were threatened by the influx of black people. Economically, right? I used to hear

statements all the time in the black communities: "They're messing up everything. They're coming and taking our jobs." And their jobs were mediocre jobs, you know: working for the rich people in Beverly Hills-every family on the street has butlers and handymen-and working for the city as janitors, custodians, or making their own jobs up. They really didn't think about being councilmen and buying homes anyplace. They were just satisfied living on the east side, across Avalon [Boulevard], living in Watts. Because the black population was very small prior to World War II. When people came to Los Angeles at such a pace, they couldn't even put up housing for them. I remember as a kid people living in streetcars, caves in the ground during that period of the war. And then after the war, they did these massive- Which later on became "projects" in-

Mason

Pre-fab[ricated].

Ferguson

Pre-fab houses went up all over, which was another thing. Because one of the biggest concerns of all the black people when the museum was going to move from Exposition Park to Wilshire [Boulevard] was that we would have a long way to go to work, right? Because most of us lived on the east side or out in Watts, and it was easier to get to Exposition Park for most of us. Now we had to come out on this side of town. And the black population on this side of town was real, real, real, real small. In fact, I think one of the reasons they built the art museum over there was because it wasn't around any black people at that time. I heard some of that at some of the meetings, because a USC [University of Southern California] coed got killed or something. I think the turning point in getting the real support for the museum was when this white girl got killed at USC and-

Mason

I've never heard about it.

Ferguson

In an apartment. They say some black guy killed or raped someone.

Mason

And then what did that have to do with-?

Ferguson

I heard some of those people who had all the money talking, because I was always there, standing around, listening to them talk, right? They were saying, "Get away from black people. Let's build this museum someplace." It might be just in conversation, but I know that after that the whole thing changed in terms of getting support for the- I'm not saying a single incident was the real main reason. I think politics had more to do with it than anything, because the old money in Los Angeles was hooked up with the science and history departments, and the new money wanted to get involved in the arts. Because some of the science building money was going into where the rich people in Los Angeles would go on these safaris to Africa to get specimens and- You know. A rich man's club, right? So the 1960s-let's say '58, '59, '61, '62-those were exciting times for most of us black guys in terms of the art museum, because we were involved in the building of this institution on a level more than just sweeping the floors. Dr. Brown kind of made us a part of the whole apparatus in building his museum. That might have been more out of need than love, because the black guys would work long hours, but we didn't get paid for it. They had a thing called comp time, you know.

Mason

Yeah. Work an hour-

Ferguson

And you can become poor in comp time. You have so much comp time that, if you take it off, the museum wouldn't have any employees. So what good is comp time, you know? So that big move to the museum started- We were involved in the groundbreaking. Every aspect of the planning, we were involved in it. I probably know what some rooms are now in the museum that nobody else knows.

Mason

So they would ask you where should the storage space go?

Ferguson

We became involved in the whole- Not that that's what they depended on, but since we were there, and since we had been involved with it for almost fifteen to twenty years in some cases, they included us. So we became a part of it. It was funny, because the black guys at that point who had those helper jobs and those few preparator jobs that we had, they were like "our" museum and gung ho about it, right? [laughter] I mean, they really loved the museum. They worked long hours and took an interest in it. And for once we had art openings where we didn't have to come back and serve the cookies and the coffee. [laughter] They hired people to do that. We didn't have to run around with a white jacket on. They hired the Lyon [Moving and Storage] Company to do the transportation, to drive the trucks, but black hands moved every stick of stuff from that old museum to the new museum. That's why I was so pissed off when they did a ten-year catalog and they made no mention of us blacks involved in that ten years, which is strictly typical Western historian racism.

Mason

I did notice, though, that when I was looking in the annual reports-and I don't know if this is unusual, because I haven't looked at too many museums' annual reports-they do mention all the helpers and preparators and the janitorial staff by name. I thought that might be unusual. Because most of the times it's like, here's the board of directors, here are our curators, and that's it. But they did seem to try to make some kind of-

Ferguson

Well, early on they were more liberal. Well, by the time ten years had passed, racism had- Because they needed us early on. I know when I wanted to become a senior art preparator- They had this man named Bill [William] Osmun, who was one of the leading curators, and when I went to him about how I wanted to be a senior art preparator, he told me something like, "Oh, that was in 1964, Cecil, when we hired all you guys. Now we're going to hire-" He didn't say white people. "We're going to hire more competent people now, because-" He almost said that "we needed you then; we don't need you anymore." And that's true. He said that to me. I can't prove this because I didn't have a tape recorder, nor can I prove what I said to him right after he said that to me. [laughter]

Mason

I don't know if you want to repeat that on tape.

Ferguson

So we moved into the museum in '64. They had this big opening with champagne, and we all came; we dressed up and went. And it was a funny thing, too, because all of us down below the highest line, we had our own little party afterwards, like an after-party.

1.6. Tape Number: III, Side Two January 10, 1991

Ferguson

They had their party, and we had a party over on Fairfax [Avenue] at a photographer named Seymour Rosen's house, a Jewish fellow who had done a lot of work for the museum. And Dr. Brown came to our party. Of course, everybody expected him to go to the other party, right? Now, I don't know the reason he came to our party. I know he didn't last long after that, because he had some problems with the [Los Angeles County] Board of Supervisors, etc. But you see how he had endeared himself to the employees. Most of the employees at the museum at that time would do anything for Dr. Brown. Not that he was, you know, Moses or anything. He just had this knack of- He'd come to work in the morning, and he'd say, "Good morning, Cecil!" He'd speak to the employees. Now, you would think that is just a very small thing, right? And he invited us to his openings. It wasn't that we had to go to the peon opening; all the people who worked on exhibits came to the main openings.

Mason

I'm wondering if he was like- Do you think he was a closet Marxist maybe?

Ferguson

I don't know. I just think- Well, he was born rich, and he just didn't have that- He was just a good man. I don't think he was a socialist. I don't think he had any real love for black people or minorities. I just think he was a fair man. He had a son [Richard B. Brown], and he had a wife [Jane Hoag Brown] who was stricken with polio in the early part of their marriage, I understand, and she was bedridden. I know a lot of times when he was building the museum and he had to go to these big dinners and things, he used to hire a van and bring

his wife. I think he was something like thirty-nine or forty years old when he came to the art museum. So that was whispered around the museum, that this man would do this. Because she was all messed up-right?-and he just couldn't bring her. I understand he had to bring the bed and everything for her. I think he was just a fair-minded man. And I always kidded the guy. You know, he was short, right? I always say that little people have a Napoleonic complex. I just think he's going to do things his way, right? And that's the way he was.

Mason

When did you start to perceive that he was having problems with the board of directors and that he was on his way out?

Ferguson

At that period. But it was like a grapevine. You hear certain things, you know. Of course, we didn't really know what was going on. We were so naive to think because he came to our party that it had something to do with it. Of course, it had nothing to do with it. I don't really know. You probably got that from [Kenneth] Donahue. Donahue probably could address that if he had wanted to.

Mason

Yeah. Actually, there are things, like in *Time* magazine and the *Nation*, where apparently this was like a nationwide scandal when he was dismissed. A lot of people took his side, because- I don't know, maybe it was dislike of what they perceived- Well, you know, just like you were saying, how money was buying culture, and they disliked this fact that these people thought they could control the museum just because they had the money. And here was a man who was competent, but he was being run out of town because he wouldn't be their puppet.

Ferguson

Yeah, their clone. I think some of it that filtered down from the grapevine was like us coming to the receptions, that sort of thing. I know at one time we used to smoke in the galleries, and of course they didn't want anybody to smoke in the galleries but the rich people, right? They gave out all the rules. This is at

the old museum. So Richard Brown had a lot of ashtrays made up for the galleries while we were working in there, and he said that he told the board of directors that that was why he built the ashtrays, so that people could smoke. Because they work long hours and that sort of thing. He used to do a lot of little things, you know. You know how a lot of racist white people would come and make remarks about the black guys in the building, and Richard Brown wouldn't get involved. He would come back and tell us that so-and-so said such and such a thing. And unless he'd see you do that, he's not going to deal with that, right? "But I just want to tell you so you'll be on your-"

Mason

On your toes.

Ferguson

They're not your friends, right? So I think he was a fair-minded man, maybe because of his wife's sickness, I don't know, or maybe he was raised that way. You know, that's the way he was. So the museum opened in '64, and at that point I decided that I wasn't going to ever get anywhere just by working in the pool. I wanted to be assigned to a curator as a preparator, but working directly with that. And since I made real good friends with James Elliott, who had become- Richard Brown became the director. James Elliott became- All of the white boys got big jobs, too, out of that new museum. He then became the chief curator. And most of the new curators that were coming were different from the old curators that I knew. It was a sign of the times. Like people always talk about the sixties in reference to black people and the Civil Rights struggle, but a whole thing started with white people, too, in the 1950s, especially in the arts, where they were going against the old establishment- you know, the landscape painting, the still lifes.

Mason

Yeah. Because I see on your résumé, here you're doing all these shows with all these dead guys, then, all of a sudden, in '65, you start seeing the New York School people. In '66, [Edward] Kienholz and-

Ferguson

A whole different-

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

And you're doing exciting things. And by me working directly with- Maurice Tuchman had come to Los Angeles. I had picked him up at the airport, and we had met. He's a young Jewish fellow out of New York. Young- Part of that new wave of thinking, as the shows indicate. And since I had been at the museum so long, I guess he could spot right away that I'd be a good person to work with him. [laughter]

Mason

Were you still reading about art during all this time? You were saying that you started to think of that as your museum. And is that when Claude Booker got interested in art? Or did anybody else get inside-?

Ferguson

Well, we were all there, right? We were all there, and we were all involved. Claude was a shipping clerk. By that time Claude and I had become kind of friends. In fact, he called me "old man." I was a few years older than him, right? Claude was a product of that generation, you know. He had been a policeman, and he had been in the Vietnam War or the Korean War, one of them. He came back and got in the police department. And Claude was very fair complexion-wise-right?-and when he was assigned to be in a car with another man, another Caucasian, as the story goes, he told me that when they would go out and stop black people and how they would treat black people, he couldn't deal with that, so he was promptly kicked off- He didn't make it in the police department. Then he went to work for the purchasing stores, and then he transferred over to the museum as a shipping clerk. He didn't know anything about art when he first got there-nothing. Because he had graduated from high school, went into the service, came back, you know, just typical for a youngster from that period. But he did have some background, because he was born in San Antonio, and his people had been hooked up in the San Antonio politics. In fact, there was a black man in the 1930s who ran San Antonio politics. He had a machine in San Antonio at that time where he controlled the whole city, everything. And Claude's grandfather was a tailor,

and tailoring in early America was big, you know, where if you had your suits tailor-made or- And then his father was a tailor, Claude's father. They were very much middle-class and Catholic. When his father came to Los Angeles he became a tailor on the east side.

Mason

So he was in business for himself?

Ferguson

For his father. Not Claude. His father, yeah. He was a tailor. And, you know, the life blood of a tailor was the musicians, the pimps, the hustlers who'd be doing all the suit buying and that sort of thing. And, of course, his grandfather, who had come from that whole machine in San Antonio, he became the tailor for all those people who were involved in that machine, so he had a lot of visibility in San Antonio politics early on. So they all came to the museum. Then I got myself where I could just work for the modern art department as their preparator, because that's where my interest was. I don't think they, more or less, wanted me for the preparator in the art department. But I always did have a social conscience, and I had become involved, even in the early sixties and the late fifties, with a lot of activist groups around the city that were doing things for black people.

Mason

So you were just saying in the beginning of the Civil Rights struggle, it was kind of removed. But then what happened to get you more involved in that?

Ferguson

Well, August 1965 came, and I was working for Maurice Tuchman, and I was all into the museum, loved the museum. I took my vacation in August and went to San Francisco and then up to see my cousin [Billy Ray Davis] and his wife [Berthena Davis], me and my wife [Laura Lorraine Vine Ferguson]. Then we went from San Francisco to [Las] Vegas. And then we decided, since we had some more time, to run down to Mexico to finish off the vacation. We got a little farther than Oceanside early one Saturday morning. We were going to Oceanside and a brother and a sister- The brother was home on leave from the service, and the sister had just bought a little white English car, and she

was out in the morning showing her brother the car. They have got a strip of freeway down there called Slaughter Alley. She hit this curve, lost control- And a long time ago the freeways used to have these cables up, and when you had these wrecks they'd knock these fences down, the wire. They took the wire off and just the cable would be there. She lost control of her car, which ran underneath this cable and took the heads of her and her brother off and ran head-on into the car we were in. Killed my cousin's wife outright. My cousin was driving. His wife was sitting in the passenger's side. My wife was sitting in back of my cousin. I was sitting in back of her [his cousin's wife]. On impact, it threw me forward. But what happened was, in 1965 they made these bucket seats that didn't lock. You know how they lock now?

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

And she was the only one who had a seatbelt on. He had a seatbelt down here. But since the bucket seat didn't lock, on the impact she was thrown like this, but this part of her body stayed intact-right?-which broke her neck. The impact threw me forward, and my head only went to the windshield. But the only reason why I didn't go through the windshield was because this part of her body stopped me. My wife was all messed up, my cousin was all messed up. It just so happened that when the ambulance got the call to go on the freeway, this doctor, this Indian doctor, went along with the paramedics, which usually didn't happen. On reaching the scene, he saw that I was dying, I guess, because of injuries I had. So he took a knife and cut my throat right here.

Mason

Your esophagus?

Ferguson

So that I could breathe. And then they took me back to the hospital and called my parents and the preacher and everybody, you know. They put me in a room to die. And I became conscious, I think now for- Because I saw my mother's preacher there, right? And, of course, I'm all sedated, right? I can't

tell how bad I'm hurt. But when I saw my preacher, I knew it wasn't good. [laughter] And the next time I woke up, Claude was there. Claude had just walked in. And Claude was kind of a crazy dude. He took one look at me and went "Eww!"

Mason

Oh, how encouraging! [laughter]

Ferguson

Well, I did look like a monster. I should have been dead, but I survived. When I was down at Oceanside and- Since they were so busy trying to save my life, they couldn't take care of the rest of the things that were wrong with me, you know. So I was allowed to heal with- You know, my face is crooked. My jaw broke. So they brought me to Kaiser Hospital on Sunset [Boulevard] here in Los Angeles. But when they got me there, the neurosurgeon that does that kind of surgery on people, he was out of the country. So I laid there two weeks, healing all crooked, until he came back, and then he operated on me and straightened me out. But the first night I was there-because I had been in Oceanside for almost a month-I wasn't exactly out of it. They put me in a room with intensive care people. And that first night I spent there, I sat there and witnessed all these people die all night long. I witnessed these nurses working on this one guy, working on all these people, trying to save their lives. I never will forget that. And then they lost him. Then, in the next couple of days, they put me in another room. But during that period when I had the automobile accident, the Watts revolt broke out. I lived in Watts; I grew up in Watts. And while I was sitting there healing-you know, loving my wife and all my family is coming to see me-Watts had become a military state. They would bring me news of what was happening in Watts. They would tell me certain buildings were burned, and I'd go, "Good," right? [laughter] Because those [were the] merchants who had inferior clothing in Watts, and the markets were inferior food. I wasn't unhappy about those places being burned down. Then I had this long period of recuperating-almost a year, maybe not quite a year-before I could go back to work. Then revolts were breaking out all over the country. I always did lean toward the Muslims, who had organized long before that period. I was leaning towards being a Muslim. And people started bringing me literature to read.

Mason

What appealed to you about them, about the Black Muslims then, that you remember?

Ferguson

Being men, for one thing. Because I had come up in a period on my job where they would do things to black men that I just couldn't deal with: jokes, serving at receptions in a white coat, that sort of thing. And then I'd become aware of the covenants in Los Angeles, where black people couldn't buy houses. I had bought a house on Avalon [Boulevard] and Eighty-ninth Street in 1950, and my deed said that this house shouldn't be sold to any other people than Caucasians for ninety years. But they didn't only say no black people; it said no black people, no Orientals, and no Jews. And I had become like an activist in a way before that period, listening to the Muslims and going to some of their meetings and doing that sort of thing. And then I was brought a book [*The Wretched of the Earth*] by a man named [Frantz] Fanon and the Algerian thing in England and Malcolm X. And the English guy [Peter Rogers] brought me a book about the Muslims, because this English guy knew I was an activist and that I didn't take a lot of stuff like jokes or any of that stuff. They had sent me out to a collector's home one time to pick up a sculpture by an artist named [Lucas] Samaras, which was a glass sculpture. Maurice had called the lady up front and told her a Mr. Ferguson was coming and that he knew how to handle the sculpture, how to pack it and everything. And three of us went, two white guys and me, right? We drove up in the county car. I was on the passenger side, one Caucasian was driving, and Peter Rogers-this Englishman-was sitting in the back. I got out of the car, and this Englishman got out of the car. I had all this paperwork in my hand. I was the only one who had on a suit and tie, right? She walked right past me and walked up to the Englishman and said, "Mr. Ferguson?" [laughter] And I said, "Not today." Of course, she was embarrassed afterwards. And Peter, the Englishman, he was all red-faced, because he knew about racism, right. So he used to come and see me when I was in the hospital. Every day he would come and see me, he and this other white boy. They would visit me every day. And some guys with whom I'd worked for years, some black guys I'd worked with for years, they came to see me initially, and they never came back. But these two white people came to see me every day. And they started bringing me these books,

this Englishman, right? I started doing something that I hadn't done in years. I had read a lot of art books, but I'd never read this kind of book. I started reading that literature. Then, when I went home from the hospital, I started looking. I started really getting into the [Black] Panthers and everything. And my life has never been the same since then because I had a lot of time to think, a lot of time to think about the years I had been at the museum-1948 to 1966. I didn't know any black artists, I didn't know anything about my culture, and those kinds of things were coming out during that whole sixties period, right? I just thought, "Well, you've been living in a dream world, Cecil, because all that racism on your job, you've just been pushing it under the rug. You are going to be a preparator as long as you've been a janitor." So I just changed. So when I got out of the hospital and went back to work, they had taken my job and given it to a Caucasian fellow as the preparator in modern art. The white guy was a very good friend of mine. So he came to me and said, "It wasn't me, Cecil. You know, I love modern art, but they assigned me over here." And I said, "Hey, man, I'm not going to let you do it. You can't take my job from me. I'm back. I want my job back." So I went to Maurice Tuchman, and I said, "Maurice, I'm back." He said, "Oh, I'm glad to see you, Cecil. How are you doing?" I said, "No, that's not what I'm talking about. I'm back, okay?" "What are you talking about?" he said. "Because you gave Dave my job. I'm back. I want my job back." "Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, Cecil. Sure." Then they made a deal where me and Dave both could work for the modern art department rather than just me.

Mason

We could come to a stopping point. We've been talking about an hour, so we can talk some more if you want to, or we can pick up here next time.

Ferguson

Yeah. Because then I go into the sixties and the Black Arts Council and what perpetuated that. What changed Claude and me was what was happening in the sixties, things I learned during the sixties that I look back on now and see what some of the problems were during that whole period, why we have so many problems now because of things we didn't do during the sixties.

Mason

Things that you should have done?

Ferguson

And how in the sixties Claude and I both realized how important arts were to people. Up until that point, I just looked at art as a nightclub for the rich. Because you have no point of reference-right?-being black. No black museums. No black people in the collection.

1.7. Tape Number: IV, Side One March 5, 1991

Ferguson

We stopped at 1965?

Mason

Yes. You had just gotten out of the hospital, and you said that you wanted your job back at the museum. That's where we left off. I thought today we could talk about that period and how the museum changed when Rick [Richard F.] Brown left and Kenneth Donahue came in and also the activities of the Black Arts Council and your growing involvement with the arts, your meeting black artists and becoming aware of black art in general.

Ferguson

Well, the thing that really contributed to that was the 1965 Watts revolt, when everything exploded out of us in Los Angeles with the burning of the little town of Watts. It was triggering the same things across the country in terms of unrest among the black population who had been left in the urban cities. Because after World War II, I guess, they had the Marshall Plan with which they were going to rebuild Europe, and they let all the cities in America just kind of die. And most of the blacks ended up in these areas. Then they started creating surrounding areas for whites who moved on to the suburbs. They called it the white flight. I guess [it occurred in] almost every major city in this country, which left the black people in the old cities. There were no jobs, there was no housing, because they took all the bond issues and they built schools for these people in the outlying districts. They built shopping centers in the outlying districts. So all the jobs in the inner city were taken out because all the industry left. After I was in the hospital during the 1965 uprising- Well, I

was in the hospital for a long period of time, and after getting out of the hospital, I was recuperating at home. I almost lost my life in that accident, so I began to ask myself how I could get involved in the aftermath of the rebellion that took place a few months earlier. I quickly observed the fact that there were going to be a lot of things that were visual programs that people were doing.

Mason

You mean the black community?

Ferguson

The black community. Because around that time, [there was] a little wave of young people who didn't exactly embrace the ideology of Martin Luther King [Jr.], which was the Gandhi nonviolence approach to the Civil Rights struggle. There grew new groups like the [Black] Panthers and US [Organization] and all of the groups that felt that "If you hit me, I'll hit you back." In fact, they sent for Martin Luther King to come to Watts after the uprising to kind of quell things down, and the young people rejected him very-

Mason

Who sent for him? Somebody in the black community?

Ferguson

I guess the powers that be thought that maybe he could be a catalyst to quell the unrest. But they rejected him, which was a bad mistake. It was one of the fundamental mistakes I think of the whole Civil Rights struggle that was beginning to take place in the last of the 1960s.

Mason

How do you mean?

Ferguson

I think that the Panthers and other more militant groups-for the sake of a better word- I hate that word militant, because I don't think anyone understands what it means, really. But just for the sake of their word, we'll say the more militant groups. I think it was a bad mistake that they rejected the wisdom of the older people. I think there should have been a coming together

rather than a pulling apart. It seems to me that all of a sudden there came a great push, that most of the young people in that time thought their whole militant or rebellious attitude that was taking place in the last of the 1960s started with them and that earlier black people had nothing to do with that. I don't know if I mentioned this to you or not: I was working with some young people one night on a project, hanging some art at an early gallery called Chicago West. Some guys got together and put together a gallery down on Crenshaw [Boulevard], and I was there helping them. They were sitting down talking, drinking wine, eating cheese, and philosophizing, and they were saying that any nigger over thirty-five years of age should be dead.

Mason

Well, that was part of the whole sixties-

Ferguson

It was a mistake, though. It was a mistake, because they needed what those early people had brought. They needed that, because they needed something to draw on. But they started with them. At that point, I didn't realize that, because I was thirty-five, right? Of course, they weren't going to include anybody in my age bracket. But when it dawned on them that they had included me, and I was there helping them for free, they said, "Not you, pop. You're different, pop." Of course, I was thirty-five years of age. I felt, "How could they be calling me 'pop'?" Of course, I wasn't old enough to be any of those people's pop. But they thought I came from that generation. And that bothered me for a long time. Why would they say that? Of course, it didn't take me long to understand that the reason they thought that way was because they had no sense of their history. They thought the whole movement started with Malcolm [X], [Stokely] Carmichael, Huey [P. Newton], Bobby Seale, Eldridge Cleaver, Angela [Y. Davis], and Cathy [Cleaver], and all those people. They represented that movement. They thought it started with them, and that nobody else had made a contribution. It was because of them eradicating our contributions of our history. I don't think that would be able to happen again, thanks to people like you and little boxes like that [the tape recorder]. [laughter] They'll be able to leave some of that history. And I think the nineties will be able to draw on these same people who rebelled against their elders. They're the elders now, right?

Mason

It's a cycle.

Ferguson

And the young people now do the same thing to them. That means we'd have to start all over again. I don't think that's going to happen. And one indication of that was when Huey Newton died up in Oakland. The press and everybody tried to picture him as such a bad man-dope addict, you know. They never mentioned any of the good that he did during the 1960s. But the black community didn't buy that. They treated him like he was one of their heroes from the 1960s. Therefore, I think that, since we do have some sense of our history, it's not going to happen again. Now, the museum never thought they had to get involved in that uprising. They sit up there on Wilshire Boulevard, a nice little club for the middle class and the rich, never having been bothered by that sort of thing historically, you know. So they thought they were safe from any social changes in the city. And they probably would have been if it wasn't for the fact that in 1968, Mr. [Paul] Tishman brought his African art collection to L.A. Now, right after 1965, 1966, I became involved in the community but on a different level, like getting into organizations and helping people to organize and become self-sufficient.

Mason

What kind of organizations? Some of the organizations that came out of Watts-? The arts organization?

Ferguson

No, no, no. Not art. You know, like self-help kinds of organizations. I joined a group named Unity which tried to organize economically and become self-supporting. I became involved in the organization before the Watts revolt. Because after the Watts revolt there were things that destroyed this organization, because we had raised a quarter of a million dollars to build a business out in south Los Angeles, which would consist of- Because the black people had no auditoriums or anything where they could have meetings and that sort of thing. And if any community doesn't have like a town hall or a place where they can come together to discuss political, economic, and other things that have something to do with them, then they can't survive

very well. Watts was still a community at that point: a community maybe predominately of black people, Latinos, and a few European types that were left over from World War II. And still, the guys who worked at the museum, all of us just kind of felt good about the fact that we weren't a part of the unemployed. Although at that point, we didn't consider ourselves middle-class, we had a job, which is a big step forward. By that time, some good jobs came down. We thought they were good jobs that came down in terms of the museum. Like there were black preparators, black packers, black shipping clerks, black security guards-

Mason

Okay. I wanted to ask you more about the organizations, but I also wanted to ask you about the museum. When you were in the hospital, was Rick Brown still director? Or was he on his way out?

Ferguson

He was still director when I was in the hospital.

Mason

Okay. So when the riots happened, he was still-

Ferguson

Yes.

Mason

Was he going through problems then? Was he on his way out or-?

Ferguson

Yeah, he started having problems the minute we opened our doors. I mean in the new museum.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

We opened our doors in '64, I think.

Mason

Yeah. But, I mean, when things started to become more open, when it was pretty clear that he was on his way out- Because there was a transition period between when he left and when Donahue was coming in. Didn't Donahue act like an acting director for a while?

Ferguson

Acting director first, yeah.

Mason

Because when you were just talking about how the museum didn't think they were going to have to respond, I'm wondering if you were talking about Rick Brown's museum or Donahue's museum.

Ferguson

Oh, just the museum in general. The board of directors ran the museum, you know, and they thought they were safe from any of that. But always the majority culture, they try to block any kind of thing that will impact their institution by doing little bitty things to offset any major confrontation. I don't know whether that contributes to the fact that they brought the Tishman collection of African art there. Because by 1968 it was quite clear around the country that part of the rebellion was going to touch all facts of American life: culturally, economically, politically. And they saw some things were going on in New York then. I think by then they had had that Whitney [Museum of American Art] show. When was the Whitney show?

Mason

I'm not really sure. I don't have it in my notes. But I was wondering because, when I read the Donahue interview, he was saying that they had the Tishman show because- [laughter] He was trying to say that it was sort of his philosophy, his own personal philosophy, about how the museum should be run. He felt personally that the museum should reach out to the community since the Los Angeles community is multiethnic. But what you're saying is that he was kind of responding to these pressures that were going to inevitably impact on the museum in one way or another. So it wasn't voluntary; it was more involuntary.

Ferguson

You're quoting Donahue, right?

Mason

Yeah, from the interview that he-

Ferguson

Well, see, what makes that statement invalid is we are not Africans.

Mason

Yeah, yeah. That's what he went on to say. He said, "So we had this show, and they were happy about it-the black community was happy about it-but what they really wanted was an African American art show."

Ferguson

The black community wasn't happy about the Tishman show.

Mason

Oh, really?

Ferguson

They were really divorced from the Tishman show. It's just that Tishman- And I don't think that had anything to do with what Donahue said, except for the fact that it would seem that way. Or you could use that as saying that that's one reason why the museum did an exhibit. The museum could have reached out to the community long before the Watts revolt if they had wanted to.

Mason

In what ways? Because that's one of the sort of themes that runs through the Donahue interview, that he wanted to reach out to the community, but people were sort of unresponsive.

Ferguson

I think Donahue had maybe been a good example of a liberal, you know. And to me, a white liberal is a person who sympathizes with you and even might deep down in their heart want to do the kind of things that Donahue said he

wanted to do but never does anything to implement them. It's like a lot of liberal white people will say that-right?-but they wouldn't do one thing like go to the board of trustees, ask them for more involvement for the black artists in the community, and really do something meaningful. I don't think Donahue had the personality or the push to-

Mason

What about some of the curators, like Maurice Tuchman? Would he have-?

Ferguson

Maurice Tuchman. I worked for Maurice for- And Maurice is another example of a liberal. Because Maurice would go along with a program and make some gesture, because I guess deep down inside he had- By being first-generation American, you know. His father, I think, was an immigrant, and he could probably identify with some of the problems the black people were having due to the fact that he probably was born in some ghetto in Europe, or his people were, right? He probably came here with a wave of immigrants during World War II or prior to World War II. I don't know when they reached America. But he wasn't too far removed from oppression himself. But again- Well, I could tell you a little bit of that further down the story. For years Maurice had a black secretary. He was the only curator to have a black secretary. [The following portion of this transcript has been deleted from the on-line version.] I was a black curatorial assistant, and Florence Hasdon was a black secretary who came through the county. It wasn't like Maurice hired us in like a private sector- right?-come off the list and that sort of thing. He was the only curator who had that, but I think it just kind of happened.

Mason

So how did the Tishman show [*The Tishman Collection: The Sculpture of Black Africa*] come about?

Ferguson

First of all, Tishman is very wealthy, and he had this African art collection, and he wanted to show his African art collection. And like any rich people in the arts, they get their way when it comes to the arts. He might have told the museum that he would leave them x number of dollars or- You know what I

mean. So they brought the Tishman collection there and installed it. We installed it, because we were the people who did the installation. But the people installing it, they had no connection with African art, not even me. It was just another exhibit. We had done hundreds of them. But into the Tishman exhibit, there was nobody coming to see the exhibit! Not even on opening night did it have the attention that most exhibits get. Not even newspapers were doing a whole big thing with African art. And that perturbed Mr. Tishman, probably for some selfish reason. You know, there wasn't anybody coming to his exhibit. I think that, had white people flooded to the exhibit, Tishman wouldn't have cared less about whether the black people came to see it or not, because like all collectors, that's how they build their collection up in terms of its value. But there wasn't anybody coming to the exhibit so when Tishman confronted the museum about lack of attendance- You know, you could go into the exhibit and you could throw rice in there, and it wouldn't hit anybody. And I think one of the things he said was that not even black people were coming to the museum.

Mason

By the way.

Ferguson

By the way, right. And it's their culture, or part of their culture, right? But black people weren't coming to any exhibitions because black people didn't use the museum. The museum was like this big place to sit down as far as the black community was concerned. Only for the rich. And it was the white people's museum. A large number of black people worked there, black people's taxes paid for it, but they never had no sense of using it, you know. So Tishman raised so much hell that the museum thought they ought to do something, use their PR [public relations] to try to get black people there to at least make Mr. Tishman feel good, because then again there was always this- They always try to court rich Americans from any institution-

Mason

Because they might donate money.

Ferguson

They might donate some money or work. I think they're more or less interested in money rather than work. Because we had no African department, so why would they want any work? Just to go into storage? They might have taken some work and stuck it into storage, you know. I think the main thing that gave Mr. Tishman so much more power was the fact that he owned all these buildings around America. He was very wealthy. So the museum thought it would be good to make Mr. Tishman feel good, even try to give a program that would bring a large number of black people into the museum. That would make Mr. Tishman feel good, and the museum could deal with that until the show was over. Then back to business as usual. And when I researched that- I don't know whether the newspapers had picked up on any of this and started addressing it. I never researched that because I never thought I'd have to talk about it in terms of what did the newspapers say during that period.

Mason

Yeah. I didn't read any newspaper reviews about it. I just read the excerpt they had about it from the annual report for that year.

Ferguson

I'm sure if Tishman caused all this noise, the newspapers must have gotten some part of it. They had to. But anyway, there was a guy named [Charles M.] Weisenberg. I think that's his name. He was the PR person for the museum. So they went to him to ask him, "Why are there no black people coming in?" And this word went out to the black community, right? And of course, he didn't know anything about the black community, because he was-

Mason

He didn't even know where to find it! [laughter]

Ferguson

He didn't know where to find it or whether it existed, right. So he went through the files of the people he had succeeded-there were PR people before him-to try to find out if there were any black newspapers involved. Did the press releases get to the newspapers? And were there, in fact, some black people coming to the museum in some period? And they had a list, and the list

was so invalid that most of the people on the list, which happened to be some of the middle-class blacks that have always been in Los Angeles, a handful, most of them were dead and unreachable. So Weisenberg didn't know where to start to-

Mason

For his outreach.

Ferguson

For his outreach program, right. But he was Jewish, and he was smart enough to know there is a large black community out there, if only we could reach them. "My job would look good, the museum would look good." And "How would we go about this?" In the meantime, they had a bunch of security guards there, and a handful of security who were always socially conscious. And Weisenberg was friendly with the black employees that worked there. So he tossed that around to them. And this handful of security guards-a guy named Officer [William] Knight, a guy who was head of the security force whose name was Sidney Slade- Sidney Slade had come from elitist people in Virginia, where his ancestral thing- His mother and father were big in the educational system in Virginia. They had attended the Hampton Institute. He collected even then; he collected Persian rugs and stuff quietly. They told Weisenberg, "If you let us do it, we'll get you some black people here." Now, these were the security guards, you know, and we worked for the curatorial department-me and Claude [Booker] and other guys, right? So the security guards had a little meeting. They gave them a little budget, and they set a night aside to have like another opening.

Mason

How long to this show?

Ferguson

A couple of weeks. And within a short time, this handful of security guards, they got together, and they knew how to get to the black community. They knew what newspapers to get to. They knew what radio stations to get to. And there was a sense of blackness taking place by 1968. So they got black entertainers like Big Black and some other entertainers, and they had this

whole reopening and told the black community to wear traditional clothing to the opening, you know. I forget the date that they had this second opening. All of a sudden, black people came from everywhere and just took over the museum for that night-black people in traditional clothing, black people with naturals-

Mason

Yeah, those big ones that they had.

Ferguson

Those big naturals, right. And the white middle class, they were alienated by the dress and by the naturals and the whole thing, right? They had a great big opening, hundreds of people came, and Mr. Tishman was satisfied.

Mason

They said in the annual report that two of the security officers, Stanley Swinger and Wiley Williams, became docents for the show.

Ferguson

Yes. In fact, Wiley went on to become a curator in African art. He was up in Washington. Stanley Swinger was going to UCLA. He had been an ex-basketball star, and he had a lot of opportunities to move into the curatorial, but he didn't have the- Well, he didn't stick it out.

Mason

You mean he studied art history?

Ferguson

He was studying art history, African art history. But he didn't do like Wiley-go on to pursue it and take advantage of that whole program. But for a while he enjoyed some of it. He was no longer a guard. He became not a curatorial assistant in job title, but in like an apprentice program that I'm sure the museum hoped would die out and which did. He didn't pursue it. But it did awaken in me and Claude. He came to the opening and saw these black people there, right? And one day Claude and I were at lunch, having lunch together, and Claude said to me, "You know, man, it's something, this art

thing." But I'd been doing art shows all along, like little shows in the community and that sort of thing.

Mason

You had been putting on shows yourself before this?

Ferguson

Yeah, prior to that, in playgrounds and churches-

Mason

What kind of shows?

Ferguson

Well, they had a couple of black organizations, I think, Art West [Associated] and another organization. I'd do little shows at playgrounds, churches-

Mason

Art West was Ruth [G.] Waddy?

Ferguson

Ruth Waddy.

Mason

Did they do mostly prints?

Ferguson

No. Leon Leonard was in that group. William [E.] Smith was in that group.

Mason

Raymond Lark?

Ferguson

Raymond Lark. They had little groups outside of the museum that I wasn't even involved in, that I didn't even know existed, except that they knew I had some social conscience, and also they knew I knew how to hang art. So they would invite me. I'd install art, and I was gone. I never dealt with it on another level, you know.

Mason

Well, I guess I should ask you now-I asked you off tape once-when you started to meet black artists. You said that you met Charles White once when you came into the museum.

Ferguson

Yeah. That was in the early sixties or maybe late fifties.

Mason

Yeah, you were saying it was in the fifties.

Ferguson

Yeah, because I worked around maybe 1959, 1960. I just happened to be in the chief curator's office, who was James Elliott, when he came in. After we met, it really didn't have any real impact on me, except I liked the image. I always was wondering why nothing in the museum had to do with black people. So Claude and I, we tossed that around, just sitting and having lunch. And Claude said, "You know, man, art has a lot of power, Cecil. Why shouldn't we use this institution? Our taxes pay for it." And he said, "It seems to me that we should form some kind of group to bring some kind of social impact on the museum to do more for black people." And we just kind of dealt with it that way.

Mason

You thought the art had affected the whole community the way it had affected you?

Ferguson

No. The community was still divorced from the museum. You can go around in little pockets, you know. And they talk about what a good time they had at the museum that night, how they scared all the white people with their naturals, etc., right? But after the Tishman collection was gone, the black community still had no reason or desire to use the museum. The exception there was some artist groups in Los Angeles. Of course, they wanted to use the museum because they wanted to further their careers. So Claude said, "What we ought to do, Cecil, is form some kind of organization, like a support group, in the

community." Since this is the first time that this history has ever been talked about- You know how some things just happen. So Claude said, "What we ought to do is we ought to get with the guards and see if we can form some kind of support group to bring pressure on the museum." So we called a meeting with the guards who had been out in front and doing the thing for the Tishman. I said, "Let's form this organization." I mean, the guards were through with it after that. They had done what they had set out to do. They got a nice poster. One of the guards was a guard named Knight; he got his face on the poster. I don't know whether you've seen it-it's a beautiful poster-where he's back to back in one of the poses. He has a mask on.

Mason

No, I've never seen that.

Ferguson

It's a nice poster. You can hardly see it at the museum, because the museum don't want to be reminded of it, but it's there somewhere. So that didn't work out. We couldn't form an alliance with the guards because of personality differences.

Mason

Had Wiley Williams gone to Washington by then?

Ferguson

No, Wiley was still in a little room in the museum. Wiley was from Watts. But- and this is my personal opinion about Wiley-I think Wiley always felt that the only way he could take advantage of his education was he had to be identified with the white community. So he did not identify with the black community, although he was born and raised in Watts. He also dated white and eventually he married a white woman. So he really didn't want to deal with it. He said, "Well, I've got my foot in the door, and I'm going to see what I can do for myself. I'll keep going to school. And I might get this to lead into something for me." So Claude said, "We'll do it ourselves, Cecil." And the strange thing about this was that we couldn't get anybody at the museum to join us. None of the black employees wanted to be a part of this. So Claude said, "Well, let's go outside the museum and see if we can get some support." Okay, by this time,

the so-called middle-class black community-about 1968-starts putting itself together in terms of being identified as a middle-class black community. It's three years after the revolt. And there was a need for this community to be identified with art, because the arts represent culture, and we could be a little elitist group, anyway. But they didn't know how to organize the show. Of course, Claude and I did know how to organize, because we had come from the institution where they organized groups all the time, and we had seen how they did this, right? Like the Costume Council; it's one of the biggest councils in the museum now. I remember when it had its start. I've got a picture here someplace. In the early days of the museum, Mr. and Mrs. [Stephanie] Holt ran the costume department and also organized the Costume Council. And they had other councils about that time. The [Modern and] Contemporary Art Council had been organized, and they were going great guns. They had organized the New Talent Award as the reason why Mel [Melvin] Edwards was one of the first-

Mason

Yeah, that was an early show [*Five Younger Los Angeles Artists*]. That was in '65.

Ferguson

Yeah, the only one for almost ten years. The next one was Gerald Ray, which was ten years later. It didn't do anything to help any of their careers, the two black artists. Most of the white artists who came through here are doing fine now. Claude and I really didn't know how to organize our organization legally. All we had was this desire to do this. We used to meet once a week, and most of these meetings took place with just me and Claude. We were the soul.
[laughter]

Mason

Did you have a name for it then?

Ferguson

We finally decided on Black Arts Council because it sounded good. BAC, right. We started meeting at a church. We started going to the outside, and pretty soon we got a few other middle-class black folk who were interested and

some artists who were interested. Every time we had a meeting we'd get bigger and bigger and bigger.

Mason

Like what were the names of some of the early artists?

Ferguson

Alonzo Davis, of course; John Outterbridge; John Riddle; Raymond Lark for a little while, but then he- Ruth [G.] Waddy became interested; Leon Leonard; Gloria Bohanon; Arenzo Smith [Jr.]; Dan [R.] Concholar; David Hammons; Timothy Washington; John Stinson; Donald Stinson. They all started to become interested in the BAC. So Claude and I said, "Well, maybe we can get some interest in this as soon as we get started doing some shows," right? We thought we could go around to universities and they would open up their arms, but that wasn't true.

Mason

Why did you think universities would be open?

Ferguson

Because that's where the young people were, and an amount of noise was on college campuses. Then, by that time, the BSU [black student union]s were being organized across the country. You know, the BSUs needed that kind of visual on campuses, and we were able to get a lot of interest from the BSUs but still not what we wanted. We wanted to use art galleries in the universities, not the student union, not the library, not outside on some makeshift walls, you know. We wanted to use the galleries, which didn't happen.

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Ferguson

By this time, Claude and I not only did our work together every day, we also, after work, spent a lot of time with each other. And one day Claude said to me, "You know, we're going about this wrong, Cecil. We should come from the museum out." He said, "Well, let's take the museum a proposal." By this time we had met a lot of artists. By then we had met Charles White and formed a

relationship with him. Of course, we were just having meetings. We had no organizational structure or anything.

Mason

What would you talk about?

Ferguson

We'd bring artists in to talk and show their slides. Or if there was an African artist in town, we'd invite him to the meeting. He would talk. We had no structure. So Claude said, "We need some kind of structure. We need some bylaws. We need to be an official organization." It just so happens that Stan [J. Stanley] Sanders- You know Stan Sanders?

Mason

No, I don't think so.

Ferguson

Stan Sanders was a young man who was born in Watts, went to Jordan High School, and later on went to Whittier College, where he excelled in sports. He became an all-American. Also, he was very bright, and he became a Rhodes scholar. He went to England and had come back home just in time to see his hometown in ruins after the Watts revolt. Of course, Stan became a good model for the majority of the culture just by saying that you too can make it, right? [laughter] He was a good example. So by the time they had the first Watts Summer Festival [of Art], he helped put that together. He was the grand marshal, and the white people were really looking out for Stan. He had to open up an office on Wilshire Boulevard. It was like being at the right place at the right time.

Mason

What kind of office did he open?

Ferguson

A law office. So we invited Stan to one of our meetings, and Stan came to the meeting. He didn't know Claude. He didn't know me, per se. But I knew his whole family. And I remember him, because his brother and I were good friends. When I was growing up and still in school, I'd go over to his house, and

he was just a little boy running around in the yard. He had two older brothers named Ed Sanders and Donald Sanders. Ed Sanders was a 1956 heavyweight boxing Olympic champion, but he died in his first pro match after turning pro. He had gotten hit, had brain damage, and died. When Stan came to the meeting, because I could talk about his family-his mother, father, sisters, and brothers, because I knew them all-there was something kindred between me and him at some low level. Of course, I'm no Rhodes scholar; I'm just a worker. But Stan loved art, although he knew nothing about art. But he was bright enough to think, "Maybe this is something I should do." His first thing to do was to help us organize bylaws and try to get us structure before we went any further. So he became my lawyer of the Black Arts Council. He would be our lawyer free, and the only thing we had to do was find some art to hang in his office and change it like once every four months and rotate art through his offices on Wilshire Boulevard, which we said we would do, and which we did do. So after two meetings with Stan, he decided that we needed what they call a letter of intent.

Mason

Like some kind of charter?

Ferguson

Letter. I can't find a copy of that anywhere. I tore my house up. But I've got another box up in the attic that I haven't gone through yet. There were about six of us at that meeting. I forget who all was there. Have you ever heard of an artist called Marion Epting?

Mason

Yeah, he's a friend of Charles White.

Ferguson

Yeah. He was one of the artists-he was a very fine artist-who attended that meeting. Myself, Claude Booker, Donald Stinson, who was an artist who did stuff in enamels- There were two people during that period who had the same last name.

Mason

Did Bill [William] Pajaud get involved in this?

Ferguson

No. Pajaud was like the curator for Golden State [Mutual Life Insurance Company]. By that time, two other people had joined us: Bob Heliton, who was a graphic artist-he's in Texas now-and another guy named Donald Dowd, who was a graphic artist. He was a good friend of Bob Heliton's. How they joined us was there was a very middle-class black church in Los Angeles. I can't think of the name of it. It wasn't First AME [African Methodist Episcopal Church]. It was more elitist than First AME.

Mason

It must have been Episcopalian or something. [laughter]

Ferguson

Much more. But they had hired a minister who was not the kind of minister they really wanted. He was a real fair-complexioned young man who started identifying with the black community. And actually these black people who went to this church, that wasn't their kind of minister. They probably were the people who had left the AME Church because the AME Church had become-At least since its founding, they had had two breakaways from the First AME. The first one was when the members pulled out and formed the People's Independent Church around 1915. And then you had another pull away from the People's Independent Church and the AME Church of some black people who wanted to be *more* elitist. They were people who sang hymns and showed no emotions in their service, you know. Every time black people get money, they want to divorce themselves from their roots. Instead of singing gospel music and shouting and enjoying Christianity, they [gestures], that sort of thing. But we met their minister, who listened to me and Claude and decided that one thing that would be good for this church was to have an art program at the church, to speak about black art, and to get a speaker who's an artist. That's when I met- I knew Bill Pajaud's family, and I knew Bill Pajaud, but he didn't know me, per se, because he had been divorced from that family for some length of time. But anyway, Bill decided to be our speaker. We went to the church and gave this program, which was a great success. Bill talked about art, and that's how we recruited Bob Heliton and Donald Dowd, because we had come over to the church one morning with the art and stuff. And Claude and I were dressed in those three-piece suits, you know. [laughter] You need

to hear Bob Heliton talk about the first time he saw me and Claude. He thought we were somebody from outer space, right? But they listened and they joined the Black Arts Council. So we decided we'd meet in a week, and everybody would bring a letter, and we'd work on it. And when the next meeting came, the only person who brought a letter was me. Nobody else brought one. Because we're supposed to put all these letters together and make this statement. And then Claude, because he was the president of the BAC-not because he was elected; he appointed himself as president of the BAC-we would take all these letters and make one letter, and that would be the letter Claude would sign as the official letter of intent.

Mason

And then you would present it to somebody at the museum?

Ferguson

No, we would just have an organizational structure. Then we could go out and be a bona fide entity. Because [when you] first come to the institution and talk about doing something, they want to know who you are, where you're from. We decided that we needed some kind of brochure or something to identify ourselves. So Stan read my letter and said, "This one's fine. We'll just use Cecil's." So Claude signed his name to my letter, and that became official. And I can't find the letter anywhere. Before we get through talking now, before we get through meeting, I'll find one, because I don't throw away anything. They're around here somewhere in a box; I've just got to go through them. So now we had to get officers, right? And since Claude was the main visual person, he would become the president of the BAC. Then we got a vice president. Donald Dowd became the treasurer. Bob Heliton became the graphic artist. And nobody wanted the secretary job because no men want to be secretaries. At that point we only had men in the organization. So I decided that I would be secretary until we could find another secretary. I really didn't have no secretarial skills, you know, but we had to have somebody to write down what our minutes were.

Mason

Yeah, that was the most important job. [laughter]

Ferguson

Yeah. I became the secretary, right? So one day Claude said, "We need to make a proposal to the museum and do something with the arts at the museum." Because by this time we had met all these artists who were really- The BAC had moved from the church to a place down on Crenshaw [Boulevard], right down on that turn. There used to be a place downstairs operated by a grassroots organization called the Big Friends. So we started meeting up there. So Claude and I made a proposal to the museum to have a three-part lecture series at the museum. By that time we had met Charles White, John [T.] Riddle [Jr.], Samella Lewis, Bernie Casey. In the meantime, Suzanne Jackson had opened up a gallery called Gallery 32. By now the arts had taken off in our little community. And at Gallery 32, we'd all get together and hang the shows- you know, hang out and talk about art. At Gallery 32 you could do anything. And a lot of the art coming out of that period was social commentary, you know.

Mason

What do you mean? You mean there were things you could do at her gallery that you couldn't do at the Brockman Gallery?

Ferguson

It was all political, right? We did a lot of political things at Gallery 32. And we started having crowds come there. It's funny. When you're making that history, you don't think about it. It's just a good place to go, you know. We all hung out there. And we became like a close-knit family of artists. For the first time we had a group of artists and art-type people who all had a common thread.

Mason

But when you look at Suzanne Jackson's work, though, it's non-political. I mean, she was interested in formal issues-color and- I don't know if she was doing different work back then.

Ferguson

No.

Mason

But I was just wondering if-

Ferguson

Suzanne's work had nothing to do with- There's a reason why she became involved in that. There were other reasons, right? I don't think Suzanne really had a social-commentary bone in her body. But she had a lot of middle-class values that we needed. She had come from a very middle-class family up in Carmel, California.

Mason

Yeah. I read somewhere that she was kind of a hippie up in San Francisco. So I guess her coming from San Francisco, she probably brought- Did she talk about things that were going on in Oakland and stuff?

Ferguson

She was really trying to find her own identity. There were many young people at that time who went through that. She was looking for her own identity, more or less. Plus, she was very attractive. [laughter] There weren't many women involved, you know, because a woman could kind of just- Gloria Bohanon wasn't really that [strong on] social commentary. But there were hardly any females involved. We all thought we needed some females, and her work had nothing to do with that, but she became a part of that whole sixties generation, although she had hearts and birds.

Mason

And everybody loving each other.

Ferguson

Loving each other, which was indicative of her upbringing. But anyway, we proposed this series at the museum. And the museum, in their anxiety to do something for the black community, they agreed. And they knew how hard it was to get white people to an art lecture. You know, they have an art lecture in the Bing Auditorium, and you could throw rice in there and you would hardly hit nobody-with the majority culture, right? It was just hard to get people. You'd have an auditorium full of scholars from UCLA and USC [University of Southern California], but you really wouldn't have large crowds.

Mason

Except for the [Edward] Kienholz show.

Ferguson

But that was a whole different trip, because they created sensationalism out of that. And that really didn't lead into the auditorium. They got large crowds in the gallery-people standing in line four and five abreast to get in and see one thing: *Back Seat Dodge*. But *Roxy's* was much more controversial than *Back Seat Dodge*, because *Roxy's* was about a whorehouse in the 1930s. Kienholz had the madame- You know how he depicted it there; you saw it in the book I had. And *Five Dollar Billy* was a prostitute that Kienholz had put on an old Singer sewing machine, and she would go up and down when you pressed the pedal. That was *Five Dollar Billy*. That was much more controversial than *Back Seat Dodge*, because *Back Seat Dodge* was just the back seat of a car that you could peer in, and there was a couple in the back making love. But it got all the sensationalism, which made it so popular, and also made Kienholz. Kienholz became a world-famous artist on the strength of that one show. So the museum was thinking-I'm only thinking for the museum-"Okay, we'll let them have this. We'll do this for the natives so they won't-"

Mason

Have another Watts revolt. [laughter]

Ferguson

Yeah. "We'll do this because nobody will be coming to the exhibit anyway. We can't get white people to come. We know black people aren't interested in art." But they figured wrong, because by this time Claude and I had become hip to PR and how to deal with it. We knew about public spot announcements. The first time Claude and I did a spot announcement, we wrote a book. [laughter] You know, you get five to ten seconds to tell where your event is, where and when- Claude and I took almost a book in there. The man said, "I can't use this." We didn't know, right? But by this time we knew. And we paired up the people. I think Bernie Casey and Samella [Lewis] was one group, one or two artists who spoke. The next was John Riddle and Charles White. The third one was when we were going to put a panel together of artists and also we were going to get some jazz musicians, and then we were going to show slides of black artists on the screen, and this musician was going to put

music to the art simultaneously. And then afterwards we would have a panel discussion about black art with a group of artists that consisted of John Outterbridge, Gloria Bohanon, Arenzo Smith, Dan Concholar, Bernie Casey, and a few others.

Mason

This says it was shown on television?

Ferguson

No.

Mason

Oh, okay. This says it was moderated by Truman Jacques, host of KNXT-TV.

Ferguson

He was on TV. That was the last program in that series, for which I was a moderator.

Mason

Is that a black station? Or was he a black guy?

Ferguson

Truman Jacques was a black man who had been on TV about twenty years or better. Now he does a Sunday morning program, every Sunday, about religion. But he was one of the most visible black people in TV and radio at that time. We got him to emcee the program because of his name. The first artists who talked were Samella Lewis and Bernie Casey. And we had a full house. The second was Charles White and John Riddle, and the house spilled off onto the patio. Now the museum was getting worried, right? All these black people coming to the museum. But they were committed to doing three shows.

Mason

They had to do three black art shows?

Ferguson

Three black art lectures, because they had committed to it and had publicized it. They couldn't cut it off. So by the third time the series came along- And we

had advertised what the concept was going to be. Claude and I knew we were going to have lots of people there. We wanted to set up chairs outside of the Bing Auditorium room to deal with the overflow, and the museum said, "There isn't going to be that big of an overflow. No way." And we came up with the idea of piping music onto Wilshire Boulevard. We decided to do Paul Robeson's "I Am America." Have you ever heard that?

Mason

No.

Ferguson

It's dynamite. And the third series, that night, we had Paul Robeson's baritone voice booming out on Wilshire Boulevard. All of a sudden black people came from everywhere. They filled the auditorium up so quickly, and then they spilled outside. They ran and tried to get chairs and stuff. It was too late. We were going to have that big reception outside where they prepared for something like three hundred people, and that food went like [mimicks ravenous consumption]. [laughter] The whole plaza level was just full of people. So we had piped those speakers outside to carry the lecture outside. It was just huge, right? So after that, Claude and I thought now maybe the museum would be open to a black curator.

Mason

Was Samella Lewis already working at the museum in the education department?

Ferguson

Not then. She got a job later on as a result of that lecture series.

Mason

Oh. And you have tapes, you said, of those lectures.

Ferguson

I have tapes of the lectures, right. It was dynamite too, because I've got a tape- I guess I can say this, how I got my tape.

Mason

Oh, well.

Ferguson

I knew the museum wasn't going to give up the tapes, because the museum has a way of eradicating people's contribution. But I knew somebody who worked inside, and I told him I needed a tape of that before the museum destroyed it and there wouldn't be a record. So I got a tape of that whole presentation. That's the only one I got. I don't have Samella Lewis and Bernie Casey. I'm sure the museum must have a tape of that, because they used to tape everything coming to the Bing Auditorium. But when you ask them about it, they say they can't find it. They must have tapes of that whole series. They tape everything else. But the museum didn't respond to that like they should have. Claude and I decided they weren't going to respond, so we were just going to try to build the Black Arts Council up and then come back and put some more pressure on them. So we set to the task of building the Black Arts Council. And you see on my résumé some of the things that we-

Mason

So the objectives of the Black Arts Council changed over time, I guess, as you became more and more professional and you saw more and more avenues to become involved in.

Ferguson

I think one of the big mistakes that Claude and I made with that whole Black Arts Council thing was that we spent all that energy trying to get inside the museum. Initially, as we had the three artists thing there and saw that the museum wasn't going to open its doors, we should have immediately put our energy into building our own institution. I think at that point Claude and I could have done that.

Mason

I see on the list that you also had people like Rose Marie Banks, who I guess is Leon Banks's wife. So you also had people who had a certain amount of money and who were able to become financially supportive of an institution?

Ferguson

Leon wanted to be a part of the majority culture, really, since he collected art, all kinds of art, right? He joined our group but did not really want to be a part of it. He really wanted to be a part of the museum, although he supported us. He supported us very meagerly, just enough to know he has some identity. He could have changed the whole course of the BAC if he had that desire, because he was a man of means, and he also knew people who had means. But deep down inside, I think Leon wanted to be a part of the Contemporary Art Council at the museum, the first black to be involved in that.

Mason

But what about his wife? Because you don't even have him- Well, you said Claude Booker put together this brochure for the "Art-In, Drink-In, Dance-In" for 1970, which you left your name off of mistakenly, but he didn't even list Leon Banks's name. He just has Rose Marie Banks's name on it. Was she more involved?

Ferguson

Well, Claude was a whole part of the 1960s revolt-right?-and the whole 1960s thing was directed toward black people. I think Leon Banks was from that generation where you don't make too much noise and maybe they'll let us slide on in. So he and Claude never had a real understanding. He almost disliked me, Leon Banks.

Mason

Were there any other black people in the community who could have-?

Ferguson

Yeah. There was June Patterson, whose husband was a doctor. He didn't become involved with June. They were real middle-class. We got a lot of those Baldwin Hills people at that time. We decided to give this art show in Larchmont Hall, and it was real successful. We raised something like \$3,500 in one night with art, which was unheard of with black art in Los Angeles.

Mason

You were trying to raise money to buy a piece to give to the museum? Or you were raising money to cover your costs?

Ferguson

Cover our costs and create patrons and interest in black art. And of course, the BAC was making a track record all over the city by now. And Claude was real articulate when it came to messing with people, right? He was like the Panthers or- He almost looked white. He almost looked white. And he was very- What should I call it? He could be very- He could make people alienated. He could say, like, "If you don't do this, we're going to blow the museum up." [laughter] And he worked for the museum, right?

Mason

Was he involved with the Panthers or US or any of those groups?

Ferguson

No.

Mason

Were any of those groups involved with you at all? I mean, did they come to the shows or anything?

Ferguson

They might have come, but not officially. We were constantly bringing pressure on the museum. We would make it seem like- The BAC did have a large membership by then. But like most organizations, most black organizations, they are your members, but they don't really take an active part. They are kind of like on the side saying, "Go on and give them hell. Then we'll slide on in the door with you." When you look at the Civil Rights struggle in the South, you think a whole lot of people took part in that. A whole lot of people didn't take part in that. A few people brought about that change, a few dedicated people. It wasn't the masses. The masses never bring about social change in society. All the masses do is enjoy social change. People don't put their jobs up, their positions up, to bring about any kind of change. And most people who bring about social change, for years and years they stay out of the history. They go along like unsung heroes. For instance, Claude did a lot to change the system in Los Angeles for black artists, but hardly anybody speaks about Claude anymore, unless I talk about him. But one day the history will be written, and they'll write Claude into that. So one day I read something about

Henry [O.] Tanner, and I said, "You know, Claude, Tanner was a black man." It's funny. I had worked there all these years, and I had moved that Tanner around a thousand times, and it never dawned on me that he could be a black man, right? The museum had two Tanners, one called *Daniel in the Lion's Den* and one called *Moonlight Wall of Tangiers* or something like that. "He's a black man, Claude, and we have this in our collection, and the museum never shows it." So, armed with that, Claude went back to the museum establishment saying it was not him but it was the BAC officers who were saying that we have two pictures in the museum collection by a black person and nobody ever sees them, and if they're not shown, we're going to picket the museum. So the museum hurriedly got the Tanners up and put them up on the wall. It was so funny, because all the while BAC had a big membership, but most of the social change that we were asking for from the museum was what Claude and I would go home at night and write up, just the two of us. Like the black community wanted a department in the museum, an African American department, and the museum was listening. They weren't reacting, but they were listening. We wanted somebody on the curatorial staff that was black. Actually, Claude wanted to be that curator. I was going through these things the other day. I didn't even know I had these papers, but Claude had written to Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, who was a representative at the time, asking her to bring to some pressure on the museum about creating a position for Claude.

Mason

Okay. And she was the one who later became involved in establishing the California Afro-American Museum.

Ferguson

Yeah. Just because she was a representative. That's the way I look at it.

Mason

I was just wondering, when you say you went to the museum- You said the board of directors really ran the museum. Would you take things to Donahue, and then he'd have to present these things to the board of directors?

Ferguson

No, we went right straight to the board. There was no point in going through Donahue; that was a waste of time. That was a waste of time. Donahue was a wimp, you know. I think now maybe it was because his credentials must have been shaky. I never knew. In reading this thing that he did, what kind of credentials did he have?

Mason

Well, he studied with one of the most famous art historians.

Ferguson

But studying isn't- What degrees did he have?

Mason

I don't know if he got his Ph.D., because I don't remember, and, you know, it wasn't required a long time ago.

Ferguson

I don't think he got his Ph.D.

Mason

But whatever he got, it was the highest degree that art historians were awarded.

Ferguson

After Dr. Brown left, the museum didn't have any Ph.D.'s in there for a long time, because at one time the only two people in the museum that had Ph.D.'s were people of color: Dr. Samella Lewis, who has two Ph.D.'s, and Dr. Patap [Pratapaditya] Pal, who's an Indian curator. I don't think nobody else at the museum had a Ph.D. I think Ebria Feinblatt got her Ph.D. in prints and drawings later on. I think right now the only people who have Ph.D.'s there are Dr. Pal and the director, "Rusty" [Earl A.] Powell III. I don't think nobody else has a Ph.D.

Mason

I don't know. Stephanie Barron doesn't have a Ph.D.

Ferguson

And the other person who had a Ph.D. was Jim [James] Peoples, who was a black man. He was the head of operations, and he had a Ph.D. in art management.

Mason

Maurice Tuchman didn't have a Ph.D.? I guess the arts were kind of in a transition.

Ferguson

Well, one time Stephanie Barron told me that after Jim Peoples got his Ph.D.- he's black, right?- One of the problems with Jim Peoples was the fact that he had gotten his Ph.D. and nobody recognized him. Because he had came up from the ranks, you know. He started as a security guard and went to school at night.

Mason

What did he get it in?

Ferguson

Art management, which was a good Ph.D. to have in the 1980s. But to the white people, that made no difference. He was still Jim Peoples, right? They never gave him- I think that utterly destroyed him.

Mason

What happened to him?

Ferguson

Because he wanted so badly to impress white people, and they never gave him any recognition. So he was a terrible man for us. He set us back years and years.

Mason

How did he do that?

Ferguson

Because he only wanted to give credence to people who had degrees. Those are the only people he respected. Because that made his degree sound

important, right? And just because you've got- He had some good things, like he wanted people to go to school. That's fine. But he was also dealing with an institution where white people didn't have no degrees when the museum first opened, and they got good positions. They didn't have degrees. It wasn't until the arts took off in the 1950s that all of sudden they started applying degrees to these positions. That's my opinion of Jim Peoples. I'll tell you about how he got to be in power later on. But we started immediately- And after they had the shoot-out at UCLA between the Panthers and US- I'm thinking you have to go research that whole history, because I think prior to that shoot-out UCLA had agreed to build a whole building toward Afro-American culture and-

Mason

Well, that sounds like something we should get into next time.

Ferguson

All right. So we had a meeting, and what Claude and I would do, we would meet in his car. And we would decide the next action to take toward the museum. We decided that we needed an art exhibit of all black artists in the main gallery. So we made that proposal to the museum through the Black Arts Council, and the museum said, "We can do a black arts show but not in the main gallery, just in the museum." The only black show they ever had in the main gallery was the *Two Centuries of Black American Art*. This is the press release about *Two Centuries of Black American Art*.

Mason

Yeah. This got a lot of press attention. Almost every paper, every arts magazine- So this is after the *[Los Angeles, 1972: A] Panorama [of Black Artists]*.

Ferguson

Yeah. I was just going to go into the *Panorama* show. I guess we could do it next time.

1.9. Tape Number: V, Side One June 3, 1991

Ferguson

Claude [Booker] and I decided that we needed to get the young black people interested in art at the school level, because we were concerned about the negative attitude that young black people had toward the word "black." Like you almost were saying that it was some kind of taboo or some kind of voodoo that had been put on you if you were black. We had tested that by asking kids certain questions and waiting for their reaction, and too many times it was negative. So we started going to different schools and not only talking about black artists in schools, but also about bringing kids to the museum in our car or whatever. So we went over to Carver Junior High School. It was a junior high school over in East L.A. It was named after President William McKinley at first, but as the community changed, they named it George Washington Carver because of the black migration into that area. Now I think they're thinking about changing the school to a Latino [name]. [laughter] But they're stupid, because they don't change white schools to accommodate whoever lives there. I think that's dumb. They should build new schools and name them after-Anyway, they had a show at the County Art Museum [Los Angeles County Museum of Art] on van Gogh [*Vincent van Gogh Paintings and Drawings*]. Van Gogh had been the largest exhibition that had ever been shown in California when it was at the [Los Angeles County] Museum of Natural History, so they did it again in-

Mason

It was in 1969.

Ferguson

Nineteen sixty-nine. And we brought some kids over from Carver. We went back and did a lecture series there with Suzanne Jackson, who's an artist, and Bob Helton. We would try to get people from the black art community-an artist or photographer or teacher or somebody-to go and share a slide presentation, take their art or whatever.

Mason

Would it be more a historical presentation? Like did Suzanne Jackson just talk about her own work, or-?

Ferguson

No. They always talked about the struggle for that time period or whatever and then talked about black art and what it means to black people using art, sure, and using historical art, too, showing visually what arts mean to black people. Then, on October 27, we had the lecture by Charles White and John [T.] Riddle [Jr.]. And that was quite a lecture.

Mason

That was part of *The Tishman Collection: [The Sculpture of Black Africa]*?

Ferguson

Yeah. Then some of the other things we did, we went to a blind children's school and we took art. They would be able to feel art, and we would- You know, because black people have big lips and noses, we would direct their hands there and let them know there were black people, right? But it was fascinating, because they really liked that. And this was a long time ago. We did things in libraries. Then they had this exhibition at the La Jolla Museum [of Contemporary Art] called *Dimensions in Black Art*, the first major black art exhibit that I know of in California. It was in La Jolla, down by San Diego. So we decided we should go to the opening. We chartered this bus and went there. It was quite nice.

Mason

Who did you get to go? It was just the Black Arts Council?

Ferguson

Anybody who wanted to go. But we had a large membership by then. We would have had to have four buses to take all our membership. They weren't active, but at the end I guess we had over three thousand members. Maybe fifteen hundred dues-paying members. So it really grew. But it took the energy of a couple of people; that wasn't so bad, right? They worked a couple of people to death. Other people just were members; they didn't participate, right? But it was going to kill me and Claude. So as we came back from La Jolla, I decided that the kids in Watts should see the show. I got them to charter another bus, and I went down and took some kids from a school down in Watts to see the show, because they had a lot of black images and things. This was a grammar school, and I thought it would be good for them to see that

exhibit. So I talked some people into getting a bus or whatever. I can't remember now how I went down. But anyway, I took a whole lot of kids down there to see that show. Then there was a school over in the Latino community, and we were trying to have some solidarity between the black and brown community-Latinos and blacks. Bob Helton and I and Jerome Scott, we did a lecture on black art at a high school in East L.A. called Salesian [High School]. I've still got some photographs from that somewhere. And then we started trying to get into the more affluent clubs in the black community. So I hooked up with this lady of the Negro Professional Women's club, and I did a lecture entitled "What Art Can Mean to Black People."

Mason

What did you talk about in the lecture? Do you remember? It was a long time ago.

Ferguson

I started by talking about how the visuals play an important part in everybody's life-because long before you can read, you relate to the visuals-and how that process can mess up our children in terms of being black. You know what I'm saying? So the visuals are very important. And then I talked about, if I remember correctly, how black artists are really historians. They document a time in history, which makes that very important. You can almost follow artwork that comes out in a ten-year period, and you can almost tell what's going on in that period. Sometimes it's for twenty years, ten-to twenty-year periods. Then I talked about how we need to form a market for black art so that our various historians can live and create a whole market.

Mason

And what was their response?

Ferguson

Well, you know, it wasn't that good. What happened was that during those days I would get carried away, right? Sickle-cell [anemia] was going around at that time, and all black people were giving all kinds of money to sickle-cell with no control over their money or where it was going. I spoke out against that, and some lady thought I was speaking out against sickle-cell. Because her

mother had sickle-cell. So that particular lecture series didn't end on a good note, because I think I made the statement-not viciously, you know- that we needed to put more effort on the well, not so much on the ill or the sick, and I didn't mean it the way she took it. I had gone to a high school, and they had typing class, and they had some typewriters that came over with Columbus. [laughter] In a black school. And I thought it was very- It didn't make no sense for us to be talking about giving money for research for sickle-cell and our kids got to use that kind of typewriter during that period, right? I thought that was counterproductive, you know, that they had taken us all on this trip, that only black people got sickle-cell, only black people died from it, and we bought into that. I was trying to ask them why the majority culture is so worried about your health. They aren't worried about anything else. They aren't worried about educating your children. They aren't worried about giving you jobs so that you can support yourself. Why are they so worried about whether you get sickle-cell? To me it didn't make sense. Well, anyway, that was a long time ago. We just went on this crash thing of doing a whole lot of work in any place they let us go into: restaurants, malls, schools, cafeterias- Claude and I would just go put up a black show. Some of the ones that were really meaningful- We did a show for Augustus [F.] Hawkins's foundation [Hawkins Family Memorial Foundation for Educational Research and Development] at a restaurant called Julius. That was a pretty good response. You know Augustus Hawkins, or you've heard of him? He's always into the culture, right? So that helps. And I had always been involved in the Watts Summer Festival [of Art]. But the Watts Summer Festival was having some problems with the art component in terms of getting people who wanted to do it.

Mason

Why was that?

Ferguson

People were just not interested in art. It brings no profit, you know. In that period it wasn't a flamboyant part of- It wasn't like the Miss Watts pageant, or other beauty contests, you know.

Mason

But, I mean, artists weren't interested in displaying their work?

Ferguson

The artist was, but you needed somebody to put it together. Oh, yeah, hundreds of artists were waiting. [laughter] So we told the Black Arts Council to take it over. In essence we were saying Claude and I would do it, right? So we started doing it in 1970. Oh, I'd been going there since '66, helping.

Mason

So how long were you involved in that?

Ferguson

Till it ended in 1975.

Mason

What was your involvement then? You were the jury for the works? Or you just hung them?

Ferguson

No, everybody could bring work. We didn't have juries. If you brought some work, we hung it. I was responsible for design and administrative things, you know. In the last couple of years we had it, I put together an award for the best art in all the categories. I also did a prison art exhibit as a special exhibit in conjunction with the Watts festival. And one year they let all the artists out of jail to attend it-I mean all the artists who had paintings there. [laughter] And then, one day, Claude and I were setting up and saying, "Man, we need to get the art out in some more places." So Claude said, "Man, they've got all those banks in our neighborhood. They've got money. Let's approach one of the banks." I said, "Which one?" He said, "Oh, how about Security Pacific [Bank]?" "Okay." So he goes to Security Pacific-it's the 1970s, right?-and talked to them about a traveling art exhibition. And there were little white girls who want to be liberal and everything, right? So they thought about taking photographs of black art and mounting them and traveling around the city.

Mason

To different banks?

Ferguson

To different banks. Leave it at each bank for a month. So one little girl, she was real liberal, right? I mean, you could tell she was- So we met with her outside the office and convinced her that it would be better to exhibit original works, that it could be done.

Mason

Yeah. Imagine! [laughter]

Ferguson

So she took it back to her bosses. I don't know what she did, but she took it back to her bosses, and they bought it. So we had to build- So for that work, we juried it. And we had to build modules for the work to go on.

Mason

You had to-?

Ferguson

Build modules, you know.

Mason

Like a portable wall?

Ferguson

A portable wall. I think I showed you some that we did at the Black Arts Council dinner. Those are modules from that show. We got that all together. It was six modules. Some could hold two, but most of them would hold one painting. I think it was thirty paintings in all-thirty, thirty-five paintings in all. Nice work from the best black artists. But when Security Pacific came down to see the modules, there [was] one piece they couldn't live with: David Hammons's *Pray for America*. So that had to be replaced.

Mason

The American flag was a hot symbol.

Ferguson

Yeah. We said we would not take it off. So at that time, we had just met Stan [J. Stanley] Sanders, the Rhodes scholar. I told you he had become our lawyer.

Mason

Right.

Ferguson

And the only fee we paid him was to hang artwork in his office, right? So we told them, "We're going to forward this to our lawyer." So we went down to see the people at Security Pacific, and Stan told us they want to just pay us off and just not do the show, just give us the money and not do the show. And we refused to do that. And Stan told them, "Just for the one painting, I hope you're going to take care of it, because if you don't we'll picket the banks, and we'll say this little organization, the Black Arts Council, is trying to do something with race relations, and you, being a big old bank, you're persecuting them." So they decided to go on ahead and let it go. I think somebody told me they fired that little girl who helped us. I feel so sorry about that. But we didn't have any problems except for one bank in Newport [Beach]. They would stare at us. In Newport, some guys got antsy about it, got all wrapped up in the American flag, right? And since then, that same piece has been on the cover of a major show.

Mason

Yeah. It was the Studio Museum in Harlem.

Ferguson

On the catalog. So you see how things have changed from that-

Mason

Yeah. That was a black show for a black audience, though.

Ferguson

But for a year Claude and I would go all around to all the banks in Los Angeles and take these modules. We'd take four hours of overtime or whatever from the job and drive this truck to different banks and put the art up.

Mason

Who were some of the other artists in the show?

Ferguson

There was John Riddle, David Hammons, Charlie White, Leon Leonard, and Suzanne Jackson.

Mason

Betye Saar?

Ferguson

I don't know if Betye was in that show or not. I've got the whole list someplace. That was twenty-something years ago! [laughter]

Mason

Yeah. Was Curtis Tann in it? Was he involved in the Black Arts Council?

Ferguson

Yes.

Mason

He was.

Ferguson

I don't think Curtis was in that show.

Mason

Yeah. If it was only paintings, he wasn't. I guess he was just doing his enamels at that time.

Ferguson

Later, at that point, we thought we needed a fund-raiser. By now the Black Arts Council was getting a lot of visibility, and black people were joining like mad.

Mason

That was a direct result of the bank shows, you mean?

Ferguson

And other activities. The bank show had a lot to do with it, because every bank in the community- You also had a sign that [announced] the Black Arts Council

as being responsible along with Security Pacific. So we decided we needed a fund-raiser. We put together a fund-raiser in a place called Larchmont Hall in Los Angeles. We made something like \$4,000, which was unheard of, we thought. [laughter]

Mason

Yeah, that's a lot of money. What was the date for that?

Ferguson

We sold some black paintings. And the Larchmont-

Mason

That was 1970.

Ferguson

Unheard of, right?

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

People supported it. And artists came who weren't in the show, but they would come and say, "Could I hang my picture?" And we auctioned off a piece. I forget whose piece it was. It might have been a piece Charlie [Charles White] gave us. I don't remember. But it was quite successful. And by that time I had gotten into black history, too.

Mason

Okay. Well, I was wondering if we could talk about that separate from the shows, because we still haven't talked about the shows at the L.A. County Museum, the *[Los Angeles, 1972: A] Panorama [of Black Artists]* show and the other shows.

Ferguson

Okay. We're going to skip that and go to the Black Arts Council's sponsorship of a dinner and exhibition at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. Our guest speaker was Barry Gaither. And we gave an award to Elma Lewis. The dinner was a big

success. Lots of people came. And we commissioned an artist to do a relief of Henry O. Tanner, which we gave to Elma Lewis, which hangs in her office now at the Afro-American Boston museum of fine arts [National Center of Afro-American Artists]. I've never been there, but one of the magazines, like *Ebony* or something, did a story on her, and I saw it up hanging in her office. I recognized it.

Mason

The museum in Boston, is it called museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists or something like that?

Ferguson

Oh, yeah. See, it might have changed since then.

Mason

And Elma Lewis worked there?

Ferguson

She was the director.

Mason

Oh, I didn't know that.

Ferguson

She founded it, right. And Barry is a curator. Did I ever give you a copy of his talk that night?

Mason

No, you didn't.

Ferguson

Yeah. You need to have that. I'll dig out a copy for you. We had it transcribed and handed out to people at the next meeting.

Mason

Why did you choose Elma Lewis to receive the award?

Ferguson

We had heard about her contribution to the arts in New York and Boston. First she had started a dance school in New York. And her struggle, you know. And then she went to Boston and was still promoting the black arts. And Barry Gaither, we had heard about him-we didn't know him at the time, we'd just heard about him, right?-and he seemed like he was the best of the people we had heard about.

Mason

Yeah. He was involved in trying to get black arts into the New York museums, and there are all kinds of letters he's written, like to the *New York Times*, about the problem with places like the Whitney [Museum of American Art] not showing black art.

Ferguson

He was a real activist. That's why we chose- Maybe we should have given the award to him! [laughter] But we gave it to her. Plus, it was a good gesture, too. We had gotten an artist, commissioned him, to do a bronze bust and to give it to a black institution, right? It all had meaning for us.

Mason

Who did you get to commission that?

Ferguson

I forget his name. I've got it written down there somewhere. And we used to sponsor all kinds of book parties-black book parties, exhibitions, you know. I guess our treasury got up to about \$7,000, \$8,000 at one time, which was pretty good for such a small organization. And we would use that money for putting up shows, not paying ourselves any salary-you know, just for putting up the shows. And we would do about every college in Los Angeles. One time we did a show at El Camino College. They never wanted you to use the main art galleries. They always wanted you to use the libraries and lesser-

Mason

Student unions?

Ferguson

Student unions, right. And we would argue and fight for the gallery. We used to lose most of the fights for the gallery, but in fighting we made them construct stuff in the other areas.

Mason

Why did they not let you hang in the main gallery? I mean, what was the reasoning they gave you?

Ferguson

Just like any other white institution in America, they won't let black people use them.

Mason

Well, they must have had to give you a reason.

Ferguson

Oh, they give you all kinds of nonsense reasons about you didn't ask them in the right length of time; they've got a calendar of two and three years in the making, the whole idea, you know. They were just threatened, I think. And they weren't giving their little spaces that easily. Because, in the first place, most of the people who worked in those galleries, they didn't understand anything about black art or black people or black artists, right? So if they couldn't relate to you as a person, how could they relate to your artwork? You know what I'm saying?

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

Well, we did the one at El Camino. They had to go to the student union and build a whole lot of walls. So it turned out all right. But the day we were installing the show- We had John Riddle's *The Operation*.

Mason

I've never seen that.

Ferguson

And then *There's More at Stake than Just Attica*," two various social commentary pieces by John Riddle. And I guess they got a phone call because some [Black] Muslim brothers were on campus selling newspapers, and then we were bringing those two works of art in there, and all of sudden, there were cops on top of the roof-

Mason

Well, I don't know. [laughter] At that time I guess they had reason to be jittery. There was a lot going on.

Ferguson

And we just kept on like we didn't see them, like they weren't there. By that time, Claude and I, our names got kind of controversial, right? We did a show at Cal[ifornia] State [University, Los Angeles], and somebody called there with a bomb threat.

Mason

Dominguez Hills?

Ferguson

Cal State Los Angeles. They had to clear the building. And then, after that, the army air force got in touch with us, because they wanted to do an art exhibit and cultural fair at their base in San Bernardino [Norton Air Force Base], because they were having a lot of problems internally with race relations. They were trying to calm that down, and somebody came to the idea that they could have that. They decided to have a whole week of festivities and an art show and music and dedicate it to the sisters in the army air force. So they brought sisters from every base in the world to this art show-young sisters. Boy, it was a trip. And they had seminars. We had just closed the show at Cal State, and they sent trucks down, the army air force trucks, these great big rigs that open up like a whole living room, you know. There they were, putting-I wish I had a picture of this-John Riddle's *The Operation* into the side of the truck, and the side of the truck had this big eagle on it, because it's the army air force, right? And *The Operation* was two steel figures, cubists, with one white figure taking the brain out of a black figure's head.

Mason

Wow. [laughter]

Ferguson

And here are these soldiers standing there.

Mason

Wow. Oh, priceless.

Ferguson

I told Claude, "Check this out." But we couldn't find a camera anywhere. I said, "Check this out!" We couldn't find a camera. I said, "We'll never get that again."

Mason

You'd have to stage it to get that picture.

Ferguson

Yeah, stage it. They played it on out, though. One thing about the white man, they said, "No problem." We went on down to the base. We put our show up. And we made one mistake. They offered us officers quarters, and we chose to stay with the enlisted men. [laughter] That was a dumb decision. We could have stayed in officers quarters with television and nice beds, right? We lived in the quarters with the enlisted men in a bunk, guys going and coming all night long, cussing. You know soldiers. I told Claude, "This sure was dumb." The last night of the event, the bus came to pick up all these kids. And I'd seen all these sisters; they were about seventeen, eighteen years old. I said, "Wow." And all these young black men in the service, I said, "Damn, why would they be in the service?" So I started asking them, "Why did you join the service?" on the bus ride to the dance. And just about all of them had the same problem: they were from the South, they couldn't get any jobs, so they joined the service. "Better than starving." And I said, "Oh, okay." And that night, when they had the closing dance, they must have played it for a half hour, and I was sitting there watching all the young people in those gray uniforms, and they were just like kids from *Soul Train* [television series], right? And they were practicing war, practicing how to get killed. It was a whole trip. Babies. But anyway, it was a good program, one of the few I didn't document real well, because that's the first thing Claude and I should have bought was a

camera when we did it. We were so busy doing that we didn't have time to stop and document, right?

Mason

There were no photographers as members of the Black Arts Council?

Ferguson

They all worked. Even the ones who were in the Black Arts Council, you couldn't get them. Like Claude and I were the forefront, right? We would initiate a lot of stuff. They didn't even have time to organize it properly. We were closing one show at Cal State L.A., and the air force trucks were coming before the show was even closed. It was a trip. They opened the Martin Luther King [Jr. General] Hospital in 1972, and they asked me and Claude to hang some pictures for the opening. They had gotten an artist named Lyle Souter to paint a painting of Dr. King, and then they had put Dr. King's painting with a shroud over it, and we refused to hang it until they took the shroud off. And some guy who worked there-some older fellow who worked there-had worked for Kenneth Hahn. He told me, "Kenneth Hahn picked that shroud, and what Kenneth Hahn wants, Kenneth Hahn gets." So I told him, "You get Kenny Hahn to come hang your pictures. It's just that simple. I'm not hanging it." Because a shroud is an indication that somebody's dead, and we felt that King was alive and would remain alive always. So they called everybody. It was funny. Finally a man made a decision. He said, "Well, these two men are the professionals." I guess they were so scared of what Kenny Hahn was going to say that that night, after the opening, this black man ran and snitched to Kenny Hahn. He pointed at me, right? And Kenny Hahn came over and told me, "You're right."

Mason

Good for you.

Ferguson

It made no difference whether Kenny Hahn thought I was right or not; that was the way I felt. So it made no difference. I wasn't going to change. Because they could hang it any kind of way they wanted to. You know, it's theirs. I wasn't going to hang it. And then we did an exhibit at Whittier College, where

[Richard M.] Nixon had gone to school. We had fun out there. And then all the time we'd tell the [Los Angeles County] Museum [of Art] about having a show, right?

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Ferguson

For a long time, we at the Black Arts Council had been approaching the museum about having a black art show. You know, we were steadily talking to them. All of a sudden our track record is coming back, because a lot of people got interested in us and in our program, and a lot of people were calling the museum and giving the museum pressure. So they decided they were going to let us have a show. We were not going to have the main art gallery; we were going to be in the art rental gallery. We were going to have the whole art rental gallery, right? And we asked for a black curator. So they said if we brought in some names they'd choose one.

Mason

Again, you're talking to the board, right? You're not talking to the director?

Ferguson

And then we went out and chose our names and brought them back, gave them to the museum, and you'd think they'd want to look at them or go choose a person, right? Maurice Tuchman got the trip to go visit all these guys and interview them and choose one of them. So he went and visited them all, and he choose Carroll Greene.

Mason

Now, had Maurice Tuchman been involved in any of the black art shows that you'd been-?

Ferguson

No, of course not!

Mason

I had to ask. [laughter]

Ferguson

Of course not! He was a curator at the museum, and I'd worked for him for a long time. He wasn't interested in it. No black shows or black people. He wasn't an outright bigot, you know, but he sure wasn't interested in promoting- Because he had plenty of time to do that in the years he had been there, right? The only thing that he did while he was there was during one of the first new talent awards. The second one they gave out was given to a black artist named Mel [Melvin] Edwards, and he rode on that forever. But other than that- And it was a juried show. It turned out to be a nice show.

Mason

Who was on the jury?

Ferguson

We picked some artists. I forget who they were. We also set up a docent program.

Mason

We should mention that this is the *Panorama* show in 1972.

Ferguson

Yeah. The *Panorama* show. We got the people coming from the community to learn about the art. We made some mistakes. We got a whole lot of middle-class black folk from the community to be the docents, and all they did was- What's the word? Once the show was over, they only wanted to come back at me with the white people and their docents. They have an interest in the Black Arts Council, right? They wanted to be the first docents for the museum because they were doctors' wives. But the show was nice. The show was dynamite. We had complete control over it in terms of the little bitty catalog they did. And you cannot go there right now and find a catalog on that show or find any history of that show. I doubt it very seriously.

Mason

But William Wilson did do an article on the show for the L.A. *Times*.

Ferguson

Yeah. I have a copy of it. One of the visuals was a sculpture by Timothy Washington. And you saw the article?

Mason

Yeah, I read the article. I just don't remember the reproductions he used. But he wasn't too happy with the show. What did you think about his assessment of the show? I remember he said something like he expected social protest art, and what he saw was sort of mild. And then he was asking, what is this show doing in the museum? Why isn't it over in Watts or something where the black community can get to it and so forth?

Ferguson

William Wilson wouldn't know social protest art if he'd seen it, because his idea of social protest art is a Montel [Williams] talk show with some black guys going into a bunch of people in front of a welfare building. That's not protest art. That whole show was loaded with protest art. One piece in it that comes to mind was Betye Saar's piece, where she did this little piece like a jewel box, and in it she had a whole lot of little white porcelain alligators swimming down the stream one way. But when you got closer and examined it, down in the midst of all those alligators, some of them black and backwards, was a black figure. Now, that is social protest. Timothy Washington's piece with the mule, *One Nation under God*, with two black men with a mule-the forty acres and a mule wanted by black people after the Civil War-that was definitely a social piece. There's more statement in *Attica*. That wasn't a social piece? What are you talking about? Wes Marlin's *Cream of Wheat*? He doesn't know what black protest art is. We were very displeased with this whole article. But William Wilson's a bigot. He can't help it. He's a bigot, or else he's never taken time out to find out what black art's all about. So he can't write about it intelligently, because he never spent the time finding out what it was about. Either that or he's just a straightout bigot. And it doesn't matter to me which one he is, right?

Mason

Did the black press cover the show? The [*Los Angeles*] *Sentinel*? I didn't find anything.

Ferguson

No. There was nothing in those days. And we tried to get the black press involved in that. To this day, the *Sentinel* isn't about that. Have you read it?

Mason

No. I can't say that I- I mean, I've looked at articles, but I don't read it.

Ferguson

The *Sentinel* is a tabloid.

Mason

Yeah. I think we did say the black press in general is in a crisis these days.

Ferguson

Yeah, because of integration. And what's so sad about it is that integration did nothing for us. The black news loses the black people. And the *Sentinel* was a little better paper. In the early days, the *Sentinel* and the *California Eagle* stayed in business because they had a different distribution. But now a newspaper can't stay alive with [only] distribution. You've got to have advertisements. Then they had a lot of old heads. They refused to let any new blood come into the *Sentinel*. The man who ran the *Sentinel*, who founded the *Sentinel*, he was a dynamic man when he was young-you know, Colonel [Leon H.] Washington [Jr.]-because he worked for Charlotta Bass, and Charlotta Bass was a dynamic woman. She was the editor of the *California Eagle*. Now, if she was still living and she was still running her paper, you might be able to approach her about an article on art. That's the kind of woman she was. When people at the *Sentinel* do art exhibits and they cover them for their social club and stuff, they take pictures of the art, and they've got the members standing all in front of it smiling. You can't even see the art.

Mason

So what impact did the *Panorama* show have on the black artist community and the black arts?

Ferguson

Oh, they came.

Mason

But did it seem like the museum was finally opening up to maybe the suggestion that black art was there? And did some of the curators come to the show?

Ferguson

Claude and I knew differently. Everybody else was saying this was a step forward, right? But by this time, Claude and I knew that that was crap. You know what I mean?

Mason

Just because you knew the board so well and how they-?

Ferguson

We knew the people who sat at the museum. On the outside, you would think that after that lecture series the museum would have been in tune with doing something. You know, they were turning away people. By then we knew it was-

Mason

There was another show done between the *Panorama* show and *The Tishman Collection: [The Sculpture of Black Africa]*-the show of *Three Graphic Artists: Charles White, David Hammons, and Timothy Washington* that was done by Ebria Feinblatt.

Ferguson

And Joe [Joseph E.] Young.

Mason

Yeah, which was a real controversial exhibition. I understand that some artists picketed the show, and some people from the black community picketed the show.

Ferguson

Well, we organized the picket. Because Joe Young, a little white boy who worked up from custodian to be a curator-which is fine-who went to school on museum time to get his stuff, he decided he wanted to do a show of black artists. He worked for Ebria Feinblatt, who was curator of prints and drawings.

So he selected Charles White, David Hammons, and Timothy Washington, because they had works on paper. He went to Alonzo Davis at the Brockman Gallery, and soon they worked out a deal that the Graphic Arts Council would also buy a painting-one painting-that was in the show for \$3,500. Now, of course, Alonzo wanted that because Brockman Gallery would get 50 percent of three artists. He'd make more money than anybody off the show. He'd get 50 percent of Timothy's, 50 percent of David's, and 50 percent of Charlie's-right?-so he stands to make more money as being the one who sponsors them. That's the way I looked at that. But that's not why I was against them having the show. I don't care if they made a million dollars; that had nothing to do with Claude's and my position. Claude's and my position was that we considered David Hammons and Timothy Washington as two of the very young and upcoming artists. We thought Charlie White was in a class of his own, and that the museum should give Charlie a show of his own in the main art gallery and not at the prints and drawing space where they were having the show. The show wasn't in the main art gallery. They took down the prints and drawings collection and put the show in that space, which was in the Ahmanson [Gallery] building. The main art gallery is in the Litton building. So we called this big meeting to decide what we were going to do, because the black art community was split on whether to have the show or not. So the ones who agreed with me and Claude, we decided to picket the show. And nothing happened but the picketing on the night of the opening. We did make it seem stupid, because a few days [earlier] we were all together trying to get space. And now we're at odds, right? That's life, right? And Charlie's position was that he really didn't care.

Mason

He had made his reputation by then.

Ferguson

Charlie was that kind of person. His reputation wasn't that secure-not *that* secure. If it had been much better, they would have given him a one-man show in the main art gallery, right? And it really didn't do anything for the careers of Timothy and David-not really. What did more for their careers was the activity and the energy we spent during the sixties and seventies. That's

what did more than any of those stupid shows that would be at the museum. I mean, I think that way, anyway.

Mason

Did that cause a permanent split between the Black Artists Association and the Black Arts Council?

Ferguson

No. As soon as that show was over, we were right back where we were before, because we knew what a struggle it was. It still wasn't over after that. We all knew what a struggle it was. We got past that quickly. So then, after the *Panorama* show, we went back to doing things in the community. By that time, John Outterbridge had a real wonderful program in Compton at a place called the Communicative Arts Academy. It was dynamite. It was an old wrestling stadium that they had gotten ahold of. John started doing some wonderful things there, and we all started participating in that, helping him. One of the first things we did out there was during the *Panorama* show, when Carroll Greene was here. We presented him at a lecture in Compton that was on June 6, 1972. The title of his lecture was "The Authority of Afro-American Art: Black Artists Face the Future." And it was crowded. It was well attended. A lot of people came, because by that time the Black Arts Council, which the newspaper played- Because when we picketed the show, the newspapers came down and covered that, of course.

Mason

Yeah, I didn't see anything in the index. That doesn't mean nothing is there, but I was wondering about that.

Ferguson

I don't remember if they printed it or not, but they were sure there. Then the two festivals in Los Angeles were real big by then, the Watts Summer Festival and the Festival in Black.

Mason

Who put on the Festival in Black?

Ferguson

The City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks. It was really black people who were able to-Claude and I started having some problems, because I got involved in black history, and Claude thought black history had nothing to do with black art. I thought differently, right? So I would do a lot of things with black history, but I would give the credit to the Black Arts Council. You know what I'm saying? Like they're sponsoring that, right?

Mason

You mean you wanted to put on historical exhibitions? He just wanted to do art exhibitions?

Ferguson

Art exhibitions.

Mason

Oh, I see. And then you formed your own group?

Ferguson

Yes, the Federation of Black History and Art. But I wanted to work together. I told Claude one day, I said, "Claude, I can go to UCLA, USC [University of Southern California], the Music Center [of Los Angeles County], the County Museum of Art, [Los Angeles County] Museum of Natural History, and I see the same people's names in all those places. I mean, it's the same names. Why do we have that problem? We're interested in black culture, right? It's just that we need different arms to approach it. There's nothing wrong with seeing people get involved in different groups." But he didn't want to be involved in anything but the arts, because that was his thing. So I went off and got involved in the history. That's how I ended up in the women's prison for a week and the crazy house and doing those kinds of things that you see in here.

Mason

Well, I just wanted to ask you a few more questions about the Black Arts Council and the different organizations before we get to the history part. There was a Pasadena Black Arts Council at one point. I saw a reference to that. Did they really exist? Or was that a misprint?

Ferguson

They might have had one. I'm just not aware. Who was the president?

Mason

Oh, I see. I don't know. I just saw a reference to the Pasadena Black Arts Council. I don't know when John Outterbridge went to the Pasadena Art Museum, but I'm wondering if there was a- And there seemed to have been a kind of satellite black art community out in Pasadena at some point. So I'm wondering if you knew anything about that and if they were trying to do the same things with the Pasadena Art Museum that you were trying to do with the L.A. County Museum.

Ferguson

Well, not with the Pasadena Art Museum. The Pasadena community and Altadena- The Pasadena community for years and years and years wanted to be divorced from Los Angeles. It was hard for black people to have coexistence, because in the early days, a lot of black people in Pasadena thought they were more bourgeois than the types of people in Los Angeles. So they might have tried to have their chapter of the Black Arts Council and called it the Black Arts Council.

Mason

But you weren't aware of it?

Ferguson

I wasn't. Because you just didn't have the people with the expertise who wanted to work, too. Because I've done a lot of things in Pasadena. That's why I know if they'd had their own network, why call me, right?

Mason

Yeah, yeah.

Ferguson

The Pasadena Art Museum never got interested in any black artists, although John Outterbridge worked there. But he worked there as an employee like I did at the County Art Museum. The Pasadena Art Museum was never into doing anything for black artists before Norton Simon got it. And sure enough, when Norton Simon got it, he really didn't have any interest.

Mason

Did you ever have any sort of connections with other groups that were trying to do the same thing that the Black Arts Council was doing? Like up in Oakland when they were trying to get the Oakland Museum to be more responsive to the black community with Ben [Benjamin] Hazard and-?

Ferguson

Yeah, we worked with Ben.

Mason

How did you work with them?

Ferguson

On exhibits. And he'd come down. But Oakland is kind of far away. We've done shows but- And then once they came down to L.A., and the Brockman Gallery was the only gallery we had.

Mason

Well, there was Suzanne Jackson's gallery [Gallery 32].

Ferguson

That didn't last long. Alonzo had the only show in town, right? So most of the artists from up north at some point would end up at Brockman. Suzanne's gallery didn't last long enough.

Mason

What about Samella Lewis's gallery [Contemporary Crafts]?

Ferguson

That opened later.

Mason

Okay. Overall, what would you say were the biggest contributions you think that the Black Arts Council made over the years? It ended in '74-right?-I guess when Claude Booker died?

Ferguson

Right before he died.

Mason

I see. How did it end?

Ferguson

One time Claude came to me and he said, "Cecil, look, we can't keep the Black Arts Council alive. We've got to turn it over to someone else, because it's killing us. We're never home with our families. We do all the work." He said, "Why don't we give it to the bourgeoisie?" And I said, "Claude, that sounds good, but they don't want to work." Because I knew they would just dress up and come to the affairs. While the work was going on, they weren't there. So he said, "Well, I just can't keep up this pace anymore." And at that time I was having a lot of problems with my wife [Laura Lorraine Vaughn Ferguson], and he was having problems with his wife, Ann Booker, because we weren't ever home. And wives think that if you aren't home you're with some other female, right? And we were with each other. And neither one of us is queer. We just spent a lot of time together. So we started having meetings to transfer the duties, you know. And somehow, when me and Claude stopped going, people lost interest in it. Because it was built with grassroots people-right?-and Claude and I had that relationship with grassroots people. One of us should have stayed.

Mason

But at the same time, this was a time when people were trying to get the California Afro-American Museum- I don't know. They got money for it later. Let's see. Yvonne [Brathwaite] Burke was involved in that in the early seventies. So were the same people who were involved in the Black Arts Council-?

Ferguson

Yeah.

Mason

They were involved-?

Ferguson

Claude and I were the ones who got them interested in that. Yvonne wasn't interested in black art. Claude and I brought them- We've got documentation of that someplace. We would bring it together, you know, and they just ran away with it, right?

Mason

So could you talk about it?

Ferguson

At one meeting, Claude said to me, "Look, Cecil, we are just spinning our wheels trying to get the museum to do shows of black art. Why don't we think in terms of a black museum?" And he said, "I'll talk to some people who are thinking along those lines," one being Augustus Hawkins. And it sounded like a good idea, right? In fact, I could show you a photograph someplace of a meeting we had with Augustus Hawkins where we did an arrangement for a black museum on Broadway. So Claude and I were definitely in the forefront of that whole energy. But, you know, black people have a tendency to write their own people out of the history by not giving credit to people where credit is due. If you go over there and confront Mrs. Burke now about *The 19Sixties: [A Cultural Awakening Re-evaluated]*, she'd say "Oh, yeah, Cecil, right," but she never invited me to be on any board or anything. She never invited me to do anything over there. [laughter] I wrote an article for that catalog, and she didn't exactly invite me to do that. And Yvonne Brathwaite was the person with the visibility in Washington there; we kind of gave her visibility. Then, after you get some interest going on something, you just can't hang with it all the time, right? We started doing other things. And then they started having meetings that me and Claude didn't know about that we weren't invited to.

Mason

This was Augustus Hawkins?

Ferguson

No, not Augustus Hawkins. This was through that whole Yvonne Brathwaite Burke group. By then I had gotten a bad reputation of always being "too black." Is that the word?

Mason

I know what you mean. So how did you and Claude conceptualize the museum? What did you envision that the museum would be? Where it would be, and who would be in it, and that kind of thing?

Ferguson

Claude and I conceptualized the museum being in the heart of the black community, also with an emphasis on black history rather than on black art-of course, with black art in it-because of the need for black people to find their history. Then they can deal with the art right along with it, right? And directed toward our grassroots people rather than to the bourgeoisie, but also to have the bourgeoisie involved, because you need them because of support, monetary support. They had their little thing over here, you know. But the main thrust was for the grassroots people, because they [the bourgeoisie] don't support the building. We had a lot of sessions with Dr. Hawkins. It's a funny thing. I went back to his office to hang all these plaques when he retired. He didn't remember me, you know. But I went to those meetings for years because- They finally chose [Charlene] Claye as the director, and the chairman of the board became the director. Doesn't that seem a little odd?

Mason

Yeah, she was doing both at the same time.

Ferguson

It just seemed odd that you would fire your director, and then the chairman of the board would take the director's job.

Mason

Yeah. Well, it sounds like shades of the L.A. County Museum. They don't want to relinquish control to other people.

Ferguson

But the County Museum of Art never did that. I mean, that's- The chairman of the board of trustees has a lot of power-right?-and I don't think the County Art Museum would let the chairman of the trustees be the director, too. I don't think they'd allow that. That would be too much power in one person's hands. Now, they might let his good friend. [laughter]

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

But there were a lot of people involved in getting that Afro museum. But a lot of people fall along the wayside, you know. It was a complete community effort. And the first man I ever heard say anything about it was Claude Booker. Claude really had that foresight. He would talk about that sort of thing. Of course, he died in '75, you know. Plus, you do so much to get anything started, it almost drains you. It was easy for these other people to pick the stick up and run with it, which I think is fine. I think that's the way it ought to be done. But in the meantime, I think the only way you can do it for posterity is you've got to talk about those people who were out there in the beginning. You don't bury them. [laughter] It doesn't make sense. When they did *Two Centuries of Black American Art*, the museum, they buried Claude. And they didn't mention anything about me in the catalog.

Mason

Well, we should probably just go ahead and talk about that show, how that came about.

Ferguson

Well, you know, it's all after the *Panorama* show. And then some people started working closely around the museum.

Mason

As a docent?

Ferguson

As a docent. All the time, Claude was talking about a black show, but then Claude died in '75, and I guess they just kept on doing the effort for the black show. Of course, nobody contacted me because I guess I had a reputation by then as being "too black." I don't understand how you can be too black, but I've heard that before. "Too black." You know that? You know, right along in the mid-seventies you started getting this stuff about, "It ain't about being

black; it's about green power." Black people started talking crazy in the mid-seventies. They hadn't gained anything.

Mason

So they thought that with these small- Like with the *Panorama* show, it seemed like maybe things were opening up, and they didn't want to have anybody that was too radical that would maybe close off the few things that had been opened up? Was that the problem?

Ferguson

Yeah, not knowing that it was the radical people who got you where you are. How do you think you got there? Come on. It doesn't make sense. I didn't get involved in the shows until after the catalog was done-the rough draft, before it was printed, right? And since I was an activist and I worked inside the museum, and a white guy worked at the museum who was the deputy director, he wanted to know "Why wasn't Cecil involved in this?" [laughter] So one day David [C.] Driskell came to my office with the book, and he was trying to explain something to me. Because I had heard about how they had mentioned Claude's name in the catalog. And then David came in saying that he didn't know Claude that well and that he didn't know about the history of the struggle in Los Angeles. He didn't want to get involved in that, you know. And I said, "Well, you don't have to know about it; somebody will tell you about it. That's why you're here. You aren't here because of white folks like you, Mr. Driskell." "What are you talking about?" That didn't sit too well with him, of course. And I said, "Plus, I don't understand your catalog." "What don't you understand about it, Cecil?" I said, "Are you doing a show of two centuries of black American art, or are you doing a show of two centuries of mulatto and black American art?" He said, "I don't understand what you mean." I said, "You referred to all the black artists in the first part of the book as mulatto and not as black people. You don't start referring to black people till you get to Henry O. Tanner." And he was going to try to show me where it had been documented that they were mulattos so that he had to keep it up in terms of history. I said, "Bullshit, David. It's your book. You can do anything you want with it. You can right the lies." But he chose not to, right? I think they were just trying to do the catalog to please- You know, to make sure-

Mason

So how did the show come about? I was reading an article in the *New York Times*. I think it was Hilton Kramer or somebody who- I don't know where he got the information, but he said the board wanted to do the show, but the curators didn't want to do the show, so- And, well, it was a bicentennial, so I don't know. Whose idea was it to do a big historical show of black art? Do you know?

Ferguson

Is it in the catalog?

Mason

Is what in the catalog?

Ferguson

That kind of-

Mason

Yeah. They probably have the- If I remember, they just have acknowledgements and things; they would mention names. But I didn't know if you had any sort of inside dope on who thought of it.

Ferguson

They used to have two meetings in my department, because I was the only black person working in the department. They had one meeting with me there and one meeting when I wasn't there. So they kept a lot of things at that period that I didn't know about. And I didn't mind the museum doing that, but it was David's and all those people's responsibility to tell people like me what was happening. It was their responsibility.

Mason

I see.

Ferguson

And the work we did on the museum when they were building it, they didn't do any of that. Of course, we had been with this museum when they broke the shovel in the ground. They could have avoided a lot of mistakes they made on

that building if they had consulted us, because we would have seen a lot of the mistakes. But it's typical, typical about black people.

1.11. Tape Number: VI, Side One July 10, 1991

Mason

The last time we met, we talked about the activities of the Black Arts Council. And today I just wanted to ask some questions that would sort of wrap some things up, then also talk about what effect your activities had on your family- you mentioned your brother [David Ferguson] becoming an artist- and then to talk about your work at the [Los Angeles County] Museum [of Art] with Maurice Tuchman and the other work you did installing shows and meeting different collectors like Edward G. Robinson and Vincent Price. The first question I wanted to ask is kind of a long question, and I don't know if there's any- Well, I wanted to ask you about this. We've been talking about socially conscious art in the sixties, and I was wondering where you think the source for socially conscious art in the sixties came from? We talked a little bit about the radical groups that were around, like [Maulana] Ron Karenga's US Organization, and then there was the Black Panther Party, which had Emory Douglas. I think he did the graphics for the Black Panther Party's newspaper. Maybe the other source for this kind of imagery might have been somebody like Charles White, who was involved way back in the thirties in socially conscious art. So I guess I'm asking whether you think this kind of art came specifically from these radical groups or- What do you think influenced the creation of that kind of art back in the sixties?

Ferguson

Well, first of all, I hope that when you transcribe this into the book, that you will go through your thesaurus and find a word other than "radical". I hate that word, because I don't think these people were radical at all. I've grown to hate that word, because people were looking for equality. There's nothing radical about that in that definition. I know there's a definition to fit those groups during that period. But it gets taken out of context all the time. And now, some twenty years later, to young black African Americans, they use the word "radical" like in terms of bad people or gangsters, you know what I'm saying? We could rewrite that history in terms of not using that word. I think I

told you one time before that I even hate the word "ghetto," because of the definition that has emerged over the years that ghetto is associated with poverty and teenage pregnancies and unwed mothers and dope and all kinds of negative kinds of-

Mason

Yeah. I guess when I used the word "radical" it was kind of in a sense that what people like the Panthers were proposing was much different from the status quo. That's how I mean "radical"-just much different from what was already happening, not in terms that they were out of their minds or they didn't know what they were talking about.

Ferguson

Well, when we rewrite this, I wish you would say that word rather than say "radical."

Mason

Okay. Well, that's just a shorthand.

Ferguson

Because the Panther party grew out of police abuse, which is almost contemporary, because we face the same thing now with Daryl [F.] Gates and the Rodney King affair.

Mason

Right.

Ferguson

Now, suppose some groups were to emerge on the heels of the Rodney King thing. Then white historians will say they're radicals. And who wants to get beat up because they're stopped by a policeman, right? And if you oppose that, I don't see anything radical about that. That's all I'm saying. Like I was telling you about when I was talking to Driskell, when he did *Two Centuries of American Art*, he kept using the word "mulatto." And if you get a chance to write something in history-and I'm sure this will become a historical document-you change some of those racist terms that the status quo or the majority culture used, used in terms of their definition of black people who

are concerned about their future and concerned about justice and equality. Surely, I don't see anything militant or radical about someone who doesn't want to drink out of a white-only fountain. We have a chance to do another thing rather than quote that same racist statement. Do you know what I mean? Or the academia that comes out of our schools. I think that most of the so-called social commentary that grew of the sixties was already there. It was just that the people needed a platform to begin to do it. There was a lot of unrest all through this country. And the treatment of African Americans after all those great wars-you know, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War-nothing had changed in America for black people, right? The artist was always there ready with their brushes and things; they just needed someone to motivate them to do it. Because too much was happening at once. It wasn't like going to school in a movement and a group of artists getting together and developing a movement like the Bauhaus school or the cubist school or the surrealist school or the impressionists, the expressionists. That wasn't true of this movement. It had to do with the people. I think Archibald Motley was a social-commentary artist. Sure he didn't do the same thing that Emory Douglas did, but he painted black people and their lifestyle. So I consider him a social-commentary artist, because he brought to attention the imagery of the Afro-Americans and didn't follow in the school of an Afro-American artist who was trying to copy a [Winslow] Homer at that time. So I consider him a social commentator.

Mason

But then again, his work is a lot different from somebody like Charles White, who dealt specifically with issues of class oppression and things like that in his art. If the atmosphere was already there, what do you think it was that motivated artists to actually portray certain themes? Because when you read stuff by, say, Ron Karenga, he has a really specific program about what artists should do and how art shouldn't exist for art's sake. That was out there in the sixties, but you kind of wonder who was following through on the things that he was saying. Do you know of any artist who said, "Oh, I'm going to paint x, y, and z because Ron Karenga says so"?

Ferguson

No. It just didn't happen that way. Because a lot of Ron's platform emerged after the art came out. It wasn't like he was going around lecturing to groups of artists to get them to paint that way. I think that that statement that he made is a very valid one, but I think it was made after the movement began. It was just something buried in the souls of black people that needed to come out. A lot of times, even during slavery, a lot of emotions came out in the music, these songs that we are so familiar with now: "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen" and so forth, right? That was no planned school of thought. It had to do with emotions, and people sang and got through their oppression. I think the art had the same kind of meaning. Because too much of it happened at once. Like the Watts revolt was in August of 1965. In August of 1966, when they had the first Watts Summer Festival [of Art], they had an art exhibit with artists-or Sunday painters or people who just painted-and they weren't entering flowers or trees or bowls of fruit. Within one year, they were entering paintings of oppression and social statements about the conditions of African American people. See, the Panthers didn't come about until the seventies, and that was from direct confrontation with the police in the [San Francisco] Bay Area. And you know, many of Emory's early graphics were directed directly to the police. And there was the oppression of black people in the communities. "The pigs" that grew out of that. So I think the people connected with the Panthers. They drew on the early artists that came out of the late sixties in terms of subject matter.

Mason

I'm sorry. The people like-?

Ferguson

A lot of the materials that were coming out of the Panther paper, I think that those artists in 1965, '66, '67, '68, and I'm sure that a lot of that artwork that emerged during the later part of the sixties, it had been sitting in somebody's studio. It wasn't like all fresh-painted artwork, right? I think maybe a lot of that work-I have never documented this-probably was done in the early sixties or the late fifties, but now you've got a chance to display it. I'm sure that someone was painting about oppression, because black people have been oppressed a long time in this country. I think they always wrote about and painted about it, but now they have a format for it. They could display it and

get it out to the people, right? I still consider it a phenomenon, you know. And within five years, between '66, and '71, I'd gotten to a place where I thought I'd seen every possible subject matter of oppression painted on a canvas, and artists were coming up with new ones every year. One of the sad things about that whole period was that, because of the prostitution and the [inability] of black people to know how to write their history and document their history, a lot of that art is lost forever. Because they would show at exhibits during festivals, and then they'd take their paintings back home. They didn't have a market for it, so a lot of that work got lost or-Now, some majority culture institutions, in the quest to be liberal-for the sake of a better word-they offered prizes for a lot of that art. Here in California, like the Bank of America and the Southern California Gas Company, they would have first and second and third prizes for a lot of that work, which they bought for \$200 or \$300. Well, they still have that art somewhere. You know, they haven't thrown it away. They've got it locked up in some closets. I understand that here in 1990 the Southern California Gas Company has begun to buy a lot of black art, so they will probably end up with one of the finest Afro-American collections in the country, which they acquired for nothing in terms of monetary value. Because Richard Wyatt told me this morning that he's doing a piece for them. They already own two of his pieces. Because Richard came along during that period, right? Although he was very young, he came along during that period. And at my party Sunday, Cynthia White said the Southern California Gas Company bought a work of hers called *The Usher Board*. [laughter] And there are-

Mason

Do you know who's buying the art there?

Ferguson

For the Southern California Gas Company? No, I don't know, but I can find out. That's one of the ways of Golden State [Mutual Life Insurance Company].

Mason

It's one of the-?

Ferguson

The ways Golden State ended up with such a fine collection. Because they let Bill [William] Pajaud buy art from a lot of the black art exhibits. They gave him money to buy art, right? Although Bill acquired a lot of this art for \$200, \$300. But had he not done that, then that art too probably would have been lost. But Bill understood. And anyway, he just pushed Golden State to go do that.

Mason

So when did a market start for-?

Ferguson

It really hasn't started yet, not in the way- It's a better market now, you know what I mean?

Mason

But did the Black Arts Council have any influence on-?

Ferguson

Oh, a lot.

Mason

Well, on galleries, like the Ankrum Gallery and the Heritage Gallery to start showing black-?

Ferguson

Yeah, well, I think Ben [Benjamin] Horowitz, who ran the Heritage, he's Jewish, and John Ankrum, who ran Ankrum Gallery, is Jewish. And Jewish people always recognize that they can take the arts of black people and turn it into monetary value and at the same time show some liberalism. They can also say historically that "We were one of the first people to recognize black art." [tape recorder off] So they were two of the people who- In the majority culture, I guess, influenced by Europeans, people of the arts- Art culturally became something for the middle class only, something for the middle class or the rich to put in museums where the other people can come gawk at them or whatever. Many other cultures of the arts belong to the people, right? You take a lot of places, they have small museums. At one time in Africa and in some Asian countries, they didn't even have guards for their museums and all that. They were just part of the everyday life of the people. But the Europeans

started going there and looting all the stuff and taking it back to Europe and to America. Of course, the industrial giants of America of the nineteenth and twentieth century, they just used money to buy up a lot of other people's culture, which I guess created a black market-it's been called a black market. But I guess people were maybe soldiers of fortune, where people would go in and steal these things and then come back and sell them to the millionaire industrial giants of America.

Mason

So-

Ferguson

But the Black Arts Council, although it was created and basically supported by grassroots African Americans in the city, it also attracted some of the middle-class people in the city who had money to buy black art or buy art. African Americans culturally-maybe "culturally" is not the word-they're not unlike Europeans when it comes to money and prestige, where once you get money you want to own something that nobody else has. With the African American early on it was cars, right? I think I showed you that car thing. First it was Cadillacs and then Lincolns and then Mercedes [Benzes] and then fine homes. Well, art's next. So the Black Arts Council, by giving lectures and putting up exhibits, pointed the way toward- Like a good used car salesman or a good new car salesman, we showed them how art can be enjoyable by buying it and also how it can be bought for an investment, especially in those days. You could buy a Charles White for nothing. If you've still got that Charles White, you've got a good investment. I paid \$107 for my Charles White, and it's worth a grand now or better.

Mason

Was Samella Lewis hired because of the Black Arts Council at the museum? Or was that not related?

Ferguson

Well, see, white people always want to not make anything related that you do. They wanted to make it always seem like, "We're not doing this because you put pressure on us; we're doing this out of the goodness of our heart."

Bullshit. They had those exhibits because pressure was brought to them. They had no problem with not ever having any black exhibits at the County Museum of Art. They had no problem with not ever having any black professionals on the staff. And they had always been very protective of their curatorial department, right? But they knew that they did need somebody black whom they could point at, "We've got somebody." And there came an opening in the education department, so to say, "We hired somebody," they hired her in the education department. Sure it was brought on because of pressure put on by the Black Arts Council, because the Black Arts Council had become a force like any support group, and especially a support group that is dealing with a cultural institution. Because most protest in this country was aimed at education, was aimed at employment, and here was a group that was aiming their protest at a cultural institution, which I believe they weren't ready for. Plus, they figured that these black people were real radical too- right?-in terms of their definition. They might come in and scratch a hole in a Rembrandt or-

Mason

Well, it happened in New York. [laughter]

Ferguson

-if they don't have some satisfaction, right? So they said, "We're going to hire Samella." Not so she could do anything, right? Samella had two doctorates, you know, and she had a lot of energy. What she wanted to bring to the education department they weren't ready for. Because at that time, that whole education department was nothing but a- They had the rich and the middle-class Europeans in Beverly Hills and those areas-Brentwood-and they had a social club for themselves, adults, in the education department. The way I define it, it wasn't anything but a social club for their children. Samella had ideas about making the education department work for everybody, and they weren't ready for that, you know. So they said she was too qualified.

Mason

They said she was too qualified?

Ferguson

For that position. She had the only doctorate in the whole building at that time. Not that a doctorate was very important. I had a curator tell me that a doctorate wasn't that important.

Mason

I guess it depends on the institution.

Ferguson

No, she didn't have one. [laughter] She told me working on your doctorate was just as important as having it. She didn't have one. And they were feeling alienated, I think. All the people who had doctorates inside of the building were people of color, right? And they didn't want to set the rules about who gets hired and all of a sudden they've got some black people who are the only ones who've got doctorates. These black people who had doctorates, and the Indian guy [Pratapaditya Pal] who had a doctorate, they didn't have a doctorate from any school anywhere; they had doctorates from credible institutions. It's not like having one from Lewis and Clark [College], you know. James Peoples had his from UCLA. Dr. Pal had his from one of the good schools in England [Cambridge University].

Mason

Dr.-?

Ferguson

Pratap Pal, who was Indian. And Samella, I forget where her two doctorates were from, but I know one of them was from a big institution. [Ph.D., Ohio State University, Honorary Ph.D., Hampton University]

Mason

Yeah, she studied with Melville J. Herskovitz and I don't remember who else.

Ferguson

You know, Samella could have had- If the museum wanted to do something worthwhile, they could have created an African American department and named her the curator. Do you know what I'm saying? She could do that. And right now that department would be twenty years old and would be functioning and operating within that institution. They didn't want that. You

know, they still don't have a- They have an Asian- Because they've got rich people who collect that art, right? There's really no real big-time art patron who collected all- They've got some people who buy a piece here, buy a piece there, not like they're supporting their own cultural-

Mason

You mean there aren't any big collectors in black art that they could-?

Ferguson

To give money toward establishing a department, like a Norton Simon.

Mason

You mentioned, I think off tape, that Robert Wilson bought-I think you said-a Richard Hunt for the museum.

Ferguson

Robert Wilson bought an Eldizer Cortor.

Mason

Oh, Eldzier Cortor?

Ferguson

Because the guy I knew who owned it, he wanted to sell it to me. He only wanted \$1,200 for it. I could have had one.

Mason

He wanted how much?

Ferguson

Twelve hundred dollars. He sold it to Robert Wilson for I think \$1,500 or something.

Mason

And Robert Wilson gave it to the museum?

Ferguson

No, he still has it.

Mason

Oh, because- Well, you were saying that one- Maybe it was another Wilson who bought a piece for the L.A. County Museum for the sculpture garden.

Ferguson

No. A group of black organizations bought the Richard Hunt. The Charles [R.] Drew Medical Society, the Allied Arts, they bought the Richard Hunt.

Mason

And the Black Arts Council-? Was this after that?

Ferguson

No. The Black Arts Council never bought anything for the museum. We would never do that.

Mason

Okay.

Ferguson

If we were still operating, we'd probably buy something for the [California] Afro-American Museum. Because the Black Arts Council wasn't a bona fide council of the museum; we were a private entity. The only reason they recognized us at all was because of the heat we were putting on the County Art Museum. The phenomenal thing is that Claude [Booker] and I worked there, and they let us continue to work there. Now that I look back- At the time, I didn't care, right? I don't know why they never tried to fire us.

Mason

Okay. Was the Black Arts Council involved with the L.A. Council of Women in the Arts? There was a group of women artists that organized around the *Art and Technology* show, like in '71 or '72, and I know Samella Lewis was a part of it.

Ferguson

Yeah, with Judy Chicago.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

No. Because that grew out of Judy Chicago's fight-a lot of it, I think-with Maurice Tuchman, because Maurice Tuchman never did female exhibits, white, European women, right? And most groups that form a protest for anything, they try to get some black people along with them. [laughter]

Mason

Oh, I thought because Samella Lewis had been involved in the Black Arts Council that she would have-

Ferguson

No, I think Samella probably had motives for joining that group, but I don't think that had anything to do with it.

Mason

Okay. Well, what did the effect of all your activities have on your family? Do you want to talk about your brother?

Ferguson

Well, most of us- Well, my brother, of course, because he was-

Mason

We have to say that his name is spelled differently, too.

Ferguson

Yeah, David Ferguson: F-E-R-G-U-S-O-N. Because David was just five years old when I started working for the museums. And he had always wanted to be an artist, you know. I remember one day I was taking him to a movie when he was about six or seven, and while we were sitting there waiting for the movie to open, he sketched the front of the movie, the people going into the movie. At that time I wasn't involved in the arts; I just worked there as a custodian. But he's my little brother, right? He's got his talent. Everybody thinks that their offspring or someone in their family is another Charles White because they've got talent, right? But as the years went on, he grew, and he went through a lot of things at the museum that I attended. So I'm sure that it had

some influence on him. Another thing I think it had in our family- Now, I wouldn't exactly say that all of us who were out there during that period wouldn't have gotten divorced sooner or later anyway, but my involvement with the arts didn't help any. [laughter] I mean, Claude was divorced, I was divorced, even John Outterbridge is divorced now, because the arts took a lot of our time. I can truly say that we just fell in love with it. For me and some people that I know, it's been a strange kind of influence that the arts have had on us. Like on Sunday, at my party, there were people here that I've been dealing with in the arts for over twenty years. We still maintain that kind of club or cult or close friendship. And we really never made any monetary value out of it. You know, we never got paid a whole lot of money for doing that thing. But we were part of the history of African Americans and their art in this city. A lot of those people who were in that struggle and were doing certain things twenty years ago are still doing that certain kind of thing and are now doing pretty well. So they really believed in what they were doing. People like Charlie White influenced them a great deal. Charlie influenced all of us.

Mason

How did he influence you?

Ferguson

Charlie was older than all of us, and Charlie could tell us about what we wanted to do because he had experienced it. Because Charlie has always painted black people and black lifestyles and that kind of art. Many of us really had never experienced the kind of open discrimination and oppression that somebody like Charlie had, right? But we could identify with it for some reason. And Charlie was able to bring it home. So many times after exhibits where we would be with Charlie, why, he'd tell us about Chicago and the WPA [Works Progress Administration] movement and the Harlem Renaissance- although Charlie wasn't a part of the Harlem Renaissance as an artist, but he came along early enough to be associated with a lot of the people who were.

Mason

Because he exhibited in New York, finally, in the forties. So in terms of the history of black art, he was an influence on you, you would say? In terms of learning about the history?

Ferguson

Oh, yeah, definitely influenced. Because I didn't know anything, either. I had worked at the museum all those years, and I had no idea [Henry O.] Tanner was a black man. I had handled his art a thousand times from storage to storage to storage to storage. There was no exhibit. I think it was only when I was involved in the Black Arts Council and listening to Charlie that I found out Henry O. Tanner was a black man. This painting that I'd been hauling around called *Daniel in the Lion's Den* was done by a black man, right? Then the Black Arts Council was able to put some pressure on the museum and get them to show it. They'd never shown it.

Mason

Was he still politically active?

Ferguson

Charlie?

Mason

Yeah, in the sixties.

Ferguson

You mean vocally or his art or-?

Mason

Well, personally, was he still politically active? And also his art as far as passing on the things that he had learned in the thirties from the John Reed Club and the Communist Party. Was that something that he was trying to pass on to younger artists? Or had he moved on to another phase?

Ferguson

He never did talk much about social communism to us. But he was still political. He was good for us because, as his artwork is, it's political, but it's not guns and hand grenades. It's about the people, right? So he could quiet us down when we were thinking about doing something stupid, you know. He could show us the power of art without the guns. Often he would use Diego Rivera as an example of how much you could accomplish by depicting the

oppression of your people. It's just as political as Emory Douglas's art. There was more social commentary, or more to the point. Many of us needed mentors because our folks weren't into that. I guess most of us, our folks were just into survival. So we needed somebody like Charlie to show us that what we was doing was right and what we were doing would have an impact on history, and also it could bring some of that history to us of the Harlem Renaissance. I had no idea what the Harlem Renaissance was about when I met Charlie. It sounded like something very European to me. You know, "Harlem Renaissance."

Mason

What did you learn about the Harlem Renaissance from him?

Ferguson

About these people who were artists that were doing the same thing we were doing-you know, meeting and painting-except that a whole lot of the Harlem Renaissance to me was financed by some of the communist and socialist groups in New York at the time. Because a lot of that support came from the Harmon Foundation and the Rosenwald Fellowship, which I'm sure is made up of a lot of Jewish people. I guess they still own a lot of that work.

Mason

Yeah, I think so. Did you ever take any art classes yourself?

Ferguson

No.

Mason

Okay. Why not?

Ferguson

Well, I had a need to try to bring about social change, right? I had found a place where I could do that without painting. I could put the paintings up of the people who painted. That was my expertise, to show art in its best light, to get the full presentation of it, right? And I enjoyed doing that. I enjoyed doing that with the European art. I was fascinated with that, putting works in the art exhibit and how to draw people's attention to what you were doing. So I had

no need to learn how to paint. I let the artist do that. Then, at one point later on, I became like a voice, which I do quite well, right? Much better than I could ever paint! [laughter]

Mason

In that *[The] 19Sixties: [A Cultural Awakening Reevaluated]* catalog done by the California Afro-American Museum, after your essay, there's a flag that says, "It's nation time," and it's not attributed to anyone. Some people think you did it. But you didn't do that?

Ferguson

No. It's attributed to what I said in the article. I saw that. I made some statements about nation time in the article.

Mason

No, but I mean there's no credit under the flag.

Ferguson

No. I didn't do that. Actually, when I wrote that, I didn't think they were going to publish it, because I'm no writer. And I wasn't going to get anybody to ghostwrite it for me, and I wasn't going to try to write something that I thought they might like, right? I was going to try to tell them the truth as much as I saw it. So I sat up one night and wrote that in one evening off the top of my head. And it was a deadline, because I had put it off and put it off. So then I just decided to do it. One night I just did it, drove it down to the museum, and left it. And no one ever told me if they accepted it or rejected it. The next thing I knew, I went to the opening-and I wanted to go to the opening because a lot of my peers would be there from the sixties, right?-and then immediately on going into the museum, all these people started congratulating me about the article. I'd almost forgotten what I'd written, and there I was. They decided to use it.

1.12. Tape Number: VI, Side Two July 10, 1991

Ferguson

Because a lot of people accused me of being locked in the sixties, you know. But I plunged into it during the sixties. I mean, it became my whole life. I

became obsessed with the movement, with the art. I mean, I put every waking moment into it. I don't know what happened. It was almost like I had been waiting for this sort of thing to come along. And I used to spend a lot of time in the [Los Angeles County] Museum of Natural History alone because I was a custodian. At some point I had the museum to myself. And I could read a lot and look at a lot of things. That really influenced me about different movements and how important culture is to people. And I started collecting everything. I'm not a well-off man by any means, but I just spent some of my money for art, right?

Mason

What was the first piece that you collected? Do you remember?

Ferguson

I collected a piece of art by an artist from the Watts Summer Festival-I forget his name now-a little piece.

Mason

Painting? Sculpture?

Ferguson

It's down at my ex-wife [Laura Lorraine Vaughn Ferguson]'s house now. And I collected a piece of art from a guy named William E. Smith, a printmaker.

Mason

Right. He was part of the Art West Associated?

Ferguson

Yeah. He also was at Karamu House in Cleveland.

Mason

Right, in Cleveland.

Ferguson

And it was called *Pay Day*, which is at my ex-wife's house, too. Because once I got divorced, I kept the two collections separated. In case something happens to me, I don't want any fighting, because I had family by that marriage. I've got

a family by this marriage, and the things I got during that period belong to that. So I just leave it there.

Mason

So would you buy things on a regular basis? Or when you saw something you liked would you buy it?

Ferguson

Yeah, when I saw something I liked and it didn't cost much. Because a lot of artists then, you could buy something cheap, right? And then there came a period in the seventies where artists would give me work, because I was real active then. I could have had a huge collection, because a lot of times I took no pay for my work in putting up shows for artists, which they would have given me work, you know. But I was so honest- Not honest, but since black artists didn't sell that much, I wouldn't just take their artwork.

Mason

So what percentage of your collection would you say is stuff you bought?

Ferguson

Seventy-five percent of the stuff I bought. Because I would also make my wives mad when I'd take the grit money when I could get things free. [laughter] But I always thought I made a good [enough] living with the art museum that I could buy what I wanted rather than use the artists to get it. I had a birthday party Sunday. I got about ten pieces of art free because of that reason, right? People who know me had tried to give me stuff over the years, and I wouldn't take it. Now they give me stuff. [laughter] And I can't afford- I didn't give the party to get artwork, right. They give me artwork. Charles Dickson gave me the mask up there, and Bernard Hoyes gave that piece there.

Mason

Which piece?

Ferguson

It's rolled up.

Mason

Oh.

Ferguson

And Bill Pajaud gave the oriental piece.

Mason

Oh, he's in town?

Ferguson

Yeah. He came to the party. He gave me that piece. And Varnette Honeywood gave me a little serigraph. And another lady gave me a beautiful African necklace made out of shells. And somebody gave me an African hand-carved walking stick. That I will treat like an art piece, because I'll mount it on a pedestal. Because I have a habit of leaving stuff. So I won't use it. I might even mount my necklace and hang it on the wall. [laughter] But I'm running out of space. I've got a print catalog upstairs, full of art, that I bought and that people have given me.

Mason

So when you look back on it, do you feel that there's a-? Do you have a theme in your collecting?

Ferguson

No. Black people. No, just work by black people. Sometimes I go to kids' shows and I see something I like, or on the street, anywhere, you know. I just collect. You can become obsessed with collecting, you know. I've spent a lot of money for some of my stuff, and some of my stuff I haven't. And a lot was given to me. About 30 percent of it was given to me by artists that I've known over the years that have grown to love me and respect me. My brother used to say, "Man, those niggers don't ever do enough for you." Well, he was wrong. At that time they didn't. But in 1981, they gave me a party, and I got forty pieces of artwork and numerous books, a lot of books. Thomas?

Watson

Yes?

Ferguson

Hand me that book right there on the table. The big book.

Watson

The real, real big one?

Ferguson

Yes, sir. And John Outterbridge gave me this.

Mason

Black Art Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in African American Art.

Ferguson

You've seen it before?

Mason

Yeah, they have it at the UCLA bookstore. This was an exhibition, wasn't it?

Ferguson

I don't know. I haven't even looked at it. John gave it to me on Sunday. John gives me a book every July 6. [laughter]

Mason

Yeah. It was an exhibition that started with the Dallas Museum [of Art].

Ferguson

I've got the Romare Bearden book, the big book [*Romare Bearden: His Life and Art*].

Mason

Yeah. Yeah, the Myron Schwartzman book?

Ferguson

The *Jacob Lawrence* book [by Milton W. Brown], the Elizabeth Catlett book [*The Art of Elizabeth Catlett* by Samella Lewis]. I have all those in my collection. They were given to me by artists, right? I didn't buy any of them. And they're expensive books.

Mason

Yeah. Is there any one you try to always read if you know that they've published an essay about black art? Is there a favorite author or somebody you think is writing important things about African American art?

Ferguson

I'd read them all if I had time. I really don't have-

Mason

Well, it's not that huge an amount.

Ferguson

I don't really have a favorite. I respect all the people that I got their books. I haven't read the Catlett book yet. I haven't read the Bearden book yet. I've looked through it, you know.

Mason

Yeah, you're so busy.

Ferguson

And I've also had Picasso's books in print, Rodin's book. [laughter] Who else have I got? Renoir, you know. I've got all those books, right? They're outside. I don't even keep them in the house, because when young people come here, when they pick a book up, I want it to be about their people. That's my own little thing, right. But, of course, at some point, I might sell those other books. The Picasso book is worth a lot of money.

Mason

What's the name of it?

Ferguson

Picasso in Print. It's a big book about his prints. You could take them out and mount them if you wanted to, right? It cost a lot of money when they first sold it. [tape recorder off] And Lachaise, I have a big book of his. I also have some art by the white artists of the fifties and sixties at my ex-wife's house.

Mason

Okay. Well, as long as you bring that up, I just wonder if we could shift gears and talk about your work with Maurice Tuchman and the people you met and the things that you did work on under him. What were your duties under Maurice Tuchman as curatorial assistant?

Ferguson

Well, I started working with Maurice first as a preparator. They assigned me to the modern art collection when we had shows, to bring the art in, set it around for Maurice to look at, do anything that he basically asked me to do, right? The main reason I wanted to be a curator was—a curatorial assistant—was because I knew I was going to retire one day. Because the work I was doing was already curatorial assistant; I just wasn't getting paid for it. Your pension for the County Art Museum depends on the last three years of your employment, and the salary between a preparator and a curatorial-type person is significant. So I filed, and they flunked me on the oral interview, which was another straight-out racism. So I filed a suit against the museum—you know, discrimination—and won the suit, and then they gave me the job. But they wouldn't really let me function as a curatorial assistant. At first I did, you know.

Mason

But when you got the position, they changed your duties?

Ferguson

No. Well, two things contributed to it. It seemed like it was all right when I wasn't a curatorial assistant in title, right? Plus, later on, I got more and more involved as an activist in the black art community, and an identifiable activist, right? And it's very hard for a racist institution, or a racist department, to have somebody like me in the department. [laughter] Do you know what I'm saying? But early on, when I first got the job, they gave me the duties of like working directly with the artists. Like if a show came in, I was assigned to work with the artists. I'm glad they did that, because I got to spend a lot of time with the artists in their studios and get to know a lot of people.

Mason

Oh, you would go to their studio to pack their art and bring it over?

Ferguson

Or even talk with them about what they were going to show. And you must remember that the white artists of the late fifties and sixties, they were kind of like the rebels, too. No one just took to their art right away, you know.

Mason

Yeah, yeah. They were kind of on the fringe, and they were interested in jazz music-

Ferguson

And I was the perfect person. Here I am, black, a minority-

Mason

Were they interested in other black artists?

Ferguson

No. No.

Mason

Oh, so there was no mixing, even though they were interested in black music-

Ferguson

There might have been some people that they dealt with: Ed [Edward] Berial, Betye Saar, Fred [Frederick J.] Eversley, Marvin Harden. Most of those people were doing the same kind of things they were doing. The acrylics, you know, the abstract kind of thing. Mel [Melvin] Edwards at that time, and a few others. They liked me because I was- I was into jazz before I was into art. I played alto [saxophone], you know, and I knew all the jazz players.

Mason

Oh, you didn't mention that you played the alto.

Ferguson

I played alto. And I was a jazz groupie when I was young. From the time I was about thirteen, I was really into jazz. I mean, just like I'm into art now, I was into jazz. I went to all the concerts. In my teens I was a real groupie. I made all

the concerts, went to all the after-hour places. But I never really dug the lifestyle of a jazz musician during that period. Because I played alto, but my mentor and the man I wanted to be like wasn't Charlie Parker; it was the guy who played alto for Duke Ellington. I forget his name right now [Johnny Hodges]. But I came out of the bop area, you know, bebop. And also it was full of drugs and- Basically heroin then, you know.

Mason

Yeah. So who were some of the artists that you worked with?

Ferguson

Well, it was mostly like local people. In high school I was with the swing band, you know.

Mason

No, I'm sorry, at the museum.

Ferguson

Oh.

Mason

With local? Working with the artists who came into-?

Ferguson

Oh, all of them. I mean, Billy Al Bengston, Ed [Edward] Kienholz, Ed Ruscha, Mary McCoy, all of them. I touched bases with all of them. And what was so nice about that was one generation would pass on and another generation would come in, right? I mean, you just name them and at some point I dealt with them. And we became friends on a first-name basis. They'd come to the museum and ask for me. Bob [Robert] Irwin- I even had a short thing with Frank Stella, [Robert] Rauschenberg, [Roy] Lichtenstein, Hal [Harold] Paris-

Mason

You mentioned Jackson Pollock.

Ferguson

I knew him early on, but now, well, you know, because he died early on- Or John Altoon. All of them.

Mason

Who are you closest to then and now? Whose work did you really get interested in when they came to the museum?

Ferguson

I loved John Altoon. And I can't think of this artist's name, but he did- He was a- God! What's his name? He did an exhibit called *Mexican Heroes*, and he used to do little sculpture things that looked like planets. He lives in New Mexico now, Taos. Well, a lot of these people I was real good friends with, but the more and more and more and more popular they got, the more and more they weren't friends anymore. [laughter] And, you know, Venice and Santa Monica was the art community, right? I went through that whole beatnik and flower-children trip and the coffee houses, you know, a lot of times being the only black represented.

Mason

How did you go? Were you invited by them?

Ferguson

Invited. A lot of them had houses on the beach. A lot of studios were down in Santa Monica, down near the beach. Some of the artists bought their studios. They ended up millionaires out of that real estate, right?

Mason

Yeah, that's smart.

Ferguson

I wish I had known then what I know now. I'd have bought some land.

Mason

So was that when you started to buy their work?

Ferguson

Oh, they gave me work. "How do you like that, Cecil? You can have it."
[laughter] I didn't start buying work until I got involved in black art, although I had a collection, but it wasn't like a concerted effort. I didn't really look at art, right? [tape recorder off] You know what happened to me- I don't know if I told you this story or not. In 1965 I went on vacation alongwith my girl I was married to then [Laura Lorraine Vaughn Fergerson] and my cousin [Billy Ray Davis] and his wife [Berthena Davis].

Mason

This is when you got into the car accident?

Fergerson

The car accident. My life changed then. Because I had all this time to think. My life just changed. I wasn't the same person when I came back. In the meantime, the Watts revolt came, and I began to reevaluate my life. Sure, I worked at the museum; sure, I ran with those people; but what about my thing? I wasn't getting any promotions; I was just there, right? So I said, "There's something wrong with this." And I didn't know about black artists. I didn't know about my own culture, right? I knew a little about the history of black people because I was interested in history. So when I got recuperated, I decided to change my life. You know, the sixties were so rich. You could go anyplace and listen to some of the best minds in the world free. I started attending every rally, every lecture, every poetry [reading]. I started listening to Nikki [Giovanni] and Maya [Angelou] and Malcolm [X] and Martin [Luther King Jr.] and Huey [P. Newton], and Ron Karenga, and I liked what I heard from them. I wanted to be a part of that. And mostly what I had to offer were my skills as a museum-type person, because it was a visual time then. I was already thirty-five, thirty-three, thirty-four, right. I wasn't a really young man, you know. A lot of the people were in their early twenties who were in that struggle, right? And like one guy said, anyone who was thirty-five years old ought to be dead. [laughter] I was thirty-five, right? So my life just literally- I was influenced for seventeen years, up to 1965. So a lot of things I'm telling you I could relate back to when I started. But for me, my life changed in 1965. Then the other seventeen years also were a very important part of it. Because a lot of times, I believe now that things lie dormant in you until you have some reason for expressing. So I was the same as a lot of the artists of that period. I

was waiting for something to come along, but I wasn't aware of it. And since that time, I've began to understand that a lot of my desire to do this came from my family, but I just never put it together. My family were activists, early on-my grandparents in their own little way, right? I know one time I was riding down the street, and I saw all these old people in this big old yard having a barbecue-you know, like senior citizens, black people. So I stopped and joined the party. Because I had gotten to the point where I knew that a lot of history and stuff was in the minds of elderly black people, and that's how you learn, because there weren't any books. You get into conversations with people, right? And this lady was sitting down at the table, and I went over to her and introduced myself. Her name was [Cornelia] Van Blake, and she was from Boston. She almost looked white. We got to talking, and in the conversation she said, "I know you, Mr. Fergerson." "Oh, yeah?" [laughter] She said, "Well, I don't know you personally, but I've often been to events where you spoke." And she said, "I always wanted to meet you, because you seem a fascinating man." Of course, that is a compliment coming from somebody twenty years older than me. She was an elderly kind of woman. And she said, "I often hear you speak about the black family and the importance of the black family and the extended black family and why we have to get back to that. You touch on that every time you talk." And she said, "I'll bet you that your folks are from Louisiana or Texas, and then they probably migrated to either Saint Louis or Oklahoma." You know, she was right! [laughter] And I was saying, "Oklahoma." And she said, "The reason you're so family oriented"-this is her talking now-she said, "is because many black people after the Civil War, aggressive black people, left the South, and they left and kept their families intact. A lot of slaves didn't leave the plantation. They were too afraid to venture away from the plantations." She said, "So you have a long history of family. You've heard stories about your family. But a lot of kids that you talk to, they have no idea what you're talking about, because they never had a family." [laughter] She said, "You could ask them what the definition of a family was, and they couldn't tell you. So they really don't know what you're saying." I thought about that for a minute, and I said, "That's impossible" in my own mind. So then I started adding that to my speeches. "What's your definition of a family?" It's a simple definition: mother, father, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews, nieces, you know. And then the extended

family: the man down the street and next door, the preacher, people at church. A lot of people can't take that.

Mason

What is their definition of the family? What definition-?

Ferguson

A lot of them just don't know. And then a lot of them would talk about their gang members and guys they run with on the street. And that's long before I heard that debate on television about the gang thing now and the gangs being their family and all that. Because after the World War II and after the baby boom of the forties, parents who came out of that period and-See, the black family has always had absentee fathers. Maybe I and you had never known it, but it always had that problem, especially early on, after the Civil War and Reconstruction period, because men could leave home easily. Catch a train, go north, right? And a lot of times they went North with the understanding that they were going to send for their women, and they never did. A lot of times women had children and got locked into the South, so they were raising their children without a father, per se. But they had such a strong family unit of extended family members-uncles, cousins, people who just lived in that community-which helped them raise their children disciplinarily. You know what I'm saying?

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

But that's fallen apart here lately. Nobody looks after each other, right? Because you're afraid to tell another person's child to do anything. Mama will come over and jump on you. [laughter] But Miss Van Blake was a very interesting woman.

Mason

Are you still friends with her?

Ferguson

Sometimes she writes me. She went back to Boston. But she had worked with Marcus Garvey during the twenties. She was part of the UNIA [Universal Negro Improvement Association]. She lived in New York then and was a real activist at her age. I used to go visit her. She could tell me a lot about the whole Marcus Garvey area and A. Philip Randolph-you know, the man who organized the pullman porters union [Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters]. So one time I decided I would take my tape recorder and be a pioneer. Anybody seventy-five, eighty years old, I'd just interview them if they let me.

Mason

I was hoping we could talk about that in a separate session.

Ferguson

Okay.

1.13. Tape Number: VII, Side One July 24, 1991



Cecil Ferguson

Mason

So today we were just going to talk about your work at the Los Angeles County Museum [of Art] and your involvement in the shows and your apprenticeship with Maurice Tuchman.

Ferguson

Well, we opened that museum in 1965. And during that period, a whole lot of African American men got jobs inside the museum for one simple reason. At the other museum [Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History] because of so much racism, you could hardly get a decent job. If you passed the test, they'd flunk you on the interview. But they had a big battle at the museum between the art department and the exhibitions department. The man who ran the exhibitions department, he didn't particularly care about art. He leaned toward history and science, and so he didn't want anything for the art department. And just about that time, the art changed in America. If he did appreciate art, he was from that school of flowers and trees and animals and that sort of thing.

Mason

Sort of the European impressionists. What was his name again?

Ferguson

His name was Henry Wild. He's dead now, I think. He had come to the museum as a seventeen-year-old boy and worked his way up to be head of the exhibitions department and also married a female who was a doctor of one of the sciences there. Her name was Hildegrade Howard. She was a big curator there, and they became husband and wife. They had a love affair, I guess, and became husband and wife. But he was a very racist man. He had no black people in his department at all. He was just a racist, California white man. When Dr. Richard [F.] Brown came here, because of the fight with the exhibitions department- There was a group of us, you know, like I said, who were helpers. So they would let us do the art shows-packing, unpacking, installation, painting-but we weren't getting paid for preparator's work. We were getting paid helper's pay. It sounds kind of cold-blooded at the time, but we learned the job by like on-the-job training. So in the planning stage of the new museum, while they were building it and while they were planning it and raising the money, well, Dr. Brown started asking for certain personnel. I don't know whether Dr. Brown was liberal or he was just- We all loved him, of course, because he got us the jobs, right? I don't know whether he was liberal or just had an argument with the exhibitions department or a combination of both, but anyway, he created packing jobs, preparator jobs, head of the department jobs, shipping clerks, for this new museum that he was building,

the new art museum. So when we finally moved to the new art museum, all that part of what we called technical service that handles the art, ship the art and do all that, were black people. Now, I don't know whether it became a black job because of pay or what, but it was a black job. It was all black people down there. But, of course, it took us a year to move over here, and sometimes I think that's another reason why they hired all of us. [laughter] Because those guys were so happy to be preparators and in those good jobs, you know. I mean, we used to work long hours, pack all that stuff for the museum and bring it here and install it so it could be ready to go on opening day, which was I think-I will get that one day-in '64. But anyway, I had met Maurice Tuchman- Because he got to L.A.- He was part of that process, too, part of that process of hiring new people for the art museum. Dr. Brown-and this is my own way of thinking-Dr. Brown didn't use the same kind of system of hiring people. You didn't have to be somebody's rich son or daughter to be an art curator, right? He went to the colleges and got people like James Elliott and Bill [William] Osmun and Maurice Tuchman-who surely wasn't rich, because he's first-generation American, right? I met him early on, maybe the first day that he got here, looking like a Jewish professor.

Mason

How so? You mean sort of bohemian looking?

Ferguson

Yeah, real academic looking. Not at all like he turned out to be later on-California, you know. Suit and tie, looking like he just got two Ph.D.'s in whatever, right? So we kind of hit it off-as much as possible, you know, him being one thing and me being another. And, of course, all the curators, when they'd install in their area, they all wanted to make a good showing in the new museum-right?-and surely Maurice was the same kind of person. So I was a preparator assigned to the technical service. But they assigned me to work with Maurice, because I had established this strong relationship between a lot of La Cienega [Boulevard] artists in the galleries. So it was nice for me to work with him. And then Maurice did a show called *The New York School*. I think it was his first show as a- And then he had some big show like *Sculpture of the Sixties*, which needed a person to go interact with the artists.

Mason

That was 1967, *American Sculpture in the Sixties*.

Ferguson

Yeah, two years later, right. *The New York School* was in '65, right?

Mason

Right.

Ferguson

I think we opened with *The New York School*, the first exhibit. Oh. When was the Bonnard show [*Bonnard and His Environment*]?

Mason

That was in '65 also.

Ferguson

Maybe Bonnard came before.

Mason

We have it listed before *The New York School*.

Ferguson

Yeah, maybe we opened with Bonnard. Some of these other things are from the other museum, I think. [tape recorder off] So we had this big opening at the museum, champagne flowing. And of course, everybody was so proud to be a part of that, especially the black employees who had long worked in the plantation kind of atmosphere at the other museum, only being the arms and hands of-

Mason

The invisible workers.

Ferguson

The invisible people there at that institution. And now they are visible, right? They got something that they feel proud of, that they did, right? They installed that whole museum. The funny thing about it: When they wrote the tenth anniversary of the museum, they never mentioned any black people. Never

mentioned them. Nothing. They just wrote them out of the whole history and move of that museum. It's as American as apple pie. They've always done that to us, like we don't exist.

Mason

So it was more like an elitist attitude where they thought only the curators and-

Ferguson

No, they named other white people.

Mason

Oh, really?

Ferguson

They just didn't name any black people.

Mason

So they named other white-

Ferguson

They even named Lyon Moving [and Storage] Company, and all they did was furnish the trucks.

Mason

Oh, really? Oh, I thought it was more of an elitist thing.

Ferguson

No.

Mason

Oh, I see.

Ferguson

No, it was straight-out racism. They continue to do that to this day over there in terms of lots of things. And a lot of those jobs black people fought so hard to get. Well, you know, every time times get hard, you know white people

want those jobs, right? You know, right now unemployment is up, so they try and force a lot of black people out of those jobs now.

Mason

Can we pause a second? [tape recorder off]

Ferguson

I was telling you about the long hours that the black employees worked there because they were so proud of their job, right? They would work fifteen, sixteen, seventeen hours. They were so dedicated to that institution and to Dr. Brown, because Dr. Brown had given them jobs that they thought they would never get in a lifetime. You know what I'm saying? They weren't dreaming about being preparators, let alone curators. They thought they'd always be janitors and helpers. At one time they wouldn't even hire black people to be a guard.

Mason

Yeah, I think you mentioned that.

Ferguson

So now they're getting good jobs, and it's the mid-sixties, right. And really California hadn't gotten caught up in the struggle, basically, because California didn't get caught up in that struggle until the late sixties, with the [Black] Panthers and other groups. Most people in California viewed that whole Civil Rights struggle like a big old motion picture as far as being active. You know what I mean? Because again, it's Hollywood in California, right? You're so divorced from everything. And of course, California is so big, and Los Angeles is so big, that they could practice racism geographically, because you could live in certain parts of the city and never come in contact with other races, right? So people were going around saying that they're free in California. You know what I'm saying? "Ain't no racism here." Shit. People are dreaming of being nothing but janitors and elevator operators and work for the movie colony in early Los Angeles. They aren't dreaming of being councilmen. World War II changed a lot of that, of course.

Mason

When you think of Central Avenue, for example, and all the black businesses and things that were concentrated around Central Avenue, it seems like there was a lot of black ambition, say, back in the fifties and-

Ferguson

Well, in the thirties and forties, you've got to understand that a lot of people who migrated to Los Angeles during that period came from the South or the Midwest, where, because of segregation, they were always practically using their own institutions. So they had no problem with using their own institutions no matter what kind of work they did. They were laborers, but when they got their hair done they went to a black barber. When they went to a restaurant, they went to a black restaurant. Because they had long been a part of that in other parts of the country. So it wasn't until the 1970s, with all that integration, that black people started acting crazy and wouldn't support each other in businesses. They had enough money as people who worked to have a business community, because a lot of the money stayed in the community. Now lots of the money goes out of the community and never comes back, but in the thirties and forties and fifties, that money got turned over in that Central Avenue, east side community.

Mason

Do you think that will ever happen again?

Ferguson

No. That's over. That will never happen again in this country. I think that we just have to deal with some of this mentally in terms of establishing our own institutions and using them, right? Like other ethnic groups in this country evolved into that. I mean, the Jewish people use all [their] institutions, the Irish use all [their] institutions. But still, they have certain traditions that they hand on to, right? And we simply, all of a sudden because of integration, don't do that anymore. Why do we like to go to white hotels? They serve us inferior food, inferior help, don't hire black people. Why do you think we flock to them?

Mason

Maybe some people feel like it's a status symbol.

Ferguson

Yeah, because we've been always the ones who used to wait on everybody. So now they feel good to go there and get waited on. [laughter] Which is fantasy, right? Because these people don't even- These [black] clubs and things go to these white hotels, and they charge them enormous fees to have banquets and stuff, and they don't even have any black help. So again, our money doesn't come back to the community; it goes out of the community. At least if they had some black help, then some of that money might come back to the community, because the people who would be working there would live in the community. You see what I'm saying?

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

I think that's one of the sins of the whole Civil Rights struggle and what integration is, their misinterpretation of integration, you know. Integration doesn't mean that you *have* to go to a white school. Integration doesn't mean that you *have* to go to a white restaurant. Integration didn't mean that you should marry white girls. That isn't what integration meant. It meant, if you decided to do that, that it was your constitutional right to do anything that you wanted to do. And integration really was a part of the dollar bill, another piece of the pie. And then all these other things should have stayed in place, all of the other traditions that we had. Now, the only thing that really flourished in the black community is the black church and the black mortuary. The black church is still intact and most black people are buried by black morticians, but in white-owned cemeteries. Because there aren't any black-owned cemeteries, because that means owning land, lots of land.

Mason

I wanted to ask you about the black workers at the museum. Were any of them able to take the skills and training that they had learned and go to other museums and work?

Ferguson

No. That's why the museum people stayed there for thirty-five, forty, forty-five years-black people-because they didn't have the flexibility that white employees had. A lot of white employees came there, learned the job there-In the seventies we started getting a lot of white people applying for those jobs.

Mason

Go to New York.

Ferguson

Yeah, go to New York, get a job. Go to Washington, get a job. Go to the Midwest, get a job in the Jesse James museum! [laughter] Black people didn't have that option, right? So black people would stay there. I'm one of the few black people who ever worked there and retired or quit and still made money from art, right? I still make money from art. Most of the rest of them just worked there a long time, retired, and now they just sit around and go to the racetrack or whatever. But I'm still involved in the arts six years after retirement. I have five boxes in my studio right now that I'm packing to ship some art. You can make a nice little living on the side shipping art, making boxes. I haven't made boxes at the museum for over twenty years, but I still know how.

Mason

I would imagine that with a lot of small art museums and organizations they wouldn't necessarily have somebody on the staff, and they would require-

Ferguson

Oh, artists. I know a lot of artists. These are artists. I know a lot of artists that ship work now. A lot of black artists ship work now. That wasn't true ten, fifteen years ago. But there are a lot of artists working in the city now that send paintings to other institutions, that send paintings to other festivals, especially in the summertime. Next year I'll do all right, because next year is the Atlanta festival.

Mason

The Festival in Black.

Ferguson

Yeah, in Atlanta. A lot of artists from California will be shipping art. And my sons [Darell Ferguson, Anthony Ferguson, and Kinte K. Ferguson] are going to help run it, because they all know how to do that from living in my house, right?

Mason

Well, it must have been difficult to work with Maurice Tuchman in some ways, because- We've talked before about how he wasn't really interested in any of the things that the Black Arts Council was putting on. So it seems that- I mean, did you two just sort of leave each other alone? Or did he try to convince you to adopt a certain aesthetic because that was his own?

Ferguson

He never did that to me, because by the time I got involved in the struggle of the Civil Rights movement, I had established with Maurice long ago that I was my own man. And I think maybe Maurice too, being first-generation American and Jewish from Europe, you know-

Mason

Where was his father from?

Ferguson

Someplace. It might have been Germany. Someplace. You know, around that area. Because his favorite artist was Soutine, and Soutine himself was part of an activist- Because he did a lot of work within the Marxist movement. Did he do a lot of work that had something to do with the oppression of the Jewish people? Do you know anything about Soutine?

Mason

Yeah, I don't really know that much about him.

Ferguson

But now he's in America, and that's where the Jewish people came during that period, right? They became a bigger oppressor of black people than the Jews who had come earlier, because now they're trying to find their niche in

American society, so visually they could become white-especially in Los Angeles, when you have all these options to be in museums or go to Hollywood. Of course, they had built this tremendous network in Hollywood. You know, that whole network in Hollywood is Jewish: the writers, the screenwriters, the cameramen, the Sam [Samuel] Goldwyns, the Warner brothers, all those people, they're Jewish. They developed that medium in this country. So at the museum, I think Maurice was a strange- Let's put it this way: Maurice was the kind of dude where he wouldn't do anything to hurt you, but he wouldn't do anything to help you either.

Mason

And that's how he treated everybody? Or just-?

Ferguson

That's how he treated me. You know, I don't know how he treated everybody, but our relationship was that he wouldn't go out of his way to hurt me, but he didn't go out of his way to help me. He felt very comfortable as long as all I wanted to be was a preparator and work for him. Of course, when I said I had curatorial aspirations, things changed, because they had never had a black curatorial assistant in the history of the museum. Another lady rode in on my coattails in the costume and textile department, and as soon as she and I retired, there has never been another curatorial assistant of color since.

Mason

Who was that? Nola Ewing?

Ferguson

Nola Ewing, right. And she rode in on the fact that I made all this noise. She piggybacked on my end, right? Which is okay with me, because I've known her all my life, even before I started working at the museum.

Mason

So she was on the Costume and Textiles Council?

Ferguson

She worked for that department. She started as a seamstress. But she knew that collection backwards. She *was* that department. She ran that department.

Mason

Oh, I see. What was her title?

Ferguson

She was a seamstress. She retired as a curatorial assistant. But she should have gotten a promotion a long time ago. I mean, she ran that department. She didn't do much writing, you know. But surely, for assistant curator, she could have handled that title, because she knew the collection. She knew where every piece of textile was, where every costume was. She repaired all of them with her little fine stitching and-They just kept her in one position all the time, because she wasn't much of a fighter, right?

Mason

Did she ever go to school later to try to get a degree or anything?

Ferguson

When she came there, she had gone to school. She had gone to school in a little school in Chicago for that. See, a lot of black schools in the South offered some of these things, but they weren't credible schools.

Mason

You mean art history or-?

Ferguson

Making costumes and textiles or even art history, right. But you'd come in and say how you went to Bishop. You've heard of Bishop College, right?

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

Or Talladega [College], [laughter] a little black Baptist school in the South, right? You didn't have any credibility.

Mason

Yeah. So she didn't see that there was any chance for her to advance even if she did go to-?

Ferguson

She was a real Christian woman-right?-and she had a southern mentality. I love her, right? She used to chauffeur the curator around in her car, in the backseat. [laughter] Miss Holt, Stephanie Holt, who was the curator of costumes and textiles. I walked up to the car one day, and I told Miss Holt, "Why don't you get in the front?" [laughter]

Mason

Oh, did you?

Ferguson

She acted like she didn't know what I was talking about. I remember one time, it was real hot one day, and Miss Holt fainted coming down some stairs. I just happened to be coming up the stairs, and I saw that she just- If she had fallen all the way to the bottom, she'd probably have killed herself. I caught her and carried her into the costume and textile place and laid her on the floor, and they revived her. Eventually she had something wrong with her brain, because she had an operation later on. I used to go over and talk to Nola all the time, so she went and told Richard Brown that I spent all my time in the costume and textile room talking to Nola. So Dr. Brown spoke to me about it, right? He was that kind of guy. He wouldn't reprimand you. He'd say, "I'm getting this snitch about you. I don't know how true it is, but if it is true, take care of it." Whatever. He was that kind of guy. So I had seen Miss Holt. I said, "Miss Holt!" "Yes, Cecil?" I said, "You remember that day that you fainted and you were going to fall off those stairs, and I caught you and took you into the room and made sure you didn't fall and bust your head wide open?" "Oh, thank you. Thank you, Cecil. Thank you. Thank you. Yeah, I remember." I said, "Then why are you snitching on me?" "I didn't do that!" I said, "Yes, you did! The man told me you did it. Why didn't you come to me? I'm the same man who saved your life. You're going to go and try to get my job." I sure did tell her. I told her straight out. Nola split. [laughter] I had no problem with Miss Holt from then on. I'd go up there all the time, speak to her and him. I had no problem out of her. But that's how they- They didn't regard you as a person, unless you

demanding that, right? Like when I first told a guy named Bill Osmun that I wanted to be a curatorial assistant, and he told me, "Oh, no, Cecil. When we moved over here, we gave you guys those jobs because we needed the help, but now we're looking for people with degrees." White people, right? He didn't say white people, but that's what he meant. I said, "What? You're out of your mind." He told me that.

Mason

So when did you decide that you wanted to become a curator or a curator at the museum?

Ferguson

Well, I taught myself a lot about the museum, you know.

Mason

Yeah, you were saying you would read in the-

Ferguson

I'd read, and I got real good. The funny thing about Maurice, you know, he would never admit that I had just improved so much academically. He said I had a good photographic mind, because I knew the whole collection, right? Because I spotted early on that an artist's signature was in his painting, where you didn't have to look at the label or look at the signature. I studied the styles of different artists, so I could tell the difference between a Rembrandt and a Rubens or a [Mark] Rothko or [Willem] de Kooning just by looking at it. And Picasso- Well, Picasso's hard, because he lived so long and entered so many different periods. Because he painted for-what?-seventy years? He had all these periods where he'd change. But I studied all that carefully.

Mason

Do you think you could tell a fake Picasso from-?

Ferguson

I wasn't that good. [laughter] I wasn't that good. Because they've got some people- They had some fakes around. They had a lot of curators who weren't that good-I mean, who were trained to the max, right? Because during the twenties and thirties, everybody in Hollywood had a nineteenth-century

French artist, and we knew a lot of that was phony. They had so many Modiglianis around at one time that I heard a guy say that if all the Modiglianis were real he'd have had to paint every minute of his life. Because he died like when he was twenty-something. So they had this guy in Hollywood who was turning out Monets and Renoirs, and they were buying them knowing they were phony.

Mason

Why?

Ferguson

Well, it was their status quo to own-

Mason

An imitation? [laughter] So did they pass it off to other people as authentic?

Ferguson

Yeah.

Mason

Oh, but they got it at a bargain basement price! [laughter]

Ferguson

Yeah, they'd pass it off. I heard them talking about it, because I used to be around a lot of collectors, dealers.

Mason

Yeah, I wanted to ask you about that, because part of your education was talking to people.

Ferguson

Yeah, other people in the modern art department. And being black, they never thought I wanted to use that. I was like a stool sitting beside the door, right? They had no qualms about saying certain things in front of me.

Mason

Talk about some of the people-

Ferguson

Because I wasn't a part of that, right? I'd go to galleries like the Landau Gallery, the Heritage Gallery, the Ankrum Gallery. At all those galleries on La Cienega they knew me. "Hi, Cecil!" They never thought that I would use any of that. And I knew all the big-time collectors in Beverly Hills, I mean the people who collected the art, the Hal Wallises, the Warner brothers, David Bright-oh, I could name them on and on and on-who had these huge collections.

Mason

You talk about knowing Vincent Price and Edward G. Robinson.

Ferguson

Vincent Price. I knew all those people visually-Anna Bing Arnold-because I'd go to their homes all the time. Edward [W.] Carter, who collected Corots and Courbets, you know; Edward G. Robinson, who was a huge collector; Sam Jaffe, you know. I knew all these people by going to their homes. So I'd hear conversations.

Mason

Did you know Walter Arensberg?

Ferguson

No. Just because he had a huge collection that came here- And a lot of times, when the different collections would come to the museum to be shown, they'd send a curator, so I'd get introduced to that curator early on, because I'm his arms and legs while he's here, right? I could always manage to get them into a conversation about art, because that's what I wanted to know about. And they gave to me freely, because I wasn't going to be a threat to them. I'm black. [laughter]

Mason

Just to get kind of a flavor of it, what would you talk about?

Ferguson

I'd talk about the history, who owns it, if it's phony or real, anything that has something to do with that art, and they explained to me why he paints a

certain way, right? That's how I learned so much about the New York School, the de Koonings and the Rothkos and who else from that period?

Mason

[Jackson] Pollock?

Ferguson

Pollock and all the people from that period, right. I was really interested in that.

Mason

Who had a big collection of the New York School?

Ferguson

David Bright had a big collection. Hal [B.] Wallis had a- You know, he married- I think after his wife [Louise Fazenda Wallis] died, he married Martha Hyer [Wallis], the movie actress. And then Maurice, a lot of times when people would come to town, Maurice would give parties, and he'd invite me. And I'm there with the whole New York gang of all the art people, right? [laughter] They were discussing art, and I was listening. And at that time, for no special reason except I was just interested in art- Once I got caught up in the movement, I didn't care anymore anyway, because now I was interested in black people. I didn't even try to use that.

Mason

I'm sorry. You said, you didn't-?

Ferguson

I didn't even try to use that knowledge that I had of European art. I just forgot about that. I started dealing with the Aaron Douglases and the Archibald Motleys and-

Mason

So you didn't see any correlations or anything that would apply?

Ferguson

As far as what I learned, to appreciate art, number one. It helps you get into Japanese art or African art or whatever if you appreciate art. Pretty soon you appreciate it all, once you establish an appreciation for it. I mean, I love all art.

Mason

Is there anybody you especially like that you can remember?

Ferguson

From Europe?

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

Oh, I used to be crazy about van Gogh.

Mason

Yeah, you mentioned that. But I mean the modern artists. You were saying off tape, I think, that you had really gotten interested in the New York School.

Ferguson

Yeah.

Mason

Or did you say you preferred the California-?

Ferguson

I knew more about the California artists, right. I liked Jasper Johns. I like his work. I like [Robert] Rauschenberg, [Roy] Lichtenstein. Those artists are my peers. We're the same age, whether they're in New York or California. They were my age then, and they're my age now. Like I saw a piece in the paper the other day about Robert Irwin. Did you see that?

Mason

No, I didn't.

Ferguson

You know, Robert is like four years younger than me. I didn't know that. He's only fifty-six [years old]. I always thought he was older than me. He's a California artist who does those light things. But we were good friends.

Mason

Yeah, you mentioned that off tape. Did you meet him at the fair? You were saying off tape that you would go down to the beach and hang out.

Ferguson

Well, see, what happened early on, the museum in the 1940s did a show called- Oh, God, what-? It was a juried show. The art annual. Every year they would do an art annual, right? So a lot of the artists who were entered in that were young artists in the late forties. Well, by the time the 1960s came along, they had emerged to another plateau, right? And since I worked all of those, it was my job to pick up the painting, walk it in front of three people jurying it, hold it up while they talked about it. [laughter] If the painting was too big for one person to do it, then two of us would do it. Now, you can do one of two things while you're standing there. You can be like a lot of my friends whom I worked with; it was only a job to them, and they wouldn't listen to anything anybody was saying. What it meant to them was holding this painting up and getting the hell out of there when lunchtime and break time and quitting time came. But I'm standing there, and I'm listening to Clement Greenberg, the critic. I'm listening to Vincent Price. I'm listening to Millard Sheets talk about art. It was interesting to me. So I'm listening to what they were- It was an education for me, right? It was like going to school listening to some of the best minds in the country discuss art, so I'd take it in rather than just stand there. We did that for years. But what really got me involved with the artists was Maurice. I learned a lot from Maurice in terms of relationships with artists. Maurice taught me if you're going to be in the art business, the artist is one of your best friends. [laughter]

Mason

And not everybody sees it like that.

Ferguson

That's so dumb. I don't understand it. But Maurice taught me, if it's your business, why would you alienate artists? You're going to alienate some people because you have control over shows and stuff as a curator, right? Everybody was in love with Maurice because a lot of people thought they could be in the shows. He'd lean too much toward New York and not to a lot of California artists, right?

Mason

You said he leaned toward New York?

Ferguson

Yeah. And they were saying- I thought he did a lot of California artists, personally. And I carried it over into my life in the community, where, since I have picked this for my lifelong work, I'm not going to fall out with an artist. They're my best friends-the writers, the visual artists, the musicians. If I'm going to be in this business, I'm going to work for them. That's how I got a good relationship with all of them. That's why 130 people showed up at my party. [laughter] I got that from Maurice. So when artists would come to the museum, when some of the contemporary artists came to the museum and did different shows, I ran interference for them. Because artists do a lot of things you can't do in a public institution. They want to do things that you can do in galleries that you can't do in public institutions, right? They've got to get rid of all the signs that say Exit and Fire because it's messing with their art, right? Anybody wants to hang something this far off the ground- So I would act between the artist and the institution. So when they came to the museum, they would ask for me.

Mason

So what you were saying about the juried shows was not only that you learned from them, but you probably met some of the artists quite- You were saying that you've just known them so long.

Ferguson

I've just known them so long. And during break time- Not only was Vincent Price interested in art, he was also a movie star, right? So I'd go and hold a conversation with him. And I found out a long time ago with people in the

arts, the best way to get to them is to just be casual and walk up to them like you've known them all day, all their lives, right?-"How's it going, Vincent?"- and start a conversation. [laughter] And since I had some knowledge of art, I could begin the conversation. And then I might repeat something I heard two days ago. We'd start a conversation. Or Clement Greenberg. I'd walk up to him and call him by his first name. I'm in an art museum, right? Like I spent all day with Philip Guston, the artist. He and I got along fabulously. Because, see, it always fascinated European people that somebody black would be so interested in art. And that's funny- You might not understand it at your age. That's the feedback I used to get, because they know there's nothing you can do with it. Or they figured there wasn't anything you could do with it.

1.14. Tape Number: VII, Side Two July 24, 1991

Ferguson

Now I'll tell it back. I knew Charles White, Betye Saar, Johnson- What was Johnson's first name.

Mason

You mean William H. Johnson?

Ferguson

No, he was a young artist. Well, he was younger than William H. Daniel [LaRue Johnson]! Daniel. Do you know Daniel?

Mason

I've seen a few examples of his work. How did you know those three especially?

Ferguson

Because Daniel is crazy! [laughter] Well, long before the Civil Rights struggle, Daniel was doing art about social commentary. And Danny and I are close to the same age, right? We'd go out and get drunk together and go to jazz concerts and sit around and rap. And Danny sold himself as an artist. He'd come to the museum and mess with all those white curators, arguing with the head of the museum. And then Mel [Melvin] Edwards.

Mason

Yeah, he had the show in '65.

Ferguson

And Ed [Edward] Berial. And what's that other black man's name? He used to hang around with the La Cienega crowd, the Ferus [Gallery] crowd. He's a sculptor. Fred [Frederick J.] Eversley.

Mason

Oh.

Ferguson

Are you familiar with his work?

Mason

Yeah. Yeah, but I didn't know that he was with a different crowd.

Ferguson

Eventually he was a part of that thing. But Mel Edwards and Danny Johnson and Ed Berial were early on. And, of course, Danny was out of UCLA. But I'll bet he was married to somebody white. These are the only black artists I knew. And I had met Charles White kind of.

Mason

Yeah, you were saying he came into the museum.

Ferguson

Yeah. And while I was going through my rehabilitation, the Watts revolt broke out.

Mason

Right.

Ferguson

And I started reading a lot. I used to love to read, but I had stopped reading. I had already worked in the museum seventeen years when the Watts revolt broke out. That's a long time.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

And I really thought I was something special because I worked at this white institution and got invited to all these people's houses. But my life had changed during that period.

Mason

So when you say you just set aside the things that you'd been learning about appreciating European art, how did you start to formulate on your own an approach to black art? Was that through the meetings of the Black Arts Council, where the artists would come and see you?

Ferguson

Yes, to find out what it was all about. If you taught Eurocentric art in college, you could teach black art in college too, because all you had to do was just use what you learned in art history and apply it to- Because all these people were trained in white instruction inside America. It's just that no established curators and teachers and things just ever dealt with black art. They had no need to do it. It would be very easy to do.

Mason

Yeah. So what you're saying is back in the sixties, when minimalism was really big or that sort of thing, unless it was a black artist like maybe Fred Eversley who-

Ferguson

Mainstream.

Mason

-worked in that aesthetic-

Ferguson

Marvin Harden.

Mason

Yeah, Marvin Harden.

Ferguson

Raymond [J.] Saunders. Sam Gilliam. They could deal with that, because that's another way of promoting their own culture, too, by saying that they were influenced by-

Mason

Well, it's so universal that anybody can do it.

Ferguson

But they can find the same thing in Archibald Motley if they look close enough.

Mason

Oh, yeah.

Ferguson

I mean, I haven't read your thesis, but I'm sure that you've done that.

Mason

Yeah, I probably have. I mean, once you've received a certain training, as you were saying, you usually- It's hard when a field is really like new, like the study of African American art. It's hard to just come up with an approach that's just completely new and different. You usually do incorporate things that you've come across.

Ferguson

But because you can incorporate different things which will allow you to come up with something new in- I mean if you wanted to. Most writers play it safe by not doing that.

Mason

They want to get jobs and get published!

Ferguson

Yeah, like Lizzetta [LeFalle-Collins], right? But I just don't believe that. You know, I believe you can build a career without doing that. You know what I mean? Because they've got plenty of white people who talk about their own culture. Why do they need you? I really believe that you can get published by not doing that.

Mason

Yeah. Yeah, it's just a matter of stages. I mean, when you look at early black art-I mean Henry O. Tanner and Joshua Johnston-they were certainly working in the mainstream style, and then it has just taken a number of generations to try to divide a separate aesthetic.

Ferguson

I think if you're smart you would do that. I don't have any academic background, and I've been published in quite a few books.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

Right?

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

I don't even have that good a command of the English language, but I've been published. And surely somebody with training like yourself can get published without doing that, by being honest about-The one thing I had, I think, was that Lizetta used quotes too much from- You know what I mean? If she finds a black artist, she always finds a white artist who surely influenced the show. And she justifies that by saying Picasso and Braque and those people were influenced by African art, and the whole cubist movement was because of the African. And I just don't- If that's true, then why use them? Go straight to the

source like they did. Why cut out the source and just use Braque and those people as an influence on me if I'm the artist? Because all they did is perpetuate European art history and take away from the African. Why do you have to go through Picasso to get to the African mask? Why you can't go straight from the African American artist to the African influence? Then they won't publish you?

Mason

Well, I mean, some artists will insist that they looked at Picasso, I guess, just to-whether it's true or not-have a certain validity and to have curators and historians pay attention.

Ferguson

Just because you paint doesn't mean you've got no sense.

Mason

Yeah, well, you know how the art world works.

Ferguson

Because curators create artists.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

Curators and writers create artists.

Mason

Yeah, but you have to get their attention somehow.

Ferguson

Yeah. You go into the closet and you can find somebody who wasn't shit when he was painting, and curators pull him out and make him important.

Mason

Recycle! [laughter]

Ferguson

I've seen them do that over and over.

Mason

Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Ferguson

They've got to start looking at other art. All the European art has been bought up, owned, or isn't affordable. If the art world is going to maintain, they've got to start looking at other people's art. They've got to start looking at the art of the African American or the Latino or- It's affordable, and all the other art is being-

Mason

Yeah, it's being bought up.

Ferguson

Bought up.

Mason

What effect do you think that will have on the art of black people? Well, maybe before I ask you that- I was going to ask you, do you think that black artists have been creating or were they able to create a separate black aesthetic? And if so, would you be able to describe it?

Ferguson

I think there are certain things in the black aesthetic. I think that everybody who started painting during the sixties and seventies are not artists. Some I think are just painters.

Mason

What's the difference?

Ferguson

Well, I think artists are not necessarily created or trained. I think they're really born and gifted with that. I don't think everybody could be a Picasso or a

Charles White or an Archibald Motley. I don't think everybody could be that. Or Elizabeth Catlett. And many times those people-or who are married to the true artist of any period-are those people who don't paint to sell a piece of artwork. I think they paint because there's something they want to paint, and maybe if somebody likes it, they'll buy it. Unless they're commissioned to do a bust of Karen Mason. That's something different. But usually an artist will get an idea, he'll put it on a canvas or put it on a sculpture, and then if you like it, you buy it. Fine. He didn't create it for a market; he created it because of something that comes out of here. You know what I'm saying? I think there was a black aesthetic developed during the 1960s for the first time for black artists in America. And I think that one of these days I'm going to sit down and I'm going to do all these other million things I do, and if I live long enough, I'm going to try to write about what that is. I was hoping that somebody like you-all would do that and save me from having to do it. And in the months that I've known you, I think that you can do it. I've known a lot of your type people that I think couldn't do it. And I'm not just saying that because you're sitting there; I really feel that way toward you because of our conversation. The things that you're interested in, the information that you go to get- You know, not very many people will sit down here and listen to me with the attention that you do, as I gibber on and on and on and on. [laughter] So you must be getting something out of this. Perhaps you wouldn't do it either, I don't know. So between some of the nonsense that I say, there must be some concrete things that I'm saying that you want to know about, right? And I think that would help you get to what the black aesthetic was. I don't think you can just look at a piece of art and find the black aesthetic, you know.

Mason

I think the term is- I think a lot of people have an opinion about what it is, but everybody's opinion is different. And it's not like you could ask somebody, "Oh, what's the New York School?" You could name x, y, and z, and-

Ferguson

But you could do that with the black aesthetic. All you've got to do is make up your mind and do it. The first people who wrote about the surrealist period, the first people who wrote about the cubist period, they thought that's what

they did, that they created it. The artists sure didn't create it; writers created it. Writers created it!

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

The impressionists, expressionists, abstract expressionists-

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

The writers did that.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

So what do you think that the black aesthetic is? You know, you write it, and that's what it becomes.

Mason

Oh, because, I mean, if you want to talk about somebody like Sam Gilliam, he's a black artist, and yet he works in a particular style.

Ferguson

But I think Sam Gilliam has a black aesthetic.

Mason

How so?

Ferguson

It's somewhere in his art, right? Somewhere in his art he's not- I think it's impossible for him not to have it.

Mason

Yeah. Right now there's a-

Ferguson

It's there, right?

Mason

Yes.

Ferguson

Sometimes that's why a lot of white people don't buy black art, even Sam Gilliam and Raymond Saunders, right, because the white people always think there's a message in black art, and they're always trying to find it, whether it's surreal, abstract, or realist. They swear there must be a gun.

Mason

[laughter] "It's about life in the ghetto." Yeah.

Ferguson

Instead of just a free expression, right?

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

They always think it's a message, right?

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

And that's too bad.

Mason

Well, right now there's a lot of scholarship being generated that talks about a blues aesthetic in black art. It tries to-

Ferguson

And white people are doing that.

Mason

Doing what?

Ferguson

Writing about the blues aesthetic?

Mason

I don't know any white who- The people I know writing about it are- Well, there's Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates [Jr.], I think, in literature. And then there's one black art historian, Richard Powell, who's been writing about a blues aesthetic, but I don't know-

Ferguson

I was involved with a blues aesthetics program.

Mason

That the California Afro-American-?

Ferguson

At the West Harlem Arts Center.

Mason

Oh, I don't know about that.

Ferguson

From this white-based group in Santa Monica.

Mason

Oh, I don't- What is-?

Ferguson

You saw that magazine called *Performers*?

Mason

No.

Ferguson

They did a whole thing on the black aesthetic or the blues aesthetic. And all these people who wrote about the blues aesthetic, which boils down to the African American aesthetics- Blues sounds catchy. I haven't read any of these people that you've talked about, but of the articles that I've read, the word blues became like synonymous, because they were just talking about the work and lifestyle of the people. Blues aesthetic sounds okay, right? I went out in Santa Monica and listened to these groups who did the blues aesthetic thing, and what white people are saying, white people can be a part of the blues aesthetic-

Mason

I'm sorry, I don't- You were talking about- Now, what was in Santa Monica?

Ferguson

These people did a whole thing about the blues aesthetic.

Mason

It was a show?

Ferguson

Yeah. It was probably a piggyback on what you're talking about.

Mason

Okay.

Ferguson

I don't know. I don't know who started it.

Mason

When was it?

Ferguson

Oh, about a year ago.

Mason

Okay.

Ferguson

I have a panel discussion here. I have a book here. Have you ever seen that book?

Mason

No.

Ferguson

Next time you come I'll try to dig it out. I also have a tape of it, because I narrated the seminar.

Mason

Okay, yeah.

Ferguson

And these people wrote these articles, and they called it the blues aesthetic, because they were trying to define what the blues aesthetic is.

Mason

So how can everybody participate in the blues aesthetic?

Ferguson

If you're black, no problem.

Mason

But you were just saying that they were trying to say that even whites could-

Ferguson

But white people always say that.

Mason

Oh.

Ferguson

Right? They always try to steal your culture. The rap, the jazz, the- Everything you do! So the blues aesthetic isn't-

Mason

Is not exempt from that.

Ferguson

It's not exempt from that, right. And I'm saying that the blues aesthetic is defined by those people who wrote about it. You've got to be black to understand that. I mean, there's no way that a- I'm not saying that- What's her name? The country and western singer. [Barbara] Mandrell, okay, the Mandrell Sisters. I'm not saying they can't sing the blues, but they aren't singing like Billie Holiday.

Mason

Nobody sings like- [laughter] Yeah.

Ferguson

I just used Billie Holiday as an exaggeration, because there are some old black ladies who've never been on a stage who probably live in a project-right?-who can sing the blues just like Billie Holiday. Because it comes from a whole other kind of- You know, the blues aesthetic is ours. I mean, you just can't do it because- You can imitate. Like one artist in there, one girl, was saying that Tom Jones and Elvis Presley sound black. Not to me. Everybody agreed! [laughter] Tom Jones doesn't sound black to me. It's easy to say that. If you don't ever listen to what black is, if you hear black off the top, you'll say that.

Mason

He's the media version.

Ferguson

Yeah. But now, if you went on to an in-depth study on it and sat down and listened to hours and hours of Tom Jones and compare it to hours and hours of James Brown, you can tell a difference.

Mason

So would you be willing to go so far as to say that-? I mean, some historians could say, "Well, abstract expressionism, that's European and-"

Ferguson

Fine. I have no problem with that. Maybe Sam Gilliam doesn't do abstract expression; maybe he does abstract bubu. [laughter] Or you want to find a better word. That way curator-type people like you can do that. Because I'll take another look at Sam Gilliam's work, and because the counterculture's brushes have an upward, downward, backward movement, it's really not abstract expression. I hate to be that facetious, but, you know, I was trained by Europeans. You know what I'm saying? And I see them do that all the time. I don't know whether it's good, bad, or indifferent, but I- And maybe that's real. Maybe Sam Gilliam doesn't do abstract expression as defined by the people who define abstract expressionism. Maybe I should look at the first people who wrote about that, and maybe he doesn't do it. Maybe that's part of his black aesthetic, his blues aesthetic that came through on his canvases that's not there with other abstract expressionists from a Eurocentric point of view. Who ever looks at it that closely? Surely you haven't.

Mason

No.

Ferguson

That's how all these guys got started, right? I mean, even the impressionist painters, some writers gave them the name. Those people like Cézanne and Renoir and those people, they were just trying to get away from the art that was being produced at that time that was so realistic. And pretty soon somebody did something with a paintbrush and it looked like a bird. Right? Or maybe Seurat said, "I can create one just by doing this with paint" [taps finger], and it became surrealist instead of just art with a different way of expressing it. You can do the same thing with the black artists. But most black people, we have aspirations to be curators and things. They try to do it the same old way by quoting Eurocentric- And my question to them is, why do they need you to write about white people's art? They've got a lot of white people to do that. They've got a lot of white people who graduated in your class who want to be curators and writers. So why do they need you to write

about Frank Stella? Or why do you think it's easy to talk about Archibald Motley and Charles White and Gordon Parks?

Mason

Why did I? For a lot of reasons I can't explain in two minutes. But why do you ask?

Ferguson

Why didn't you pick those three white people to do it on?

Mason

I'm sorry, the three white people to-? I'm sorry, who was white?

Ferguson

I don't know, Picasso, Jackson Pollock.

Mason

Oh, why didn't I pick a white artist? Oh, mainly for the reason you said. There are so many sheets of paper published about them, about those artists.

Ferguson

So you're afraid you won't get your piece published if you decide to write?

Mason

No, it's just-

Ferguson

I'll bet you will get it published. Because you did pick three people who are known, that a lot has been written about.

Mason

But it's still hard to get published. I mean, I find that in a lot of the work that I do, I still have to go get somebody's unpublished thesis or dissertation or something.

Ferguson

Well, they're probably boys from the hood.

Mason

Yeah, that's true. There might be a new trend coming along.

Ferguson

Tropic of Cancer, Lady Chatterly's Lover. Remember fifteen years ago, twenty years ago, a whole lot of books that are published now that they said they would never publish?

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

And it's garbage.

Mason

Okay.

Ferguson

Has much been written about Betye Saar?

Mason

Has much been written about Betye Saar?

Ferguson

Yeah. A lot.

Mason

There have been a lot of articles that kind of repeat the same thing and-

Ferguson

Somebody needs to find you somebody brand-new that they think is good and write about him.

Mason

Yeah, that's important. Well, this leaves us at a good stopping point.

1.15. Tape Number: VIII, Side One August 28, 1991

Mason

Finally today we get to talk about your activities in the black community collecting and documenting black history in Los Angeles. I know I stopped you a couple of times before, but that was so that- I mean, you've done so many things, and I thought it would be better if we talked about different themes. It might be a little less confusing to the reader, even though it takes us out of the chronology a little bit. You mentioned starting the Federation of Black History and Art and your doing shows about black history kind of under the auspices of the Black Arts Council. And you also mentioned meeting an older woman named [Cornelia] Van Blake from Boston who got you interested a little bit in black history and black family. You said she talked about Marcus Garvey, and you learned a lot from her.

Ferguson

Well, now, actually that was later on.

Mason

Okay.

Ferguson

Actually, the woman who really got me interested, her name was Nola Ewing, who worked for the [Los Angeles] County Museum of Art.

Mason

Right.

Ferguson

I had known Nola since I was in my teens, because her husband was a playground director at the Imperial Courts projects in Los Angeles. You probably hear a lot about Imperial Courts now with the gang activity and the crack cocaine and all that.

Mason

Is it in South Central?

Ferguson

South Central. It's in south Los Angeles; it's in Watts.

Mason

In Watts.

Ferguson

I hate to use the word South Central because-

Mason

Yeah, who knows what it describes.

Ferguson

Yeah, they include from Washington [Boulevard]- Wherever there's black people, especially lately- It's in Watts on Imperial [Highway] and Grape Street, Mona Boulevard. It was built during World War II as housing for the defense workers. Then later on, in the 1950s, they rebuilt them and they became projects. Because after World War II all those people were left with semi-skills, and the jobs dried up, and the houses became projects like in every major city, I guess, in the United States, in the inner city.

Mason

What's her husband's name?

Ferguson

Morris Ewing. The Ewings are originally from Louisiana, and both of them are very fine people. Like one of their concerns for the last thirty years has been the education of young black people. They were so dedicated that- A little boy wanted to go to UCLA, so Mr. and Mrs. Ewing caught the bus to work and he took their car to UCLA.

Mason

Oh, my goodness.

Ferguson

So they're that kind of people. They had that kind of commitment.

Mason

He was a relative? Or just-

Ferguson

No.

Mason

-somebody they knew.

Ferguson

Yeah. They've done that. They raised money to send kids to Rome because they were interested in architecture.

Mason

Oh, how nice.

Ferguson

Or to the South to visit black schools. Mrs. Ewing was the first one to lead the fight to get the Dunbar Hotel declared a historical monument and also the [First] AME [African Methodist Episcopal] Church and the Ralph [J.] Bunche home. She also was into getting the William Grant Still home declared a historical monument. Mrs. Ewing was good at rallying people to take care of those kinds of needs in the black community. We ironically ended up with the same institution, being employed, after I grew up. I used to see her every day, you know, and she was always telling me I should get my life involved in something else. "You can do this, Cecil. You don't have to remain a janitor." You can do this, you can do that, you know. And she started me into buying property, because she would always tell me, "The key to it is real estate in America." And the first piece of property I bought she bought with me.

Mason

What was that?

Ferguson

Some land up near Barstow, California. And even when I was unable to make the payment, she made the payments for me so I could maintain the property. She's that kind of individual. But in 1965, after the Watts revolt- I spoke to you about how I had a car accident. So I came out of the hospital. I wanted to get

involved in the community, and all I knew was art, per se, because I started at the museum at an early age. So I could use the art to get back into the community, because at that time, in the 1960s, the black community was a visual community. So if you knew anything about the arts and graphics and all that, you could volunteer, because they needed that kind of expertise. And after we got the Black Arts Council going- Well, Claude Booker, my friend, he more or less didn't want to deal with the history; he just wanted to deal with the art. And I never could separate black art and black history, or African American history and African American art. I couldn't separate the two in my own head, because I thought it was one and the same. The history was written and the art was visual, but I consider artists historians, me personally.

Mason

Did he like different artists than you liked? Or did you like pretty much the same artists but he liked different kinds of work that they produced? I mean, did he go more for like Fred [Frederick J.] Eversley and people like that?

Ferguson

No, we liked the same artists. He just didn't want to deal with the history-you know, with the Harriet Tubmans and the Frederick Douglasses and the written material. He had a point that you could only use up so much energy, right? But I wanted to extend that energy, because I thought it was important. Because most young people get involved in the history of their people much sooner than they get involved in the visual arts. So rather than cause any conflict between Claude and I, I just said I'll form another organization with people who wanted to do that. So we formed the Federation of Black History and Art, Incorporated, with Nola Ewing, Bob Heliton, Jerome Scott, Ruth [G.] Waddy, Harriette [Craft] Pajaud, Mae Rucker.

Mason

I don't know Mae Rucker.

Ferguson

She's dead now. She's one of the charter members. Bernice Potts.

Mason

I don't know Bernice Potts. Is she an artist or just a-?

Ferguson

Just a citizen. And a woman named Jessie [Sayers] Terry, who was still living then, way up in her eighties. We all went over to Jessie Terry's house. I think I mentioned earlier in our conversation about Jessie Terry's house. In the 1920s it's where all the black politicians and people used to meet.

Mason

No, you didn't mention that.

Ferguson

She called it "the kitchen cabinet"-people like Gilbert Lindsay, Ralph Bunche, Augustus [F.] Hawkins. Because in my collection I have her autograph book. She used to have people sign the book when they came in. Some of the people in that book are people like Paul Robeson, Roland Hayes, Augustus Hawkins, the woman who founded [Bethune-]Cookman College. Mary McLeod-

Mason

Oh, Bethune.

Ferguson

Bethune. Those kinds of names are written in there with a date and their hobbies. Mrs. Terry had for a long time been a member of a church at Eighth [Street] and Towne [Avenue], which was an African Methodist Episcopal church where Cecil [L.] Murray is now the pastor. The African Methodist church was always a church that served the needs of black people in the city both religiously, socially, economically, and politically. It was a cultural spot, the cultural building to serve the needs of the African Americans in Los Angeles in the early twentieth century. They had concerts, plays, and the whole nine yards at the African Methodist church. We had a meeting there, and one of our first priorities was to try to save the Methodist church from being destroyed on the edge of town at the time, which was the original site of the African Methodist church. Because they had bought some land over on Hobart [Street] I think, where they are now, and they wanted to move. This church was such a grand church. It was built in the old English architectural style, like churches in England, with the tower and stained glass windows and a built-in organ. Black people just wanted to abandon the church and build a

new one, which is-We're guilty of that, you know. Always trying to find something new rather than preserve what we have or staying where we are and rebuilding. Black people haven't quite matured into that even in 1991. That's why we end up in old neighborhoods abandoned by the so-called white flight. In the inner city, which is probably the ghetto across this country-But anyway, in our constitutional bylaws one of the things we wanted to do was to educate people as much as possible to African American history, and especially African American history of Los Angeles. Because African Americans have a strong history in Los Angeles, but no one had ever documented anything. That's what led me to doing the life of Jessie Terry, the Terry family; the Bruington family, whose daughter became the first black teacher and principal in Los Angeles; the Shackleford family, who are- James Shackleford formed a furniture store in early Los Angeles called Canadian Furniture, in downtown Los Angeles. He used to deliver the furniture on his back. And the Blodgett family, who built some of the first tract homes by a black contractor in Los Angeles called the Blodgett tract. He [Louis Blodgett] also formed the Liberty [Savings and] Loan company, which forty years ago, when they sold it to the Jewish people, was worth \$3 million.

Mason

I wonder if that's the same loan company that gave-what's his name?-[J. Alexander] Somerville money to build a-? Was it around the 1920s?

Ferguson

Yes.

Mason

Maybe that was the same organization that gave Somerville money to build the Dunbar Hotel.

Ferguson

It could have been, because I have a picture somewhere in my collection of breaking ground for the Somerville Hotel, which later on became the Dunbar Hotel. It was originally the Somerville Hotel.

Mason

Right.

Ferguson

It's a picture of [H.] Claude Hudson, Somerville, Louis Blodgett, and they're all standing on this ground with the steam shovel.

Mason

You have the original photograph?

Ferguson

I have an original photograph somewhere. I'll find it.

Mason

Oh, where did you get that photograph from?

Ferguson

Once I became interested and older people became close to me, they would give me things saying that I was going to do something with them. They wanted to take them from their family members when they felt they wouldn't do anything with them. For instance, if I have Bessie Bruington's- I have all her diplomas from USC [University of Southern California] and the [Los Angeles] State Normal School from 1911, 1910, 1912-outside, right? That's how the Federation was born. But in the meantime, aside from the history thing, I kind of became involved with my own community when it was the Watts community. Because in 1966 they decided to do a Watts Summer Festival [of Art], and in that festival was an art component, and I would come down and help in '66, '67, '68. Then, in the early seventies, Claude and I took it over in terms of curating it and the presentation, and we tried to turn it into more of a slick kind of presentation.

Mason

I just wanted to make explicit when you were talking about your talking with or trying to document the history of blacks in Los Angeles, one of the things you did was start an oral history project. How did you conceive of that?

Ferguson

Someone would tell me about someone who was seventy, seventy-five years old who had been in Los Angeles, maybe born in Los Angeles or been here

since a very early age, and I would contact him for interviews, and we'd just sit down for week after week after week and just record them on tape.

Mason

So how many hours would you say on average were the interviews? Were they really in-depth interviews?

Ferguson

As much as I knew at that time about interviewing people- I used my own gut level. I never was trained, you know, but I understood by working in the museum for events, and I'd bring those sort of things out. I knew that just by working at the museum, by reading the labels at the museum. It was a history museum, too, at Exposition Park. So I kind of had an idea about what to ask: Where were you originally from, your family? What were they into? What did you do when you first got to California? That's how I found out that Los Angeles was primarily founded by the African Americans with Spanish surnames.

Mason

Yeah. I think by the sixties, didn't Miriam Matthews publish something on-? She did a lot to make people aware of-

Ferguson

Let's see, Miriam was a scholar, right, and Miriam did a lot, right. But no one has hardly seen Miriam's material. Because I got a lot of my material from Miriam. But no one saw her, you know. She's writing this book, you know. So I'd go over to Miriam, I'd take it out to the community, and I would do shows and I would put the information on labels.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

And I would create the little brochures so that people could read it. Let's say I reached a larger audience than Miriam did.

Mason

What were some of the other members in the Federation doing? I mean what was, for example, Jessie Terry's role?

Ferguson

Jessie Terry was like a spiritual- She had come in from Tennessee as a young woman to marry a man named Woodford H. Terry in Los Angeles, who was a black contractor. He had gotten a bride unseen like a lot of men did in those days. She was a schoolteacher in Tennessee, and upon reaching Los Angeles she fell right into being a vital part of the community, teaching. And she formed the first YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association] in Los Angeles, black YWCA.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

They called it the Young Men's Christian Association, or YMCA, but they're racist.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

How can they be Christian when they're racist, right?

Mason

It's an American tradition. [laughter]

Ferguson

So she was instrumental in forming that. She got involved in a Sojourner Truth Home with James Shackleford's wife. Her name was Dora [Shackleford]. And the Sojourner Truth Home is still a vibrant part of the community right now at Washington [Boulevard] and Western [Avenue]. It was in East L.A. when it was beginning. But what they would do was create housing like, say, for a young woman who came to Los Angeles by herself seeking a better way of life and had no place to live. They would put her up at the Sojourner Truth Home for

girls. Or if a girl got pregnant and that sort of thing, they had a house and shelter for her, for those individuals.

Mason

Okay. What were some of the activities of the other members? Were they also involved in oral history projects?

Ferguson

Well, Harriet was Bill [William] Pajaud's first wife. She worked for the library. So she would be very instrumental in writing. She helped me write the brochures, do the labels. Mae Rucker was good at public relations. We all had jobs. Bob Heliton was a very fine graphic artist. He created our award, which was the Biddy Mason Award.

Mason

Okay. As you were doing your research, what sort of surprised you most about the information that you found out? Was it just the overall fact that there was so much history and that it hadn't been uncovered? Or are there any other specific facts or incidents that you found out about black history in Los Angeles that really surprised you or really interested you or you got really excited about?

Ferguson

Well, it all surprised me, because I came from the South, right? Well, they consider it from the South in terms of mentality; I don't know about location. But my folks were from Oklahoma and Texas. And about that time, I finished high school and had gone to junior college some and had never heard of any of this information. And I was kind of appalled at the fact of the important role that black people had played in California, yet still there was no historical account of that contribution. I'll tell you, that's what really drove me to spend hours and hours trying to get the history from pioneer citizens, because usually when a person is 70 years old you can get 150 years worth of history, because they will be able to tell you stories their grandparents told them.

Mason

Right.

Ferguson

An oral history is very good at getting to some of this history. And sometimes you have to do it over and over, because as people get older they forget dates. So you might talk to them today and they'll say 1880, and tomorrow it will be 1879. But the events are what's important. I found out later on that all these people were peers at that point, so I began to know that some of these things were true, because when I interviewed others they would tell the same stories almost verbatim, and I felt good about that. I would always do a little pamphlet of some sort and write a little something about it with my poor writing skills. But I felt like something was better than nothing. And anybody else who wanted to go further on wouldn't have to start at day one like I did. They could get my little pamphlet and have a starting point, because I'd have certain key things in it like birthdays and events. Again, I knew how to do that because I worked at the museum. I had read their labels and things. I educated myself as to what was important.

Mason

So when you said the main goal was to use this material to educate the community, had you always envisioned putting on exhibitions in the community of the material that you uncovered? Or you were just going to document things and give it to a university?

Ferguson

The ultimate vision was to have our own center, see, because later on I found out that blacks historically had given white institutions material which got buried, which never got seen. And right here in Los Angeles, a lot of blacks have given UCLA, USC, museums, very vital information as to our culture and as to our being in California. You understand that a lot of this material is in storerooms and boxes someplace, because the racist institutions never meant to show them. They want to keep on perpetuating the lie that Los Angeles was founded one way when it wasn't or giving the impression that the African American was a buffoon, three-fifths human, incapable of reading and writing.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

I was talking to a man from a newspaper yesterday-he's the editor of the *Watts Times* newspaper, one of those free newspapers they hand out-and he was telling me the real truth about Teddy Roosevelt and San Juan Hill, when Teddy Roosevelt was pulling his charge up the hill at San Juan in the war with Cuba, that actually the Buffalo Soldiers that were the people with Teddy Roosevelt during that campaign were a black outfit out of Arkansas, the Tenth Cavalry.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

The true story is that Theodore Roosevelt had been captured by the Cubans, and these black soldiers rescued him.

Mason

Oh. He had been doing research himself?

Ferguson

Yeah. See, a lot of times in the Western world, the Western world has a tendency not to destroy anything, they just hide it. They have this information-

Mason

Absorb it.

Ferguson

They hide it.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

And knowing that their scholars have access to it- I'm sure they've got loads of black history at UCLA. But if you don't know what to go look for, if you're not a

scholar, it will remain there. And that's probably true of every university in America.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

The true story of Columbus. The true story of America. Black people were the first industry that America had. It's led to the industrial age.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

And when you come and look at it, we're still being held hostage in this country. We've never been free. Not really. Even when it comes down to- Many black people used to shoot their guns on January 1, not because of the new year, but because that's when the Emancipation Proclamation was signed.

Mason

Oh.

Ferguson

But they didn't pass that on to their young people, so the young people think it's celebrating the new year. And now they go pop the guns because of-

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

And many black families do firecrackers.

Mason

Yeah. Was it something that your family did? Is that something that they passed on to you? Or did you have to rediscover it?

Ferguson

Well, see, later on- You know how you grow up. You go through this part of your life when you're really not interested. When you're young you're interested in listening to everything the old folks say because you're nosey and you want to be grown. Then at some point you reject all that, right? And then, when I became active again- Because I remember a lot of stories my folks told me. The stories came back. A lot of stories my folks told me came back. The oral history of the African American I probably have in minutes- Let's see. Maybe the last forty years. Up until that point, oral history was intact in the black community. There were very few people born before World War II, very few black people, who don't know something about their history if they're still living. It's just that they didn't pass on that tradition to the young people. And the exploiting of integration has a lot to do with that.

Mason

You mean in terms of not getting it through school either, not getting black history?

Ferguson

By getting fooled that you had no need for that.

Mason

Oh, I see. So when you started to do research on black history, what were some of the sources that you went to besides just talking to people? Did you go to the public library or-?

Ferguson

One time the Los Angeles Public Library in conjunction with the *Los Angeles Times* was going to do the history of Los Angeles at the Arco center downtown, and they had excluded black people and Latinos.

Mason

When was this?

Ferguson

Nineteen sixty-something. And after they were going to deal with that in 1900, 1910, when the white, the Victorian age came-you know, the long dresses, the big hats for the Europeans, the middle-class Europeans and the chariots, you know- I guess it was motivated by French culture, that whole Victorian age. I know it's European. The black community was outraged, so they decided that they would include black people and Latinos. So they contacted me. Someone said they knew a young man who was doing that. I met with them. And this very liberal white woman, being liberal, said, "You could use the library to get some of the information." And a man who worked for the library, he volunteered to come in after hours and stay with me while I looked for information on the African American in Los Angeles. And after two or three months of going through almost everything-microfilm-nothing. It was like the blacks didn't exist. Finally, we were going through the microfilms of the *L.A. Times*, and I found a special magazine that was used as an insert in the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper dated Sunday, February 12, 1912, which was Abraham Lincoln's birthday, and they had dedicated the magazine to black mansions in Pasadena.

Mason

Let's pause for a second. [tape recorder off]

Ferguson

Where was I? Oh, the "colored" page. Of course, I wanted to use that, and they didn't want me to use it, because they didn't want to believe the *Times* ever had a "colored" page. They didn't want to write it. They wanted to xerox it, but it wouldn't have the same impact. But me, with an artist's mentality, I knew how important it would be to show a "colored" page in 1912, right? It would be very important for the black community.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

Although the material in the "colored" page was racist, right.

Mason

What was it?

Ferguson

It showed a white man riding on a horse and some black kids running behind him saying that the Negroes are free, and inside were black mansions in Pasadena, which is positive, part of the American dream. But on the front page is a very racist pictorial picture, right? It wouldn't be racist to white people; they probably thought that was cute.

Mason

Little pickaninnies.

Ferguson

They're running behind him, right? They probably thought that was a great thing to do. So nothing. So finally this guy-his name was Tom Owen-said, "You know, there used to be a librarian who worked here for years; she might have some material," which led me to Miriam Matthews, who told me about the book *[Negro] Trail Blazers [of California]* done by Delilah Beasley and the *Memoirs of a Black Newspaper* done by Charlotta Bass, which was the history of the *California Eagle*'s first forty years.

Mason

So the library had given all the material, the black material, to Miriam Matthews?

Ferguson

She had it. Miriam has always been an active person-right?-so Miriam- She probably purchased these two books early on in her career, and she still had her copies.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

She had copies, but the library didn't have any copies.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

And the black community published a book called *Who's Who in Black Los Angeles* in 1948. I had seen the book because Miriam had the book. The Bruingtons had a book, the Terrys had a book, and the Shacklefords had a book. So all these progressive people still had their books. But now I have a book. I found mine in a junk shop and bought it for a quarter, because I knew what it looked like. Every time I went into the junk shop, I would look for *Trailblazers*, *Memoirs*, and another book, and I found all three of them, which are in my collection now. But I got the Bruingtons' book because she gave it to me before she died.

Mason

Okay.

Ferguson

Of course, I do the history on the side. Then I've gotten involved in the art shows too, which was my first expertise, in which I'm more about-

Mason

Well, what happened-?

Ferguson

See, because prior to- The revolt was in '65, and I started working in the museum in '48. So by the time the revolt came, I had almost seventeen years in a museum, right?

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

So where my real expertise had come from was from working on the exhibit that they had given at Will Rogers Park for the site of the Watts Summer Festival, and they would give us a gymnasium for two weeks to do our art gallery in there.

Mason

I just wanted to ask you, what happened to the Arco show with the L.A. Public Library?

Ferguson

Oh, I went around. I did a good show. I found enough material because Miriam led me to other black people. And with my museum expertise, I was able to go in homes and gather different things of interest from their homes, like Mrs. Bruington's first report card, 1906. I mounted it. Or Mr. Shackleford's budget when he was in college. He kept a little card: ironing, ten cents; meals, five cents a week. Which was very interesting.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

And Mrs. Terry's wedding license when they referred to her as an Ethiopian when she was an African American.

Mason

Ethiopian? Were they-?

Ferguson

Or Mrs. Terry was a member of Mary McLeod Bethune's organization [National Council of Negro Women] during World War II when black women couldn't join a very racist organization with the white women doing the war effort, so they were forced to create their own organization. I mean, that's madness that black people have to almost volunteer to die for this country, or to serve this country, this very racist country. The USO [United Service Organization] for instance. The federal government provided no USOs for the black soldiers. The black community did that, and they were sent here, because black soldiers couldn't go to the white union. So-

Mason

Yeah, that would be potentially upsetting.

Ferguson

See, all that kind of history- After World War II they shoved it under the rug, so young black people never knew about that, right? So what happens when a young black person is born? He goes to school, he enjoys certain things, he thinks that he always had that privilege, because he has no sense of his history.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

And then they keep on starting all over again after every two or three generations. It's from day one. And that's not necessary, because other people have set the tone. That's why I'm doing the 1960s and one reason why the [Black] Panthers and some of the other groups grew up out of that period. That's why they didn't last, because they thought the whole thing started with them and their commitment to freedom and equality and justice. Because many of them had never heard of Nat Turner or Sojourner Truth or Harriet Tubman, A. Philip Randolph, or [William E. B.] Du Bois, Booker T. Washington. They'd never heard of those people. Or Frederick Douglass or Paul Robeson or Marcus Garvey. I mean, you could go on and on and on. They only know of people during their time. So they thought that this whole thing started with them, and all black people that went before them were "Uncle Toms." So I used to make a blanket statement at all my shows that the revolution was started when the first black man was brought to America as a slave, because no man wants to be owned by another man. And I used to just put that statement out for them to read. Of course it drew a lot of dialogue, because they wondered what I meant. And I just followed it up by saying, "Until the American educational system includes the contributions of all its citizens, then African Americans will have to direct themselves in the area where that system fails." I put that up everywhere I did a show. When white people read that, they understood.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

No problem. Lots of blacks understood too, but too many didn't understand. And I still do that. I put it up. I still make that statement in a lot of the things that I'm involved in publishing. I'm planning to do a newspaper thing on black festivals in Los Angeles.

Mason

You're going to do an article in a newspaper?

Ferguson

A whole newspaper edition, a little sew-in, like a tabloid. But they're going to give us a whole paper for that, the *Watts Times*. It all makes a statement.

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Mason

You were talking about when you first started to do shows at the Watts Festival.

Ferguson

Well, Claude Booker and I, since we had this expertise at the County Art Museum of doing the shows in a certain kind of way, we thought that we would create a museum space inside a gymnasium. So we went to the Junior Chamber of Commerce and got them to purchase some modules for us, have some modules built, which means they were just four-by-eight-foot walls that you could put together in different kinds of configurations that we designed.

Mason

You mean you were trying to do it the same way that you had done it at the museum? Or you were trying to do it differently from the museum?

Ferguson

Differently but using that same expertise in the presentation. The whole revolt grew out of black people dealing with things that they already had. Like they would get hundreds of pieces of plywood and they would just put them up unpainted and made that become part of a patina, become part of the "funkadelic" kind of way of portraying black art. And, of course, with me and Claude's training, we could exhibit art and make a better presentation. That

was the way to go. They were putting you in a pigeonhole by doing it in that way, and why should you do it that way when you had people working there who had expertise and could do it another way. Which was true, right? We created a whole new interest, because we knew all the slick ways of doing exhibits from working over there in the "plantation house."

Mason

What kinds of ways did you want to depart from what you learned at the museum? Because I think it was in the last session that you mentioned that you felt, for example, that black scholars shouldn't rely on a lot of the history and things that they learned from white institutions and that they should try to evolve a kind of separate way of evaluating black art.

Ferguson

No, I didn't make that statement. If I did, I didn't mean to make that statement. I said some of the people who write about our visual arts need not to always find some European artist to use as an influence but to use our own people or past artists as an influence. If all these other people like Picasso and Braque, and all these people, if they were influenced by African art, which that whole school of the Bauhaus school came out of, why not us, right? So rather than, if I'm a painter, say that I was influenced by this painter, just supposing they're trying to look to find some of my art that suggested that Joseph Stella- When I go to a [Sam] Gilliam [Jr.] - If Gilliam and Joseph Stella initially drew theirs from African- You hear what I'm saying? So why give all this credence to Stella when you can give it to Gilliam, who's black, right? You never see white curators say that white painters are influenced by black painters.

Mason

Yeah, that's unusual. But you had said, though, that when you started to look at black art that you disregarded what you had learned about evaluating European American art, that you had to put that aside and develop a different approach to- I guess what I'm asking is, obviously the Los Angeles County Museum had problems in relating to the African American community. What did you do differently at the Watts festivals in order to help integrate the arts into the community? Or did you feel you had to do anything at all, that people were really receptive to the art anyway?

Ferguson

I had to educate myself, because I had spent years listening to white scholars validate European American art, which is really European to me. And they get you into that mind-set. They say "expressionist," and they tell you what it is; "abstraction," and that's what it is, right? So in order for me to get to look at the art of my people, I had to kind of try to throw it out of my mind and try to get a whole new set of artistic values and see the whole African influence in the African people from Africa, right? Not go to the Europeans, then to Africa, then back to me.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

And I think I was motivated by that because I used to see curators take obscure artists and make them famous. Not obscure because they had no talent, because the talent is always there-right?-but to point out some of this. And curators had gone on and looked at- Especially when I found out in van Gogh's whole life he never sold a painting and that his brother Theo used to buy them and say that somebody had bought them.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

Now they're taking another look at African American art and Spanish art and art of other people because the European market is drying up in terms of affordable art, so now they're going to try to create a whole new market of- But these same people were there. Like David Hammons, for instance. David's doing nothing different now than he did twenty years ago. He's matured as an artist, but so have the mainstream artists, hopefully. Hopefully the [Robert] Rauschenbergs and [Roy] Lichtensteins and Frank Stellas aren't at the same place they were twenty years ago. You know what I'm saying? And I used to hear curators, white curators, say that, "Maybe in ten years the Afro-American artist will be caught up to where the mainstream artist is."

Mason

Caught up! [laughter] Yeah.

Ferguson

Which will be a never-ending catching up. Because if you catch up ten years, that means they've got ten more years on you, so you've got to go another ten years.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

So what happens is you never catch up.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

And Claude and I were aware of that early. And then, when they had the art annual at the County Art Museum, it was a juried show, and one of my jobs was to carry the paintings in front of the jurors, and I would hear these people discuss art, which gave me an education within itself. When they finally got rid of the Watts Summer Festival, that art exhibit there in the park had become the biggest black art exhibit in America in terms of participation, in terms of quality. If they had allowed it to go on, now it would probably have been one of the major exhibitions in the United States and also a training ground for our young people who want to be into the arts, because all of that would create more curator-type people. And I think that they knew that, so they just cut it off.

Mason

You're talking about the funding?

Ferguson

The funding, yeah. Because one of the mistakes that was made in that period was that the African American got the attitude that it probably would never stop, that it was a bottomless pit, right?

Mason

It's a rich country.

Ferguson

Yeah. So they controlled your program. And any time they wanted to destroy it, they'd just cut off the funding. The paint company no longer gave paint. The lumber companies no longer gave plywood. You didn't deal with any institutions. So when the festival was over and the art show was over, you had no place to store the lumber. So next year you had to beg all over again. There were no warehouses. They didn't create any way of continuing the programs after the funding dried up.

Mason

Yeah. So you said that that was a deliberate act on the part of the government to kind of dissipate-

Ferguson

They knew!

Mason

After the riots, they just wanted to keep people quiet basically.

Ferguson

For a while, yeah.

Mason

And that is pretty much what happened?

Ferguson

They were put into a program designed to fail. They would give you no money to build an institution because they knew institutions were long gone. They'd give you some money to do an exhibition, because when an exhibition was over, it was over. You caught hell getting money to produce catalogs, books, even to document that.

Mason

They wouldn't give you money.

Ferguson

They wouldn't give you money for that, because that way [they knew] you could build an institution within their institutions. It would create problems for their institutions.

Mason

Were there, after those funds dried up-? I guess you're talking about CETA [Comprehensive Employment and Training Act], the CETA plan.

Ferguson

Yeah, Model City Program and all those programs, right.

Mason

Okay. Was there anything that came afterwards to supplement the work that had gone on?

Ferguson

Lost funding, because pretty soon the government funding went into the corporation funding.

Mason

Yeah, the [Ronald W.] Reagan years.

Ferguson

Yeah, and then they had more control. It's the same people. If it's the government or rich families or corporations, it's the same white people who control them. It's just a way of doing the funds.

Mason

Okay.

Ferguson

So Claude and I, we'd just go do art exhibits anywhere we could: shopping malls, schools, alleys, fields, tennis courts, anyplace that we could get a space. And the modules served a purpose. So the modules that they built for

the Watts Summer Festival, we'd use those modules all year round. And finally, when the city of Los Angeles decided "We aren't going to store the modules any longer" and I had no place to put them, I gave them to the Dunbar, right. They were pretty beat up by then, but the Dunbar used them until, say, seven or eight years ago. They were still there in the Dunbar, because I saw them. While it was raining, the Dunbar leaked.

Mason

Yeah, it was in pretty bad shape.

Ferguson

And then the Black Arts Council really went into like- We would get people from all over the country who were experts in certain fields to lecture. We would try to get artists to lecture. And we used auditoriums like the Golden State [Mutual] Life Insurance Company auditorium and some churches in the city that were progressive. And it was a good program. We had a large membership, but it was hard to-

Mason

Make everybody work.

Ferguson

Yeah. You know, the work boiled down to a handful of people. They'd burn you out because of the lack of building an institution. Now, if we could have gotten some institutions, we could have built it better and faster.

Mason

So on your résumé you have a number of community shows and exhibits that in the eighties- For example, in '81, the *Contribution of Women to Watts* at the Watts Towers [Arts Center], and at the William Grant Still [Community] Arts Center in '83 you have the history of blacks in films [*Blacks in Films*]. How did you get support to do that?

Ferguson

Well, I'm from Watts, right? I lived there since 1939, so I knew something about the history of that community, and I knew certain people, women there, who played an important part in my life growing up, like some of the

doctors and other people like Mrs. Ewing and other people who lived there, and I decided to do an exhibit. A real fine lady who came at the turn of the century and had created a whole yard full of exotic plants-you know, orchids and everything-right down in Watts near the projects- She planted some trees in her yard, and by the time I did that show, these trees, they grew from little bitty plants to over fifty feet high. So in my exhibit in Watts, I built a greenhouse inside the gallery and brought some of those plants to the community rather than the community having to go to her house. I just built a greenhouse. Me and John Outterbridge built a greenhouse inside of the Watts Towers, getting no money from the city. We hustled the wood and just did it.

Mason

Yeah. Tell me about your black doll exhibition [*African American Dolls*] in '82 at the William Grant Still Arts Center.

Ferguson

Well, the director of the William Grant Still Arts Center was a man named Hakim Ali. And I had seen some programs and been involved in some situations where young black women liked white dolls better than they did dolls of their-

Mason

Yeah, supposedly somebody did a sociological study about the South.

Ferguson

And that bothered me, right? So I wanted to do something to help deteriorate that, so I said, "Let's do a black doll show"-but original dolls, not commercial dolls. Not a white doll painted black, you know, with a thin nose and thin lips and it's just got some paint on it. So I went into the rag dolls, and I found out that people all over the country had been doing it for years. Like one lady in Buffalo, they call her the dollmaker of America, right? She sent out all her rag dolls that she made of black people. An older woman. And each doll had its own character. It wasn't a repetition. She loaned me a lot of her dolls. That doll show had its eleventh year this year. But it grew into a commercial kind of venture, right.

Mason

How so?

Ferguson

Because they wanted to institute like a black doll, and then it became an industry too. People began to sell dolls, and it lost its cultural meaning. So for that reason I won't have anything to do with it anymore. Now they've asked me to do the eleventh one, and I'll reinstitute that same theme as it was ten years ago, and I'll have some problems, because people- People used to use it for a showcase for their dolls, and they've become just like the rest of the money changers, although they're black, just to make a buck, and I'm not into that. So I'll have some problems. If it's not an original doll, then it can't be in my show if I do it.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

And, you know, John Outterbridge got into dolls, those kinds of dolls that I was looking for.

Mason

Yeah. How did you research this show in '83 of the history of blacks in film? Because there has been a lot of interest in that lately, and people-

Ferguson

Again, Hakim Ali. Hakim was the kind of a director where he knew some kinds of things that he wanted to do but he didn't know how to implement them, and I was the person who would always implement them for him. So he came up with the idea of blacks in film, because Hakim liked the glamour of Hollywood and that crap-right?-and I wasn't into that. But I was into blacks in films. And Hakim knew that I worked at the museum, and he also knows that the museum had a very fine cinema program run by Ron Hayworth and that I probably could get material from Ron to do the exhibit. And I probably could have, because Ron and I were close. But I didn't want to do that. I told him I would do the exhibit under one condition: that the collectors and all the photographs or whatever, memorabilia, had to come from the black community itself. I didn't want any white people in the exhibit-not for any

racist point of view, okay, but I wanted all the history and artifacts to come from the black community because I thought it was important historically. For instance, a very fine collector in Los Angeles named Mary Kimbrough, whose grandfather founded the Golden State Life Insurance Company-a man named [William] Nickerson [Jr.], her paternal grandfather on her mother's side- A very fine woman. I love her. An actress from the sixties. Well, she had a collection of some of those things. Like she had a picture of Hattie McDaniel along with Vivien Leigh. So she and I got in a problem, because I had to have a picture of Hattie McDaniel without Vivien Leigh. And me and Wes Gale had some problems, because Wes Gale- If you don't know Wes Gale, you will know him. He's been around for years. He's worked in movies; he worked on all the Tarzan films. I went through the Tarzan trip myself as a youngster. "Me Tarzan, you Jane." I went through that, right? Wes and I were real close. And although I know it was a very important part of the African American's history in film in Hollywood, I didn't want to deal with that. I didn't want to deal with Tarzan. I wanted to deal with Paul Robeson, Clarence Muse, *Cabin in the Sky*, *Stormy Weather*, *Green Pastures*, and those kinds of films. And I found them. It took me months, but I found them. I wanted to deal with Oscar Micheaux, because he was an original black filmmaker. He made some terrible films in relationship to the black community because he borrowed white themes and just made them into black pictures, like *Scar of Shame*.

Mason

Where did you find these films? Because a lot of people were saying- Well, a lot of them just aren't preserved, the films that-

Ferguson

Well, as I say, most of our history is in people's closets and homes, you know.

Mason

But I mean the actual film itself.

Ferguson

Well, it wasn't film; it was photographs.

Mason

Oh, photographs.

Ferguson

And posters.

Mason

I see.

Ferguson

Well, by this time, my name was out there in the community. For instance, I met a woman named Delilah, whose grandmother was Fay Jackson, who had done a little magazine in the 1920s, but more importantly she had-what do you call it-a card to get you into the films as a reporter.

Mason

Oh, yeah.

Ferguson

She was one of the only black people who could-

Mason

It's a press pass?

Ferguson

A press pass, that's right. It was her grandmother. She was dead, and I met her granddaughter, who said she had a lot of memoirs of her grandmother that were in the basement, and would I come over and look at them. I came over and took them out of the basement and got all the cobwebs off of them, and it was amazing, because this woman was thorough. She had photographs with labels on them, information. It was like finding a gold mine. And she also was a reporter; she had covered the coronation of King George in 1936, and she had information. And the other things that were there, like her desk from the 1920s, her typewriter from the 1920s- She also covered the other arts, divas, rich-and-powerfultype singers, blacks, early ones. She had all that information. It was just there, and I took it out and matted it, framed it, put the information up, and did a whole- She was a whole part of my exhibit. Then I found a man who was collecting black film posters, found him out in Palos Verdes. And then Wes Gale, he had been in Hollywood so long that he had a lot of popular stuff

that I got from his collection, from which I was able to put together an exhibit. And when black Hollywood found out I was doing that, then things started coming.

Mason

You said they started coming?

Ferguson

They started bringing stuff to me.

Mason

Oh, yeah.

Ferguson

For instance, Sandra Sharpe- Do you know Sandra Sharpe? She's a poetess, but she also made all those films called blacksploitation films during the sixties.

Mason

Oh, yeah.

Ferguson

She had a lot of stuff. She had a lot of stuff on Sidney Poitier and Bill Cosby. Well, a lot of Sidney Poitier's films are made with white people, right. So she brought me a stack of photographs about this high. I was trying to select stuff to go in my show, and I'd go, "Out, out, out, out!" And then I came on *Paris Blues*, a little picture of *Paris Blues* with Paul Newman and Sidney Poitier and Diahann Carroll. Then I found a photograph of Diahann Carroll and Sidney Poitier: "In!" I found one with that girl he made that picture with about Ivy; it was something about *House of Ivy* or something [*For Love of Ivy*]. "In!" A *Raisin in the Sun*. They had no white people in the show. Not for a racist point of view. The name of my show was *Blacks in Films*-right?-and I wanted to keep it that way. The posters, a lot of posters from when they used to show black pictures in black neighborhoods and they would make posters or note cards advertising the picture, I found some of those. And then I was able to do a catalog.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

Because I'd been talking about a catalog for years and years. Finally I got money to do that, to document that.

Mason

Yeah. How did you get the money? Where did the money come from?

Ferguson

Aurelia [Brooks] was part of that money, Aurelia Brooks. And Sandra Sharpe was instrumental, because Sandra was sitting there, and after going, "Out, out, out" through all her photographs, and I would put in somebody black, finally, after about an hour, an hour and a half, she said to me, "Well, I gather, Cecil, that you don't want any white people in your show." [laughter]

Mason

Where did you ever get that idea? Yeah.

Ferguson

And she tried to show me how if it wasn't for whites we wouldn't- The doors were shut in Hollywood. And I wasn't interested in that. Sandra and I are very good friends now. In fact, she wrote a poem to me at the end of that show, a very fine poem. She's a poet.

Mason

Yeah. Did you take the show around at all?

Ferguson

No, it never traveled. But out of it we got some of our first money for our funding for the Friends of the William Grant Still Center, which was a support group. And finally we gave a fund-raiser at the- You know the L.A. film thing there on Wilshire Boulevard [Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Samuel Goldwyn Theater] where they-

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

And we [showed] the first run, *The Return of the Jedi*. What's the name of it? Which I really, really objected to, because I can't stand the Jedi, because I think Jedi is just an updated Tarzan.

Mason

Star Wars?

Ferguson

Jedi. It was named *Return of the Jedi*. Have you seen that one?

Mason

You mean one of the versions of *Star Wars*?

Ferguson

One of the first ones that [Steven] Spielberg made, yeah. Something about a Jedi. It wasn't anything but an updated Tarzan to me, with your blonde, naked, you know, and the funny people rescue the whole King Kong.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

I was amazed that black people turned out in droves to see that. And we raised a lot of money. But more importantly, on the show was a Jewish fellow who had collected films of early jazz artists. One of the only films made of Charlie Parker he owns, and we aired that, which made it all right for me. But they can have *Jedi*. But we raised \$25,000 for our purpose. Black people came because it was on Wilshire Boulevard.

Mason

Yeah. But they came to your other shows too, didn't they? At the Watts Towers?

Ferguson

They never left any money, though. Like the film thing attracts a thousand people in that little center. I knew they were coming, because by then I knew the mentality of the black community. I'm not putting it down, but I knew how they had come to the museum with those invitations, just the idea that they could come now and be invited. And they came to that show. So I rented a tent, paid \$600 for a tent to go out in the back, filled the tent up, filled the center up. People couldn't move. It was a wedge, right? And it was nice in terms of participation. But after all those people-a thousand people came through there-in the donation box was \$80.

Mason

Wow.

Ferguson

A lot of Hollywood-type people came with their furs and- Playacting. But then, again, I understand. It's just a part of our- You know, we're talking about a people invested with two hundred years of history of slavery. And what is time? Because we never know how long those Europeans wanted to escape Europe to come to America. We only know the initial history. They might have spent five hundred years to get the boat.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

So I do understand. But it doesn't make it any less painful that we don't support our own, when they paid \$25 to go on Wilshire to see *Jedi* and wouldn't put a buck in the donation box to an institution that serves their community and was named after one of their truly great artists, William Grant Still. And I probably would be one of those same people if I hadn't been fortunate enough to go to a museum as a part of my cultural growth.

Mason

Yeah. How do you think we can change that? How do you think we can-?

Ferguson

Keep creating institutions and keep creating- I think it's better now. I can remember thirty years ago, you'd go into a black home, you'd see hardly any black images. The calendars would be white. There would be a picture of the Kennedy brothers.

Mason

Yeah. Jesus Christ.

Ferguson

Jesus Christ. [Franklin D.] Roosevelt.

Mason

Maybe Martin Luther King [Jr.].

Ferguson

Yeah. That's disappearing. I think it's a good sign, though. If it's a photograph or a reproduction or note card of original art, I think that's the first step into creating markets for the people who are part of our culture. We don't need other people to buy our art; we'll just buy it ourselves. We represent the richest country in this world in terms of the consumer. The money that we spend, we just- It's just that our money isn't always directed to the same culture; it's directed toward the enhancement and the production of other people's culture. But we don't build any institutions, right? We don't even build churches anymore, big churches. We move into abandoned Caucasian churches as the community changes and assume their note or pay three times as much as they originally paid for the building instead of building our own institutions. Well, that came out of the sixties, and we've got to get past the sixties. And we will! We're only talking about twenty-five years. We'll get past that as soon as our middle class levels off and gets used to Rolls Royces and Mercedes Benzes. And they will. And no, it isn't going to matter what kind of car they've got or where they live; Americans still aren't going to accept us as a whole race of people. They'll accept certain individuals until times of crisis. I was watching *Donahue* yesterday. You know the problem in Milwaukee now? Have you been following that?

Mason

No. Milwaukee with the-?

Ferguson

Blacks in Milwaukee and the condition- This guy is saying if they don't clean it up by '95, we'll start a war, and he has set himself up as a leader like Malcolm X.

Mason

Oh, I haven't heard about this.

Ferguson

Oh, you haven't heard about that?

Mason

No.

Ferguson

They had him on *Donahue* yesterday. And one white woman got up and said, "I just don't know what you're talking about. I teach my kids to love everybody, because Martin Luther King said we should all be brothers. And I tell my kids all the time that the only difference between white people and black people is that God left black people in the oven longer." And you can multiply that kind of thinking. See, white people that have taken Martin Luther King's ideas and only look at one part of Martin Luther King, and disregard the other, the revolutionary part, they don't adjust themselves to that. And it's hard to love everybody if your kids are dying of starvation and crack and have nowhere to live. You know, it's hard to love everybody.

Mason

You did two shows about Martin Luther King in 1986. So what did you-?

Ferguson

Well, one show I did called *Images of King*, because they always contact me in February about doing something for Black History Month. And black history and art should be year-round, not just in February. But I was around the studios earlier on watching artists do portraits of King, and I never saw two look alike. I very seldom see any one that was good or a true likeness of King. From some very fine artists, right?

Mason

Why do you think that-?

Ferguson

And I started wondering about that.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

It almost became a spiritual thing to me, that he really wasn't a human being. That's why he was hard to capture. And it bothered me, right? Because I've seen some horrible Kings-they didn't even look like the man-from some very reputable black artists who I know weren't intentionally- I could see that coming from white artists. But a lot of black artists I know wouldn't do that intentionally.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

So I feel there was a problem with King. So, since I had seen so many different Kings, I decided to do an exhibit on *Images of King* where I show every artist's image of King. It just exponentially grew out of my head and turned out to be a very dynamic exhibition, because here I had fifty Kings, and they all looked different.

Mason

Yeah. So were you able to draw any conclusions about how artists and how people had seen-?

Ferguson

Well, I came to two conclusions at this point. One conclusion, I like to think of King as being a man not of this world, right. I think certain men are born; I think certain men are created. I really think that Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and [Marcus] Garvey are saints. So you have problems with that,

because Marcus Garvey isn't as hard to paint as Malcolm and King. Malcolm and King both are very hard for some reason. One day I was down in Louisiana talking to my brother [David Ferguson] about King. He had painted him a couple of times, right? My brother can draw. And he said King has a very baby face. He doesn't have any lines in his face, and it's hard to get the character. He said the photographs of King were all taken at different times, so all the photographs are different.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

And then he said that if King had sat for some of these artists, it might have made a difference. And then he said a whole lot of white people photographed King too, and they didn't try to do their best job of capturing him; it was just for sensationalism in the newspaper. Which made some sense to me. I'll keep on looking for the right King.

Mason

Yeah. So you have an idea what it might look like, but you just haven't seen it?

Ferguson

I've seen him before.

Mason

No, I mean the image that you think is representative.

Ferguson

Yeah, I have it in my own head what I think it should look like. You know, after forty years of looking at art, after all this time looking at art, I can do a whole show and never look at it. It can be a hundred pieces and I'll never look at it. You know, I'm doing the show.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

But if there are two or three pieces in there that really stand out, I'll focus on them automatically. I mean, it just comes naturally. You know what I'm saying?

Mason

Yeah.

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Mason

We haven't met for a long time, and I know a lot of things have happened. But we can talk about some of the things that we've left out so far, and then you can add whatever you think is important. There were three things: your curating the show in 1990 at LACMA [Los Angeles County Museum of Art]; we haven't talked about your position or your work on panels to choose public art, like for the new blue lines and the red lines, and we haven't talked about your work at [California State University] Dominguez Hills.

Ferguson

The Metro Rail.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

Yeah. Did I talk about the first black exhibit called [*Los Angeles, 1972: A Panorama [of Black Artists]*]?

Mason

Yeah, we talked about that. We talked about most of the shows at LACMA. I know it's been so long, but we were trying to go sort of chronologically. Yeah, we talked about the Black Arts Council and their role in trying to open up the museum and trying to get black curators for the show and things like that.

Ferguson

Well, in about 1984 and '85, I had become real involved in the African American community, and the museum kind of just turned me back, because I

was away a lot doing exhibits at the Watts Towers [Arts Center] with John Outterbridge. Because we have to realize that the art centers in this city are not like typical art centers, in the black community. The black community is unlike the majority culture, because the majority culture can have centers that have kids come in and paint little paintings and put little aprons on and become involved at the art center. But the art centers in the black community-such as the William Grant Still [Community Arts] Center and the Watts Towers-additionally to the art classes and dance classes and music classes, they also act as cultural institutions because of the void left by the majority culture institutions not to include the contributions of the African American. So these centers also become museum-type centers because of the eradication of black contributions. For instance, take our Watts Towers: There are no other institutions in the city that are going to do exhibits like *From King to Mandela*. There are no other institutions that are going to do the stereotype art that came out of the early 1900s, when America built a whole industry with stereotyped art-the Aunt Jemima's syrup, the Uncle Ben's rice, the Gold Dust soap, the sheet music that came out of that era-

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

And the Valentine's [Day] cards. They built a whole industry with racism. It's so sad how racism is so deeply rooted in American history that one European type would send his girlfriend a Valentine's card with a stereotype black, and in dialect, on Valentine's.

Mason

Because it's so cute.

Ferguson

Yeah, because it's so cute, right. I mean, it's amazing how they would buy sheet music with a couple of stereotype blacks with big lips and kinky hair on the face of the sheet music. They'd still buy it and take it home. Or how they'd have a very stereotyped-looking African American man standing out on the front of their lawn with a jockey cap on and felt safe with that, the image,

unlike-And those institutions in the black community under the leadership of John Outterbridge and Hakim Ali and now James Burke, they fill the void left with the majority institutions.

Mason

By majority institutions, it sounds like you're including the California Afro-American Museum, because you seem to be saying that they would also kind of shy away from more controversial exhibits because of their state funding, I guess.

Ferguson

I don't think it's because of the state funding. Because I think people will go to the- The people, taxpayers, control institutions. I think it's some people who run those institutions who have a problem with their own blackness. For instance, the Afro Museum is called Afro Museum rather than African Museum of History and Culture.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

African American Museum of History of Culture. "Afro" might have been a good term to use during the sixties because of all of us trying to find our identification. But the word "Afro" became a word that they use for some kind of sheen that you spray in your hair, Afro Sheen, or some kind of comb that you comb your hair with, the Afro comb.

Mason

I looked at some of the legislation for that museum, and it seems that- I think they were going to call it the Black Museum, and you see all the places where that's crossed out and they substituted Afro-American. So, I mean, it seems like there was probably a struggle even to get Afro-American. So I guess it will take a while for them to catch up and change it to African.

Ferguson

Yeah, well, during the sixties, when we were struggling for institutions, the word "black" became very necessary, because we were identifying ourselves

as people in this country. The word "black" was good at the time because we needed something to mobilize all of us in terms of the political army we were talking about. I think "black" was good at that point. But African Americans are not all visually black, so that has some problems later on with our children. I had that problem with my children. You know, my children are very fair, so they were always- They were too young to understand that it meant something politically, not necessarily a color. So I changed. I started using the word African American. It was because of my own growth. One time a European-type man approached me with that, "I don't know what to call you." I said, "Well, don't worry about it. I remember distinctly years ago that you referred to yourself as a German American, and you were referring to the place you came from. That's when you hadn't quite solidified the fact that you were American, and you always referred to the country you came from." So he was unsure about what he wanted to be called, you know? "So why do we have to be so right on. We'd like to be called whatever we decide we want to be called. The problem is we don't want *you* to decide what to call us." That's the whole problem. It's impossible for us to kill the word Negro, because if we killed the word Negro it would kill too much of our history. Surely when they referred to the boys Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver and Mary McLeod Bethune and A. Philip Randolph and all those African Americans who contribute so much to our history, I'm sure they referred to them as Negroes, right? Historically, I think we should keep that word. But I think we should reidentify who we are as a people in this country. It's very necessary. And we don't have to explain to nobody why we went through "Negro," "colored," "black," "Afro," and "African American." We don't have to explain to anybody. That's just how our history evolved.

Mason

You were talking about the contributions of Watts and William Grant Still to African American culture.

Ferguson

Well, they have exhibits like *Blacks in Films* from our perspective. I have no problem with Stepin Fetchit, Willie Bess, Eddie "Rochester" Anderson, Hattie McDaniel, and Louise Beavers. I think they made a great contribution to our culture. But in the 1980s, when I did the exhibit, I had to explain that and to

redefine what that was all about. I wasn't blasting it, you know. Oscar Micheaux, one of the first black motion picture directors, I mean, his movies were horrible in context, right? Like *Scar of Shame*. Have you seen that?

Mason

Yeah. They had a big festival at UCLA.

Ferguson

That's a horrible movie, but very necessary. He was a pioneer black filmmaker, and I think that our young people should know about Oscar Micheaux, because he contributed to the [Robert] Townsends and the Spike Lees and the [Melvin] Van Peebles and all those young people who are doing movies now. They need that history to be able to draw on it, so you can't destroy- I'm sure American European types are not proud of all the Europeans who have gone ahead of them, you know. They tried their best to get away from those people who killed large numbers of people. I'm sure that Benedict Arnold was not one of their favorite people, but they still teach you about him, right?

Mason

Yeah. And then years later they rehabilitate- Some scholar from Yale [University] says, "Well, you know, Benedict Arnold wasn't such a bad guy after all."

Ferguson

Right. "Take another look at him." Like they did Jesse James and the Dalton brothers and all those people.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

Now you've got a Jesse James museum. What is it? Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid or whatever his name is, they reevaluated their position in American history and almost made heroes out of them, or modern-day Robin Hoods. But the truth is that all those people- You talk about young people today in our culture that, because of the drug trade and all that, to make a living become entrepreneurs in the drugs, and I hate that. But I can deal with

that, because that's the same thing that happened in the thirties with white America, when they created the John Dillingers and the Pretty Boy Floyds and Bonnie and Clyde. They were white people from out in the Midwest that were starving because of the Depression, so they became bank robbers. And they used to bring food and stuff to the people who lived in Oklahoma and around that area. But they were criminals because they were breaking the law. I guess criminals is a harsh term, but they were breaking the law. But now scholars are taking a look at them and trying to validate some of the things that they did. Jesse James became a bandit because the railroad was trying to take his property, and I think it killed his mother or his father or something in getting that railroad, right?

Mason

Well, I guess that leads us into your work at Dominguez Hills.

Ferguson

Yeah, well, after the museum confronted me about not being there, like being in two places, because some of the guys I worked with began to complain- I think the museum would have lived with it from then on. They had no problem with it, because I was representing the museum but I was doing community things. But a lot of my friends, so-called friends, they started complaining about "Does Cecil still work here?" and "He's never here," right? "We look in the paper and he's out in Watts doing African shows." And one of the things I'm really proud of is that I got the museum personnel, the black guys in the museum, to come out to Watts and design and do an African exhibit, sculpture exhibit, from a collection of Augustus [F.] Hawkins's.

Mason

Who did this?

Ferguson

The guys who worked for the museum, myself and Michael Tyron and James Kenion and Roma Alison. They were all guys who spent every day taking care of European culture, right? So I talked about it and messed with them until they finally came out to Watts and did that exhibit. It was dynamite, because they brought their expertise that they spend with the European culture and

brought it to the museum in terms of presentation, and it was dynamite, a dynamite show. So when I was confronted with it, that I had to spend more time at the museum, I started looking at the fact that I'd been there almost thirty-eight years, and I just didn't want to do that anymore, right. I just didn't want to come to the museum anymore. It was getting to the point where trying to go out to the museum and trying to work in the community was just too hard in terms of my own sanity. And I wanted to be in the community, right? I wasn't going to leave the community. So I figured if I stay on at the museum and do things I have been doing like not being there and being out in Watts at the same time, I thought maybe someone would try to mess with my pension by getting me fired, a whole lot of mess, right? So the day that I was confronted with this very evil black man who worked at the museum, I headed home and my car just uncontrollably turned at San Vicente [Boulevard], and I went on downtown and retired. And I never did go back. I never did go back to pick up my belongings. I never went back to pick up my plaque for years of service. I had a watch that I never went to get. They brought all those things to me, because I just was determined not to go back. Because I wanted to close that door of my life. Don't get me wrong. The museum brought me a lot of things that I'll cherish for the rest of my life, because they gave me an opportunity to become involved with the arts. I met a lot of interesting people that I never would have met before, like spending a whole day with Philip Guston, or being friendly with Vincent Price and Clyfford Still and all those people, all those artists from the sixties, like Billy Al Bengston and Richard Diebenkorn and Kenny Price, all those guys from the sixties, the white artists from the sixties, that I became friendly with during my career at the museum. Because a special part of my job as a curator was to act as a liaison between the artist and the museum. There was no way in the world that I was going to be functioning at the museum as a full-time curator, because they thought those jobs were reserved for them, right? And it really had nothing to do with me not having a degree, because there were plenty of young black people who had gone through that process, and they could have worked for the museum. I would have gladly pushed for them to get a job there so they could establish an African and an African American department to show some of that history and contributions of the African American and the African. So I went on and retired, and then in 1990 I got this telephone call from Bill [William] Lillys, the head of education, saying that he wanted to talk with me

about doing a show at LACMA. I told him I really wasn't interested in another basement show. I had done that already. I just wasn't interested in that. So Bill said, "Look, why don't you come on in, Cecil, and we'll talk about it across the street from the museum." So I wouldn't have to go into the museum, right? He said, "We'll meet over at the Potting Shed [restaurant] and have breakfast and talk about it." So we met over there, and he said to me, "We'd like for you to curate this show, Cecil, because it's a program that we want to do, and we've been out looking for someone to curate the show." And he said, "Every time I go to find somebody to curate the show, your name comes up. And so I told the people at the museum- I mean, hey, whatever Cecil's about, everywhere I go the people say, 'Get him.'" So he said, "Why not get him? He worked here. He knows the museum." So [I said], "I don't know, Bill. I have this thing about the museum and the kind of racist administration they have in terms of black and Latino and Native American people never having been in any exhibits, you know." So he said, "We'll pay you whatever you say." And I said, "Well, I don't know. I'll think about it." So I came home and told my wife [Miriam Fergerson] what happened and that I didn't think I wanted to do that. So my wife said to me, "Well, you ought to think about it, Cecil, because artists in this city look up to you to look after them. If there's a space available- You ought to ask them what they think about it." And I said, "Well, I'm not going to do an exhibit with John Outterbridge and John Riddle and Suzanne Jackson and some of those people if I can't do a show with them in the main art gallery. I'm not going to put them in the basement. They paid their dues." I might try to seek out some African Americans and Latinos who are young artists coming up, you know, and see what they think about it.

Mason

That's where they normally show the younger artists.

Fergerson

Yeah, downstairs, right. But they don't show the older black [artists] upstairs, either.

Mason

No, that's all in storage.

Fergerson

So I went out and asked people in the community, and they wanted to be in the show, because they didn't have that history like me-right?-and the racism. They just wanted- You know, they were saying, "Show at the museum? Of course!" They were very happy to show at the museum. So me and Bill met within a week at the same place, at the Potting Shed, and he said, "Well, Cecil, what do you think?" So I decided if I could ask him for a whole lot, then maybe he'd say no, and they wouldn't do it, right? So I asked him for a pretty good brochure, a poster, a lithograph, and that all the venues that have something to do with the show had to come from the black community. Like the reception had to be done by a black catering company, the graphics had to be done by a black company, you know. He said, "Well, I don't know about that, Cecil, because we have contracts with people at the museum. So I don't know about that." I said, "Well, that's the only way I'll do it." So he went away, and another week passed, and we met at the Potting Shed for the third time. He came back and said, "You have it, Cecil." Right. "They okayed everything that you asked for." I said to myself, "I must not have asked for enough." [laughter] Because it was too easy, right?

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

No fight.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

So I said, "Okay, then, I'll do it." At that point I didn't know who I was going to get as the artists. I knew a lot of Latino artists, but I didn't know who I could put together to make the exhibit. So before he left, I said, "With the lithograph, it has to be a collaboration of a Latino and a black artist." He wasn't too happy with that, because he figured it would be harder to accomplish, you know, two artists. I said, "Well, that's the way it has to be, because as the curator, if I choose a Latino over an African American, I'd be in plenty of trouble. And if I choose an African American, I'd have some problems with the Latino

community." And I just didn't need that. But I figured if I could find two people who could collaborate together, then I would please both communities and everything would go forward. So I was fortunate enough to get Joe [Bastida] Rodriguez and George Evans to collaborate on the silkscreen. I don't know if you've seen it or not, but-

Mason

Yeah, you gave me one.

Ferguson

It turned out to be dynamite.

Mason

Yeah, it's beautiful.

Ferguson

And then the show was dynamite. I mean, they were only prepared for four or five hundred people, and eleven hundred people showed up. Because the black people and the Latino people will always come to the museum- Because they go around in front of that museum all the time; nothing in there for them. And when something comes for them, sure they come. I tried to tell them that they were going to have lots of people. "You'll have five hundred people just on my name alone," because as an activist I knew people who were going to come if I curate a show there, right? And I had to be careful when I curated a show there, because I wanted my identification to be with the black community. I didn't want to identify with LACMA. It just wasn't worth it for the \$2,000 they paid me to put the show together to throw away my base in the community, because I enjoy the base in the community. When he [Lillys] came up after it was all over, it was fine. Everybody was happy. So when I retired from them-

Mason

Oh, can I ask you a question about the show?

Ferguson

Sure.

Mason

Well, we should mention that the show is called *L.A. Expressions: The Cultural Shift*, and it was actually done from August 3 to 31, 1990, which means it wasn't Black History Month. So when you say you were approached to do a show, they wanted a black show or a multicultural show?

Ferguson

A multicultural show.

Mason

I see.

Ferguson

I really believe it had something to do with grant money.

Mason

Oh.

Ferguson

I still believe they underpaid me. You know, they probably got a large grant to do it. You know how they do it, those institutions. I probably wouldn't have done it if it had been Black History Month, because I have a thing about that. I refuse to do- Some things I do in the black community for Black History Month. It's fine, because that's the month that grew out of Carter G. Woodson's [Negro History] Week, and I think that should be celebrated historically for the black people. But sometimes when white institutions approach me about doing something because it's February, I just won't do it, because why not July? You know, you're going to do something in February, then all year round you can point [to the fact] that you did something for the black community. And you know who the artists were?

Mason

Yeah. [tape recorder off] I started looking at the catalog. We're looking at the catalog for *L.A. Expressions*. If you just want to read the lists of artists-?

Ferguson

We had Anthony Barboza. Now, Anthony Barboza I didn't know was a national photographer.

Mason

Oh, I didn't either.

Ferguson

I didn't know that. But he was living over in Santa Monica, and I'd never heard of him. I went to his house, and I saw his paintings and fell in love with them.

Mason

How did you find out about him?

Ferguson

Someone told me about him. I went over to look at his paintings, and later on I got some flak because he was an acclaimed photographer, so he wasn't unknown. But he was unknown as a painter, so I defended that. Because I didn't know. And Joe Bastida Rodriguez, you know, he worked for SPARC [Social and Public Art Resource Center], and he's from Texas, right. I didn't know him as an artist, and I liked his work because it had kind of that Texas kind of influence and Indian kind of- Unlike the influence on the Latino that came up from Mexico into California rather than Texas. Culturally it's a difference. And then Melonee Blocker. She was an older woman, but she had never shown before. She was a schoolteacher, born in California, and she loved the arts. I mean, her house was like a museum. But she always was low-key. She enjoyed teaching.

Mason

She collected local artists as well as national?

Ferguson

National and local. She's quite a collector and painter. And since she hadn't shown anywhere, I decided to use her, because I always liked to, not cater to, but include the older generation, because they kind of bring something to it historically for me. And then Isabel Comancho [Diamond]. She's an artist that I stumbled on. She's from Costa Rica, but she lived in Cuba. I was really impressed with her work because of the African influence on Cuban culture,

and her work reflected that. So I decided to use her. In age, she was a contemporary of Melonee. And then George Evans. I met him quite by accident. I went to a studio and saw his work. He was an abstract painter, right? I get appalled at people who say African and African American people don't do abstract art, because Africans were the first people to do abstract. It's very apparent in their cloth, *kente* cloth, and their costumes and things. It's very abstract. So I decided to use George. Diane Gamboa is Latino, like Mexican, and I liked her work because of the simplicity of it. And she was one of the only people to sell something out of the show. La Keeta [Howard] was another young African American woman who was doing abstract art, so I decided to use her. She had never shown art before. I kind of liked the colors in her artwork because of the colors of the African *kente* cloth. You know, she does things on fabric, too. She just had a show at M. Hanks Gallery in-

Mason

Oh, in Santa Monica. I guess it's still in Santa Monica.

Ferguson

In Santa Monica, yeah. And Victor Rodarte, he had done some things on stained glass windows, and it was a very big piece. The museum didn't want to show it, but I insisted on it. He had lived in, I think, Argentina for a while, and he had done something with the llama animal that was very spiritual. So I decided to use him.

Mason

I guess that's it.

Ferguson

That's it. It was four African Americans and four Latinos. But as a result of that show, they're doing quite well.

Mason

Good.

Ferguson

And they were very happy.

Mason

Okay.

Ferguson

And I got Greg Pitts to write an essay, because first of all, there isn't anybody at the museum writing about it. And my whole thing is to try to develop someone from the community in areas where we don't have much representation. Like most of the time, when they write about the art of the African American, they write about the African American and not his art, and that appalls me. His personality and- You know the way European writers look at art. They look not at the art but at the artist. And I was a kind of mentor to Greg about how he should get into writing, because he had a flair for writing from an Afrocentric point of view. I find a lot of African American people who do write are curatorial types. They just copy the same old curatorial writings of the majority culture. Like they'll take somebody who's black and show some kind of European influence on them rather than refer to an influence from Jacob Lawrence or Archibald Motley or Romare Bearden. Surely they could find something, because those artists, Picasso and Braque and that whole cubist thing, took their art from African culture, especially from the African mask. That whole cubist and Bauhaus school in France came from the influence of African. So now that they've established that, European writers don't give reference to Africa anymore; they give reference to Picasso now and give it credibility. So I always confronted African American curatorial-type people who give Picasso and those people the credit rather than the African the credit. You never hear any European writers saying that no one was influenced by anybody black. And I know it's all about words, because I know that when I first worked at the museum they had certain California artists that they would never hang. And then twenty years went by, and all of a sudden they became giants just by curators writing about it. Right?

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

So Greg wrote the essay. The only problem with the essay is because I wanted to tie the essay in and Greg wanted to tie the essay in with the African

American and the Latino by using the Olmec and African influence on Mexico, surely on the heads in Mexico- I don't know if you know about those and the founding of Los Angeles. We wanted to tie the whole essay into that, right? And the museum didn't like it, because they said that it never has been proven that those heads in Mexico were African. And he also wrote about a sweet potato, how it got to America, since it's an African fruit, through the Olmec civilization down in Mexico, which is the oldest civilization known to Mexico. That's B.C.; it goes back before Christ. And surely the pyramids are not unlike the pyramids in Egypt, have some kind of connection. Greg has read a lot of Sertima.

Mason

[Ivan Van] Sertima?

Ferguson

Yes, *They Came before Columbus*.

Mason

Right.

Ferguson

So they didn't like the fact that you would quote a black scholar rather than quote one of their people who has always distorted history. You know, I heard a white scholar say how the potato got to America was that the seagulls brought it by using a relay system. [laughter]

Mason

Yeah, anything. The Martians. Who was that guy who wrote about the Martians? [Erich von Jaeniken]

Ferguson

Chariots [of the Gods].

Mason

Yeah, *Chariots of the Gods*. So do you think that the museum is changing or that museums are changing?

Ferguson

No. Well, I know they're trying to make some feeble attempts. They asked me to be on the membership board, right? Here's a letter from the chairman of the membership board. And it just seems sort of odd to me that they asked me, because they all know- These are people I know, right? They all know my politics. And to ask me to be on a board within the museum, a lot of people say, "Well, you ought to join the board, Cecil."

Mason

Yeah, work from within.

Ferguson

Yeah, but that's a lot of crap. You can't do it from within. The best you could do is be absorbed. And the Afro-American Museum, which I have done a lot of work for in making the institution come about, no one has ever asked me to be on any board there, right? But that's okay. If I want to spend some energy building a membership, it would be with the Afro-American Museum. So I've got to tell her that. I can't be a part of that, to try and get people to join that, because there are still no programs over there [at LACMA]. Even with their curatorial program I hear they're trying to- It's just another funding thing to make some money for them. Say you go through the process and you make A+, A+, A+, right? Are they going to find you a job in an institution? You'll just be somebody with credentials, right? If the program was designed- At the end of the program, if you were showing real well, will they place you somewhere in the country? I mean in an institution. That would be a valid program to me. I'm not sure that is in place. So I have to learn more about that. But then, if you become a curator, then you become a curator for the majority culture. Because they don't have any departments inside those institutions, where would you work? Just do their thing? So I have some problems with that. But if I found out how that program is, I would let people know. Because they contact me, because white people always get to the place where there's some black person who becomes the spokesperson for *all* black people, right? And usually, sometimes, that black person will exploit his own people, to gain recognition for himself. And I'm never going to do that, so- But I still feel that if I'm going to be there and that's my position in life, I should take advantage of letting people know about programs that ordinarily they wouldn't know

about. So I have to wrestle with myself before I decide what I really want to do. But in the meantime, when I retired- The main reason I hadn't retired sooner, I listened to people that said that I had a ten-year-old son [Kinte K. Fergerson] that hadn't even gotten to junior high school yet, and I had to raise him. But that morning when my car turned left and I went to retire, I made up my mind. I'm talking about my life, not about Kinte's life. Because if I stay at the museum and out of stress I die, Kinte hasn't got a father anyway, right? Well, even when he was born I heard a lot of flak about my being such an older father. But I decided a long time ago that, whatever time I'm here on this planet, he and I will enjoy that together, and that I really can leave him a legacy so that he won't be robbed of a father if I should die early. So I want to retire. As soon as I retired, John Outterbridge gave this guy from the [Los Angeles] Southwest [College] my name. The person at the college wanted to get someone to be involved in the art program at the school. So I went down there. At first he wanted me to find him somebody. So John said, "Why don't you take it, Cecil? Maybe we can suit you into it." So I went down and talked to him. I told him that I would do it.

Mason

Well, it's got a tradition of a strong black arts program there, because I think before John Outterbridge was there, wasn't Samella Lewis-?

Fergerson

Where?

Mason

At [California State University] Dominguez Hills.

Fergerson

I'm not talking about Dominguez.

Mason

Oh, you were talking about what?

Fergerson

Southwest.

Mason

Oh, Southwest College. Oh, okay.

Ferguson

Dominguez really hasn't ever had a really strong program. During the sixties they made some feeble efforts to get black people involved, because the director there is Kathy Zimmer, right? I knew her when she was an arts aid, because I worked for her at the museum. So I went down and interviewed for the job at Southwest. He wanted me to teach a class in Afro-American art and run the gallery, and I refused to do that. I said, "I'm not doing both." He said, "Well, that may be the only way we can get you aboard." I said, "Well, you can't get me aboard doing both, because I refuse to do both."

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Ferguson

Because that's the way they always do to us-right?-make you wear two hats. I said, "No, I can't do both. I'll do either. And I prefer to do the gallery." So they found some means for me to do just the gallery. And I said, "Another thing is that I have to document everything I do with some kind of brochure or catalog, and I won't do xerox catalogs. Essay with photographs, that sort of thing." And they said, "Well, we don't have any money." You know, the same old crap. I said, "Well, you'll have to find money." So they hired me, and I was there for almost two years. I was there two years, and I just started my thing there. And I documented everything I did with a brochure. But now money's real tight on campuses, and you don't get any support, because everybody's thinking about themselves. And it's funny, too, that I got more support from the European types than I did from black people within the campus-I mean black educators, who are a problem, okay? Some of those people who came out of the eighties are unbelievable. I mean, when you talk to them, boy, it's like all they care about is their jobs. And they're the ones who took advantage of the affirmative action programs and went out there and bought them some houses in the suburbs. Now all they think about is just getting home to the suburbs, and they're really robbing our young people of an education. Because some of the things I did were controversial for them.

Mason

Like what?

Ferguson

Like the sixties show I did there; they didn't like it too much. Plus, this is a Latino school, too. There's a big Latino population there. So they wanted me to do more multicultural things, right? And I said, "Well, I really only have time to do African Americans." They said, "Well, you came to do a Latino show." I know a lot of Latino artists, right? "But you've got to let somebody else do that. I'm only going to deal with the African Americans." That might be why nobody really looked after any funds for me for this year, because of the multicultural thing that's taking place all over the city. But it's so strange. They told me they didn't have any money for me to come back this semester, but the young lady who runs the retention center, Carmen Estrada, she called me to help her do a program of Latin, Asian, and Afro-American artists, which I said I'd help her with because I happen to know a lot of Latino and Asian artists. So I'm going to help her with that whole program of Latino culture in October. But all these people on campus, the African American educators, they aren't going to do anything till Black History Month, and then that's going to be feeble. They're going to throw some pictures up of Martin Luther King [Jr.]. They asked me to help them the first year I was there, and they had never heard of Carter G. Woodson.

Mason

You're kidding, right? No?

Ferguson

No. I'm not kidding. I wish I was. How can you-? So all over the city there are black kids who celebrate Black History Month not knowing that it's really an African American month that grew out of Negro History Week that was brought up by Carter G. Woodson. And so on Black History Month they dress in African clothing and act like it's an African holiday or celebration, not knowing it's an African American celebration of the contribution of the African American to this culture and not of the African. I realize that Africans are our ancestors, but at the same time I know that after three hundred years there is a culture called African American. They have their own dance, music, dress,

etc., that nobody has done anything with. And African American people, they come up with some of the most colorful costumes and hairdos and the way they do things, you know. It's just that no one has spent any time doing that. Sometimes I go to the Fox Hills Mall, because the young women who come in there, they really intrigue me, how they- Everybody's an individual.

Mason

Yeah. Scholars are looking at that now. Like people are looking at African American hairstyles.

Ferguson

Also there's a business. There's money to be made by just doing African American dress, the whole thing, right? But since they have no sense of their history- And then in the sixties there was such a need to refer to the motherland that they forgot about who they were, right? So they think that they have to dress up in African, West African clothing to have a celebration. I did an art show in Palos Verdes, and I went over to the mall because I heard the mall in Palos Verdes had an ice skating rink. So I went down there to check it out. I was standing up in the mezzanine, and I looked down at the ice skating rink, and everybody down there had the same thing on. I mean, it just blew my mind, because everyone had the same uniform on. To me it became a Norman Rockwell painting. It just loses its identity when everyone has the same thing on. These are people skating, right?

Mason

Yeah. What did they have on?

Ferguson

You know, the little thing they bought in the drugstores, the kind of clothing they go down there and buy. The little suits and the ice hockey things, you know. Now, see, with black people, if they buy an ice hockey stick, they're going to stick some green or some red on the handle or something. They're going to make it different, right? And then that painted individually comes out differently, you know. So I know there is an African American culture that we've just begun to look at in terms of Afrocentric, but we need people to

write about it so it won't become just a style and disappear after three or four years.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

Hopefully there will be some scholars. But if we don't have those kind of things on campus, then nobody's going to pursue it. Because usually you go to school to get your degree and then come out and make some money, right? So they're going to go to school and be influenced by European culture, hopefully, so they can get a job or something at European institutions, I guess. So then a lady over at [California State University] Northridge college named Louise Louis- She used to write for *Art Weekly*, I think. She called me and wanted me to do an exhibit for her in Northridge. And I didn't know her then, that she was kind of a- What should I refer to her as? Not liberal, but someone might say liberal. Because I don't know what liberal is; that's why I don't use the term. During the sixties I hated liberals, because liberals were people who sympathized with you but did nothing to change the system. They'd see you dropped off to the lynch thing, and then they'd cry and say how sorry they were that you got lynched, but they never stopped the lynchers. That's what my definition of a liberal is. But Louise was the kind of person where she liked to do controversial things, you know what I mean? And she asked me if I would do it. At that point she only knew that I was a controversial figure. She didn't have any idea what I wanted to do. And I had long wanted to do exhibits [of art] from the sixties, the art that was created from the sixties and the early seventies, like 1965 to 1975, because I thought that was a golden decade of art by African American artists who came out of no particular school but just came out of a need for people to do across the country.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

It almost seemed like it came out of some school because it was so similar no matter where you were. Whether you were in New York, Oklahoma, Chicago, Los Angeles, it's amazingly ironic how the art looks the same, yet there was no collaboration. It was just people doing that sort of thing.

Mason

Are you thinking of assemblage or painting?

Ferguson

Yes. Social commentary. Things that lend to the culture politically, that dealt with racism and the whole kind of scene that came out of America at the end of the Martin Luther King marches on- That "We shall overcome" and that whole group of young people who came of age in the early seventies who didn't necessarily want to address "You slap me, and I'll tell you how much I love you." They wanted to strike back, and their art addressed that.

Mason

You're talking about artists whose sensibilities, more or less came out of things like the Watts uprising.

Ferguson

The New York uprising, uprisings all over the country. That's what was so unique about it, because they were doing it all over the country. It was almost like they went to a school, like the Bauhaus school or something. Everybody was doing the same thing, but there was no concerted effort. It was just the thinking of people, right? And some great artists and art came out of that period. A lot of that art was just done by folk people, right? But a lot of great art came out of that. And then it just cut off. Because by that time, the people who came of age and were going to college and things, they had none of them for their instructors. So then they were right back where they started from with European-type instructors. But one thing about it, though, the black artists who were on campuses then and only had the white instructors, they still had some sensibility of who they were. So out of that whole decade of the eighties came a lot of the cultural-type art. They made their statements by addressing the cultural life of Africa and Jamaica and Cuba, like Synthia St. James's work or Kathleen Wilson's work. But it really didn't say anything for

me, because I come from a political- It was nice, right? Now here it is in the nineties, and we're right back where we were in the sixties, because all these institutions are saying to me like they wanted to do a show that relates to the Rodney King beating. I don't want to be a part of that, because it wasn't a Watts riot this time. It was an L.A. riot. No matter what historians and media people try to say, that it was a black uprising, it wasn't. And when all of a sudden they turn their TV camera on white people running out of the stores with food and stuff, they were so appalled, because they always had to keep the European-type community thinking that they're in better shape than everybody else. They believed that, and they buy into that. There are some European-type people you could never tell there are more white people on welfare than black people. They refuse to believe that. They would never believe that white people do more crime than black people, because the media always does it statistically in relationship to the population, which is invalid. A hundred crimes is better than ten. I don't care how you do it, it's a hundred.

Mason

Usually the way I see things in the newspapers and TV, the statistics will always be correct, that there are more whites on welfare than blacks. But the images that they show to people on TV and the image that they'll put in the paper is always whatever the stereotype is: the black welfare mother. So it's the images that they use, it seems, to try to manipulate people's ideas.

Ferguson

Because they never use the word "more." Statistics, they use statistics.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

To the average little brother on the street who has never been inside a math class in his life, who can't count to a hundred, how are you going to deal with statistics? To him it comes out more.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

Of course, with college-trained people and people who are more involved, they understand what the statistics mean. Because I hear young people all the time repeat what they hear on television.

Mason

So did you get a chance to do this show at Northridge?

Ferguson

Yes. I called it the *1960s Second Generation*. The reason I called it the second generation was because there were a lot of the artists who came from through from '65 to '70, and these were artists who came of age in the early seventies. So I referred to them as the second generation. And the show was a big success. I did it at Northridge and Southwest.

Mason

Who were some of the artists?

Ferguson

Greg Pitts, Charles Dickson, L. W. Kwasi Osei, Richard Wyatt. They were people whom I had met during that period and who were in their twenties then and now are in their forties. They were the people whom I really admired because they never compromised their work. They kept on working just like they were then, right in Hollywood, and they never changed into the more pretty stuff. And most of them are earning their living through their art, who really suffered for twenty years without making any money. But they're the people who remained, and other people fell on the sidelines. And now everybody's calling for something from the sixties because that art is new, because it's never been seen before because it only got exhibited in a very closed audience, right? Like we did some at Dominguez fifteen years ago, Claude Booker and I, called *From Oppression to Revolution*. Well, few people saw that exhibit. Even in the early days, the very first show I had at the William Grant Still Arts Center when they opened, I did my collection. And I borrowed a [Henry O.] Tanner and a Charles White and a Timothy Washington and a David Hammons from the museum. They just let me have them. [laughter] Try to get them now. They let me have them. "Yes, he's a shower," you know. Because

they were trying to be identified with them without really doing anything. So they let me take them then in my car! [laughter] So then Dominguez had me do a- I did *Six African American Artists* at Dominguez. I've done two shows at Dominguez. And now all of a sudden I'm on the panels to pick somebody for the Metro Rail.

Mason

Who is that sponsored by? [Los Angeles City] Cultural Affairs [Department] or-?

Ferguson

No, it's a separate entity they set up. Jessica Cusick is the director of that. I know you've heard her name because she's built her whole career out of that. And now they have this big art project in Union Station, because Union Station is going to be the station where all the trains come to, right? So they've got like \$1 million for- They've got \$3 million for art, and the first phase of \$1 million dollars is like \$500,000 for one artist and \$250,000 for two other ones. Now I know why they asked me to be on there.

Mason

Why?

Ferguson

So they can have somebody say, "Well, we had somebody black." But the system that they use, I can't control it. Well, if you're going to be there, you don't know how instrumental you can be, right? Because on that Metro Rail thing-

Mason

You're on the panel there with-what's her name?- Rowe?

Ferguson

Yeah, Sandra.

Mason

Yeah, Sandra Rowe. And who else? She's black.

Ferguson

Yeah. And they had two other people from the community who didn't know anything about art. And Sandra, between me and you, she was so busy trying to show us aesthetically that she knew art till finally I had to step over and say, "Hey, this isn't about art. It's just political. They want some black artists at some of the stations, and they're going to make us go through this process." And they still didn't understand, because two of the people on the panel just didn't know. They were community people, and they just didn't know. So they ended up having the black artists all vie for the same station. And we had control of it.

Mason

You could have picked-I think you said-four artists? Or how many artists?

Ferguson

Two in the final thing.

Mason

Two artists.

Ferguson

But then they ended up with all the black artists competing for the same station. So then that's when I said, "How about a collaboration on one of those stations?" Stanley Wilson and Willie Middlebrook and John Otterbridge, they decided to collaborate. The Metro Rail didn't want to. But when Jessica first came to town, I told her how racist the whole system was. So that's why I know I'm on these panels, just so they can say they had somebody black there. I was instrumental in having something to do with that. And this panel, which will meet again Friday, the system they use, you can't control anything. So they had two hundred and thirty-some people with slides, eight slides apiece. It goes whoosh! You know what I mean? And then on Friday they're going to pare it down to thirty, and then the following Friday it will be down to the three who are going to get it. And I only saw two African American artists that I know who even entered. It was Mr. Richard Wyatt and Elliot Pinkney, which is obvious, isn't it? Because it isn't about art, I don't think. Because most of these people are good artists. And what can you tell by a

slide presentation, anyway? So I'm very happy that I'm in a position to be able to do that, because at some point they've got to listen to something you're saying-right?-especially when you've established that you're an activist. If they know your politics- Most of the people in the city know me, white or black. So when they ask me to be on this panel, they know I'm going to bring a certain thing to it. I know that. I can't ever be compromised or be bought. And I do the festivals, right?

Mason

The Watts Summer Festival [of Art]?

Ferguson

The Third World [Art] Festival, which I won't be doing this year because they just don't want to pay me, right. And I'm not doing the [African] Marketplace this year. I've done it for five years. Because the people who put on the Marketplace, they call it "Marketplace and Cultural Fair" now. Now, you know what that means.

Mason

What?

Ferguson

African Marketplace and Cultural Fair. It was called African Marketplace. Now they're going to change it to "and Cultural Fair."

Mason

Well, you put up an exhibition last year, and they had dancing, usually a jazz band, so doesn't that count as cultural? I'm not sure what you're saying about the name.

Ferguson

Because they just did that- You can still call it African Marketplace without saying "Cultural Fair" and still have that. They're trying to attract more European types to it, because white people don't do festivals, they do fairs.

Mason

Oh.

Ferguson

You knew that, didn't you?

Mason

No, I never thought of that.

Ferguson

Think about it.

Mason

Okay.

Ferguson

Because I know the people who run it. They want to attract white dollars, right?

Mason

Well, everybody knows what their neighborhood is. I don't think anybody would- I mean, they won't go to Watts and watch it there. Why should they go to the Marketplace?

Ferguson

But they will come to Watts. White people will go anywhere to be entertained by black people.

Mason

[laughter] Okay.

Ferguson

They will. In the twenties they went to Harlem. In the twenties and thirties they went to Central Avenue. I mean, they kept those streets alive. They went to State Street in Chicago, Beale Street in Memphis, Rampart [Street] in [New Orleans] Louisiana. White people always go to support the black people who can entertain. They go to basketball games. That's nothing but entertainment. They have no problem going to the black communities for entertainment. It's

just that if you keep it to where culturally it deals with you, it's better. Because you don't want to do anything special to attract them. They'll come to a black family reunion in droves. Now, if you were white, what would attract you to a black family reunion?

Mason

Pardon?

Ferguson

If you were white, what would attract you to a black family reunion? It's a black family reunion. Why would you be attracted to go to that? Because of the music and dance.

Mason

Good food.

Ferguson

And good food that they gobble up, right? We have a history of cooking for them. See, I never wanted to be involved in the booth kind of thing. See, I never was involved with anything but the fine art. I never was involved in a booth or anything. These new entrepreneur marketing people, who are marketing art-right?-who had made a whole kind of print market, they're selling a lot of prints, reproductions, very little fine art, which is fine, because they get the images out there. I'm more interested in developing a fine art kind of market so they can buy art from African American artists to make the art have validity.

Mason

Maybe you can lead a tour through different artists' studios. Like you do the mural tour. You could have a day where you take people around town to artists' studios.

Ferguson

The only problem with the tour thing is it's all white people.

Mason

This was the tour of the murals of South Central [Los Angeles].

Ferguson

I've done five of them. The last time, they had one black person. The most I ever had was four, and two of them were children. And I've had some repeats on the tour, so I know I do a good job. But I'd like to develop a tour of black murals that come from the black community and not controlled by the Europeans.

Mason

Maybe you should just name some of the mural sites that you go to.

Ferguson

I started at the site off at the Golden State [Mutual] Life Insurance Company, because at the Golden State Life Insurance Company there's a mural by Charles Alston and Hale Woodruff that was commissioned by the Golden State Life Insurance Company in 1940. But I also include African American Los Angeles history when I do the murals. First time I did it, a TV commentator was there. So immediately he says, "Oh, are you Cecil Ferguson?" I said, "Yes." "Oh, well, we're here with Cecil Ferguson in the Golden State Life Insurance Company, and the two murals here are about famous black people." I said, "That isn't true."

Mason

You said that on camera? [laughter] Good!

Ferguson

I said, "Don't you want to ask me what they are?" [laughter] "Or are you going to tell me what they are?" Because he sees a lot of black people on the wall. He doesn't even know what the mural's about. The mural's about the African American contribution to California, right? He's going to tell me what it's about. So I got rid of that right quick. Then we went over to the [First] AME [African Methodist Episcopal] Church, you know, which is the first black church in Los Angeles. And there's a very fine mural in there by an artist named Eddie- What's Eddie's last name? I forget his last name [Edwards]. But it's a mural inside [Cecil L.] "Chip" Murray's church. I know you've been hearing about "Chip" Murray since the [1992] revolt-right?-because he's

become the premier minister. And usually I have a problem with ministers being at the front of a movement for freedom for black people.

Mason

Why?

Ferguson

Because Christianity and freedom are in direct conflict. Because Christianity teaches love and "Turn the other cheek," and to me, that's in direct conflict. I don't care whether it's Chip Murray or Martin Luther King, right? I think Martin Luther King toward the end of his life had stopped being a real Christian influence and had turned more into a political influence.

Mason

You mean more out of the tradition of, say, Nat Turner's Christianity? Wasn't he a minister?

Ferguson

Yeah, because he had the March on Washington.

Mason

Do you want me to pause?

Ferguson

Yeah.

Mason

Okay. [tape recorder off]

Ferguson

The California Afro-American Museum is a new museum. It's a young museum. It has growing pains. It's a museum that grew out of a group of people who saw the need for having a museum which can showcase the cultural contributions of African Americans. It's a new museum. They don't have any giants from industry on their board. They don't have a group of people who are leading businessmen in this country, who make millions of dollars, to contribute to the museum. The County Museum itself was a

department in the [Los Angeles County] Museum of Natural History when I went there in 1948. There, if it wasn't for the fact that they did the van Gogh [exhibition] and the art that Hitler had confiscated during World War II [*The Berlin Masterpieces*], their art shows didn't draw hundreds of people. I remember art openings at the museum where you could throw rice in there and it wouldn't hit anybody. They've grown quite a bit since they've been over on Wilshire [Boulevard] as a museum because of two reasons. All those people who made money during World War II- That's the next thing after you make money; you want culture, right? That's the way it goes. They put a lot of money into the museum to show L.A. could have a major institution of art. For years and years the museum was a beautiful building, but the collections weren't anything exciting when we first moved over there. They had [Mark] Rothkos and Rembrandts and [Willem] de Koonings, but they didn't have the best work out of these people. And they've been there twenty-some years, whereas the Afro-American Museum has only been there less than ten, I guess. So the museum has lots of growing pains. Plus, the museum also has a bunch of people who want the African museum to copy after the majority culture museums, which can't be done because of lack of trustees that have money. Their programs should be directed more toward the people and reach for their support. You can have both-right?-but you can't have either/or.

Mason

Do you have any favorite museums anywhere in the country? Do you try to go visit museums when you travel? Like the Studio Museum [in Harlem] or the [Museum of the] National Center of Afro-American Artists?

Ferguson

Well, whatever museum does artwork from black people are my favorites. You know, the Afro museum in Exposition Park [California Afro-American Museum] is one of my favorites. The African art museum [Museum of African American Art] in the May Company [no Robinsons-May] building is one of my favorites, the William Grant Still Art Center is one of my favorites, the Watts Towers, because they do things that have something to do with our culture, right. Now, I had a great career at the County Art Museum-I mean a great career, considering the fact that I started as a janitor and had never been inside an art museum in my life before I went to work there. So I gained a lot through that

institution in terms of my growth. If I hadn't been there, I couldn't have seen all this or taken part in it.

Mason

You brought up something interesting. You were saying that when people get money they want culture. But when you compare the creation of an institution like the County Museum or the Metropolitan [Museum of Art] with places and institutions like the Watts Towers and the William Grant Still, I mean, they seem to come out of two different places. It seems that black institutions like the Watts Towers, they weren't founded with a whole lot of money and a whole lot of patrons with money. So do you have any-?

Ferguson

I wasn't trying to compare them.

Mason

No, no. I just wondered if you had any sort of observations about why it is or how it is it seems that black institutions come out of sort of a different need than things like the Metropolitan.

Ferguson

Well, the Metropolitan came out of the industrial giants at the turn of the century who made all that money and who wanted to compete with Europe as a culture, just like what the Europeans did since they came to this country. The better citizens of Europe didn't sell America, right? But even with the Metropolitan and those institutions that grew out of New York, which is an industrialized center, there was a need for other European-type people across the country to have their little museums, and they developed them. That's part of that big museum in Anaheim right now. Twenty-five years ago, Anaheim, or Orange County, was a country town with cows and dairies. And they've built that community, and now they have a music center [Orange County Center for the Performing Arts] and the whole- It's just that within the African American community- Too many times, when African American people get money they join the majority institution, because they have this thing about they've spent all their lives trying to be a part of the American system, which they think includes being a part of their cultural institutions. So when

they get money, they try to join the majority cultures instead of developing their own.

Mason

They do for the most part, I guess. But at the same time, that doesn't mean that the black community is left without art, without culture, because people like you and Claude Booker, with money out of your own pockets, make sure that things happen in the community. I guess I'm just trying to get an understanding of-

Ferguson

But you can only take it so far.

Mason

Yeah, yeah.

Ferguson

See, the middle class supports cultural things in America. You need a middle class, because it's a matter of dollars and cents, right? Claude and I didn't have any money. [laughter]

Mason

But you got things done. Well, I guess it brings up the next topic, which is money. You were saying that you just got a grant. Who awarded you the grant?

Ferguson

I got the grant from the cultural affairs department. Some friends of mine said, "You ought to put in for a grant, Cecil, so you can do some things." I hated the word "grant" during the sixties.

Mason

Why?

Ferguson

Because the mentality of the black community was- It all became welfare, right? They'd put in for grant money, and they never gave you enough. They'd

make you spend hours and hours and hours doing proposals, and they'd turn them down. See, the whole National Endowment [for the Arts (NEA)] in my mind was not created for the artist; it was created for majority institutions to subsidize the arts across America. No longer would rich families subsidize the arts, because it got too costly. And then the government took away those tax shelters, so they started the National Endowment, which in essence is the same people-right?-even when the National Endowment started having some problems and corporations started subsidizing art. But it's the same people, the same control mechanism.

Mason

What about the California Arts Council? The way you just described the NEA seems like it would describe the California Arts Council before "Jerry" [Edmund G.] Brown [Jr.]. But after Jerry Brown, did you notice that there was a difference?

Ferguson

Oh, there was a big difference. But that only lasted eight years. As soon as Jerry Brown left, it was back to business as usual.

1.19. Tape Number: X, Side One August 26, 1992

Ferguson

During the sixties, one of the arguments was that there was no need for an Afro museum because they had the [Los Angeles] County Museum of Art. They actually said that. With no programs inside the County Art Museum that reflected the culture of the African American, they said, "Why do we need an Afro museum? We've already got a County Art Museum. Why do we need an African American history [museum] when we have the museum of natural history?" It's just like saying- That's why when you go to do some research on blacks in California you can't find any. You say, "Well, we have these people doing this; why are there no contributions of black people?" I watch A & E [Arts & Entertainment television network] every Sunday on television.

Mason

What is that?

Ferguson

About World War II. Like blacks didn't even take part in that war. Nothing about blacks in any of those- They just celebrated fifty years since the attack on Pearl Harbor. Not one black did you ever see. But we know that the first hero of World War II was Dorie Miller, who shot down three or four enemy planes. If they couldn't show you the actual footage of him shooting down the planes, which I'm sure exists someplace, they could have shown you a picture of Dorie Miller and made mention of the fact. They've got archives in Washington, D.C., that recorded the whole history of World War II, and they get these films from the archives in Washington. Why are there no black Americans in any of them? We know the 92nd Tank Division was black, the Redball Express was black, the Tuskegee Airmen. Here, lately, they've been giving them some due.

Mason

Yeah, Gordon Parks talks in one of his autobiographies-I can't remember which-but he says that he had gotten an assignment to go over, I think, to Italy and photograph black airmen, but he said some high-powered congressman or senator stopped him from going. So that's very interesting.

Ferguson

So you've got to form your own institutions, because they're never going to rewrite this history, because the African American history is American history. That's why they got black studies during the sixties; that's to keep them from rewriting the history books and including Afro-American history as American history. So they've got black studies to kind of quiet the natives for a while.

Mason

You're saying two different things, though. Before you were talking about this kind of hopeful vision of having majority culture institutions include people from all nationalities. You were saying that that's a kind of naive thing. But now you are saying that when you have your own institutions that they can just ignore you. So are you saying that it's just a necessary phase that the country has to go through? Or do you think that African Americans should just not bother with them?

Ferguson

Oh, no way! At some point in the history of this country they're going to have to include us. You know what I mean? But it's good that we're doing this, because when the time comes for us to be included, we've got that information.

Mason

So it's more of a phase or a stage that's-

Ferguson

Where we are in our history. Because time in history is like a split second. You know what I mean? These things that you're doing with black people in the community, when the time comes for the history to be rewritten, the information is there. If we don't do this, then we have to start from ground zero, right? When someone decides to rewrite California history in the right perspective, you'll have people like the [Ivan J.] Houstons and the [H. Claude] Hudsons. That work will have been done already. UCLA is sponsoring this program-right?-but they're sending you out to do it. Now, if they were to send a European type out to do these interviews, they wouldn't come off the same. Because actually young, white Americans, they're really appalled too that they've been lied to, but at the same time, they don't know how to conduct the interview to get real information, because at some point, if I were to say the same thing to a white girl as I'm saying to you, she might let her own feelings enter into it, right? Like you hear them say all the time, "I'm not responsible for the history of your people being enslaved." You know, "I don't want to sit here and listen to that," right? True, you're not responsible. But somebody's responsible. You know what I'm saying? In order for this country to survive in the end- At first the European types had problems. There were the French, the English, the Germans. They were separated in this country. You know what I mean? They were separated. But over the years, like in 1992, they're all Americans, right? There was a big separation in early America. That's why these communities sprang up. There was Italian and Jewish, separate, right? But over the years they have come together. And they really come together whenever there's a war. Historically, whenever there's a war, this whole country comes together regardless of their ethnic background. But if Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders were some black men out of Arkansas, why

didn't the history books reflect that? Hopefully, some day the African American museum will have the culture of Americans and the County Art Museum will have the culture of Americans-all Americans. But until that time comes, we have to do what's necessary. I don't advocate separate institutions. I advocate institutions that are necessary for any given time. At the time in our history it's necessary for us to have these institutions, then we must have them. Because why are there no records or anything? There was nobody out doing them.

Mason

Okay. We were talking about your grant from the [Los Angeles City] Cultural Affairs Department.

Ferguson

So I put in for a grant to do a- I intend to do a photo exhibit of Los Angeles history in three parts: early Los Angeles, mid-Los Angeles, and now, bringing out in photo history how they connected up with early Los Angeles blacks, the blacks who came in World War I, the blacks who came in World War II, the blacks who are here now, and how that whole migrating to California had something to do with all the unrest that took place in 1965 and again in 1992. For instance, as I watch my television and some young Korean, third generation or second generation, says to an African American person that "We're not responsible for your three hundred years of slavery," why can't this African American person refer back to them, "We're not responsible for your country being divided into North and South and you coming here in the 1950s"? "Hundreds of African American men lost their lives in 1950, '51, and '52 fighting for your freedom from the communists." You know, that's a point of history that probably a lot of our young people don't know about, because no one has told them about it. Because the history books don't reflect that part of our contribution, so they can't relate to that. And I know how after the Watts revolt the Jewish people were the ones who sold most of the liquor stores and the businesses to the Koreans, the liquor licenses and all that.

Mason

Oh, I thought that belonged to the- The licenses, though, they belong to the state.

Ferguson

Oh, but they've got- The liquor license from the state might cost you \$100. But you try to buy some liquor license now for \$100- See, because they only issue so many liquor licenses. So if you've got some liquor license, and you've got a store that you want to get rid of, you can sell your liquor license for \$15,000, \$20,000, \$25,000.

Mason

Oh. So where are you going to get the photographs from for the exhibition?

Ferguson

I worked at the museum for thirty-eight years, and I always was nosey. [laughter] So I know where a lot of the history is, and I know a lot of people who record that history.

Mason

So you're going to go to private citizens?

Ferguson

Yes.

Mason

I think they're doing a project now trying to collect at the-

Ferguson

The [Los Angeles Public] Library.

Mason

The public library, yeah.

Ferguson

Yeah, Ms. [Carolyn] Kozo [Cole]. But she controls the photographs, too. She gets the photographs from you, and it costs you ten dollars to get one back. Same old thing: they control our culture. But the photographs were one of the first ways that the African American documented his history. The photograph might be in the family. They might have no idea who it is. I know a lady who

had a [James] Van Der Zee and had no idea what it was. She said, "Will you look at this photograph for me, Mr. Fergerson?" I said, "Do you want to sell it?" She said, "No, my mother does." I said, "Well, it's a photograph by Van Der Zee worth some money." It had been in her family a long time. She had no idea who it was.

Mason

Was it well taken care of?

Fergerson

Yes. It had sat there in the house. It was a photograph of her mother. Van Der Zee meant nothing to her-probably didn't mean anything to her mother when he was taking it. He was a photographer in New York. But there are lots of photographs that are in black homes right here in L.A. The library didn't get nearly all of them. And I know the library guy. The area that's missing for me is 1951-52-which is a very important area for me-and World War II. See, they didn't document the contributions of blacks to the war effort. I mean, the shipyards were full of black people. The airplane factories were full of black people. Have you ever seen any photographs of them? No. But they exist somewhere. So you have to go out and beat the bushes-right?-which I'll do for the next three months, as soon as I get the money. And then I'm bringing together a panel discussion of Koreans and African Americans and Latinos to discuss what's happening with us as it applies to the majority culture. I'm not going to do a Rodney King thing-"Why don't we all get along?"-I'm going to just examine the political, social, and spiritual life of all three of these communities and tape it, and that will be part of the piece, too. There will be a moderator. That will be part of the grant requirement. My son [Kinte K. Fergerson] wants to do it. My fifteen-year-old wants to do an exhibit. I want to try to get him a grant, because he wants to do an exhibit. He did a rap exhibit, and he wants to do another one, a sequel to it. And he wants to get about ten to fifteen artists to do a painting of the social and political life of blacks in Los Angeles as far as drugs, gangs, marriage, family, and have a show, and then do a rap into a video presentation to go along with the pictures. And it was his idea. Now, my son will have no problem bringing fifteen artists together, because all the artists I know know Kinte, too. They'll be happy to do it for

Kinte, because he grew up with them. And the day that we unveil his drawing the artist did for him- Have you seen it?

Mason

No, I haven't.

Ferguson

Okay. I'll show it to you before you leave. An artist friend of mine, and, of course, Kinte's too, because he's been knowing Kinte all his life, he wanted to do a drawing of Kinte for his rites of passage, our program that we had for him. He didn't finish it. He worked on it for three years. So he just gave it to him about six months ago, so we had a little unveiling over here. And during the unveiling is when Kinte mentioned what he wanted to do, and the house was full of artists because we invited all of them, and they said, "Yeah, count me in." And then I want to do a monthly panel among artists about the arts in south Los Angeles-you know, just bring people together in a gallery setting, table, microphone, and just have an open debate and document it. Not only African American artists but also Asian, Korean, and Latino. See, basically the artists don't have a problem, because artists represent a community that's different. But I'm talking about people who are real serious about their art. I'm not talking to "somebody who paints." I think some good things will come out of that. Because usually they can tell what a community is thinking if they get ahold of the artists, because usually the artists are ahead of their time in terms of what a community is about. For instance, the rap artists told us long before this what was going to happen. Nobody listened. Everybody thinks Sister Souljah is just a brash, uncontrollable young lady. But you listen to her sometime. And a lot of the older people who are into the struggle, they don't like her because she's a new voice. I heard [William] Gray and Andrew Young put a real sexist move on another young lady who simply said, "Why don't the black leaders listen to the rappers and get their opinion?" And Andrew Young said, "Look, honey-" [laughter] How could he do that? A man of his stature, how could he call this young lady with a real sexist statement: "honey"? Like, "We know more than you, little whippersnapper." [laughter] How could he do that? And Gray wasn't much better.

Mason

Who?

Ferguson

Gray, the guy who is the head of the Negro College Fund now. He used to be Congressman Gray. How could he be threatened by some twenty-year-old young lady in Los Angeles in dreadlocks? So maybe we should talk about it-right?-because the reason there's no written history about black people- It wasn't something that just happened; it was a concerted effort by the government. They didn't want people to know that there were black soldiers over there with those French girls and English girls. It wasn't just an oversight. Why don't they ever mention the many inventions done by black people in this country? There were many.

Mason

Yeah, they had a show at the [California] Afro-American Museum.

Ferguson

There were many. Why don't you know about it? You went through the whole school process.

Mason

Well, it all starts with Columbus discovering America.

Ferguson

The biggest lie of all.

Mason

A metaphor for the whole educational system.

Ferguson

But as long as there are people like John Outterbridge and Suzanne Jackson, David Hammons-you can name them-which is a follow-up to Charles White and Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden, who were a follow-up to Charles Alston, Hale Woodruff, Margaret Burroughs, and Richmond Barthe, as long as they have those people and you keep creating new generations of culture-minded people, it will come out. It's just that we have to keep it going. I'm

sure all these hours you've spent talking about all these people have to be mind-blowing for you.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

Because that's how it happened to me, except that I didn't come from any concerted effort like a school sponsoring me. I sponsored myself, the tapes and everything, just because I wanted to know. Because I went to the libraries, and it's like black people didn't exist in this city until the 1930s. And then every time they talk about black contributions, it's always from jazz-right?-which is used for entertainment for them. When the Hollywood stars flocked to Central Avenue during the twenties and thirties, that's how the street survived, because of the white money. Just like through Harlem and the Apollo [Theatre] and the Cotton Club. The same thing existed here in Los Angeles; the same thing existed in Chicago; the same thing existed in Louisiana; the very same things.

Mason

So you have a lot of documents on tapes and papers and catalogs and things. Do you have any plans for what you want to do with this?

Ferguson

I want to write a book. I want to write a book called *Cecil*, and the subtitle is *The Way You Do the Things You Do*.

Mason

I'm sorry?

Ferguson

The Way You Do the Things You Do, taken from the Temptations, which is what culture is about. I want to trace my life from Oklahoma and the two families that emerged, the Fergusons and the Kirkseys, up to now. I don't have any idea how to write a book, but-

Mason

You'll have to get a ghostwriter.

Ferguson

Yeah, I thought about that, get a ghostwriter. I know a very good one, but to get him interested-

Mason

Do you plan to give the papers to a university? Or are you going to keep them in the family or try to-?

Ferguson

I plan on giving them to a university, but I plan to make Kinte, my fifteen-year-old, a keeper in such time that if they don't get to the university it won't be just lost.

Mason

Oh, okay.

Ferguson

Someone who will take care of it, and not only take care of it but make it available to other people. They tell me some of the most dynamic theses in the world are inside of black colleges and have never been published. Those papers were written for degrees and stuff. Most of the black colleges of this country have got some dynamic papers that have never been published; they're just in their archives. No one to do that. How many people do you know are disciplined to do what you're doing?

Mason

Well, there are a lot of young black scholars now.

Ferguson

There are?

Mason

Yeah, a lot of-

Ferguson

Turn me on to some of them. [laughter]

Mason

Well, I mentioned some before, young black historians like Richard Powell, who has done a dissertation on William H. Johnson. Judith Wilson, she's interested in Bob Thompson. But most of the people are on the East Coast. For some reason there are not a lot of people interested in-

Ferguson

I don't why, but Bob Thompson is not really interesting to me. I don't know why. Because Lizzetta [LeFalle-Collins] did a-

Mason

Yeah, William H. Johnson and Bob Thompson.

Ferguson

Because of an essay she wrote, it was-

Mason

I didn't read it.

Ferguson

Read it.

Mason

And then there are a lot of people doing work under what's called-and they have problems with-popular culture, like I said, looking at African American hairstyles and clothing and a lot of people making connections between African American music and the visual arts and things like that. So I think there are a lot of exciting things like that going on.

Ferguson

Yeah, there's a definite connection if they're writing from a very Afrocentric point of view. Sometimes you train them in European institutions, boy, and it's hard, because it's hard to-

Mason

Yeah, it's hard to keep your perspective.

Ferguson

Yeah, until we meet a special kind of person. Because I have talked to some of those people, right?[This portion of the text has been sealed at the request of the interviewee.]

Mason

So when you talk about writing from an Afrocentric point of view you mean-

Ferguson

So the populace can understand it. They've got the right two books, right?
[laughter]

Mason

And looking to Africa for models maybe or-?

Ferguson

I think we can look at America now after three hundred years.

Mason

Okay, okay.

Ferguson

I really think we can look at America. We don't have to look at Africa.

Mason

Okay.

Ferguson

We can use Africa because that's where our ancestors came from, but I think we have enough "heroes and sheroes" now from America. We've just got to dig them up. And they don't have to be like no Nat Turner or Harriet Tubman. They could be a Benjamin Mays or a Carter G. Woodson, you know-some of those people who made real contributions that we need to have resurface. A lot of research. See, that's the only thing about that kind of involvement; it just takes so many hours. You've got to really be dedicated to do that sort of

thing. Because I know when I was involved with it, it was on my own personal level. Lots of hours, and I wasn't getting any money, right? And I was spending money to get this information. And then people were hard to get to. Like if you say you're from UCLA, the door flies right open, right? But when they ask me, "Who are you?" I'm just-

Mason

"I'm your neighbor." [laughter]

Ferguson

I'm just a black dude interested in our history, right? It takes a lot of time to get past that. I was over at the Furlong Tract picnic.

Mason

The what?

Ferguson

Furlong Tract picnic, these people who live in the Furlong Tract.

Mason

Oh.

Ferguson

In 1914, 1915. They have a picnic every year, and they're all vanishing. They're getting old. It was this tract of houses that was built because it was hard to get housing in Los Angeles for black people. When I first came here, there wasn't anybody I could identify with. I'm just Cecil Ferguson asking these questions, right? They were real paranoid. And I was just asking for historical [information]. But then some people came whom I knew by being involved in it so long, and that eased up a little bit, right? Because I wanted to take pictures and have them say something on tape. They go like [gestures]. I'm trying to do a thing on Santa Monica, because Santa Monica was one of the first cities blacks lived in. And there are some old people who have been living in Santa Monica a long time.

Mason

Yeah, a lot of them are involved in the city council now because of all of the sort of gentrification and trying to get them to move out.

Ferguson

I've been catching hell trying to get to black people. White people can, because I think of my people as-

Mason

Because what?

Ferguson

Because, thinking of black people sixty, seventy, eighty years old, they have a tendency to trust white people. This one man said, "Well, I talked to Miss so-and-so already, and you have to see her." It's his history; he doesn't have to see anybody. [laughter] He didn't want to deal with that. So I've got to go to Miss Daisy to get his history, right? Miss Daisy may or may not give it up. You know? And I couldn't convince him how important it was.

Mason

Well, I don't have any more questions, but if there's anything you want to add- Or I can turn the tape off.

Ferguson

I think in about the next twenty-five years from now, the Afro-American Museum will be a big institution doing what it has to do. There are still a lot of black people living in Los Angeles who want to be identified with the majority culture-institutions and people. They need the stamp of approval from those people. They use for an excuse that the museum doesn't have a lot of local artists and programs because it's controlled by the state. I doubt that very seriously. It's just that nobody goes out and tries to- Dr. [Joseph] Howard is trying to give them his drum collection and catching hell.

Mason

That's on exhibit now.

Ferguson

Can you imagine if you're catching hell giving it to them?

Mason

What are they giving him problems about? The tax thing? Is that it?

Ferguson

Yeah, the tax thing. You have to support it. And they can't treat it like a collection of drums; they've got to treat it as something special, right? Even for them, after they get it, is the collection worth \$80,000? Is it worth a quarter of a million dollars? You make it worth more because you can't- You've got to deal with how long it took to get them. You've got to deal with is there maybe only one left in the world. That's what curators have to do. They just can't go down to an appraiser from a drum person and just deal with it on that level, because it's not on that level. They've got to make museum pieces out of these drums. And I just imagine that they don't have a curator who wants to do that, take the time to do that. That's according to Dr. Howard, now; he was telling me this. So I don't know.

1.20. Tape Number: XI, Side One August 12, 1994

Mason

Well, the first time we met was November 29, 1990, and the last time we met was about two years ago.

Ferguson

Nineteen ninety? That's unbelievable.

Mason

Yeah, that's when we started. The last time we met was the summer of '92 when you had just received a grant from the [Los Angeles City] Cultural Affairs Department. You were going to do an exhibition of photographs of the history of blacks in Los Angeles.

Ferguson

Memory, Fire and Rebirth.

Mason

Memory, Fire and Rebirth? Oh, I see. And you did the show?

Ferguson

Yes.

Mason

Okay. Where was it hung?

Ferguson

I installed in at the Watts Towers [Arts Center] initially. Then it traveled to the William Grant Still [Community Arts] Center. It was a good show. It wasn't near enough money to do it solo. But I was able to call a lot of my friends for support, and I got it done. I went all the way back to the 1700s up to 1992, as much as possible, which is like little sketches of history in terms of the African American and Latino community in Los Angeles, which is a strong history, but no one ever documents it or pays it any attention. And I have it on tape.

Mason

I was looking in my notes, and I remember that you were saying that what you wanted to do as a part of the show was to have a panel discussion in which you would gather together artists-African American, Asian American, and Latino artists-and they would have a panel discussion on some topic. And then for the photographs for the show, you said that you wanted to get some from the collection that they're building in the downtown [Los Angeles] Public Library, some of those photographs, and I guess photographs from people whom you know, your friends. Is that how the show ended up working out?

Ferguson

Well, I had to go gather most of the photographs myself, because that woman who runs the library program- She gets the photographs from the community, you know. Once they give them, they guard them with their lives, and I'm not going to play that game. So I just bypassed that. And I have a lot of photographs myself over the years. So I just went and dug out all my stuff. I'm just always reluctant to take all of the African American history and house it within a European institution. Well, a lot of black people think it's safer, like UCLA, right? But who gets the chance to see it at UCLA? Like all of [Thomas] Bradley's stuff is going to UCLA, and Ralph [J.] Bunche's things are at UCLA. I have the feeling that all that happens is some Jewish scholars at UCLA go and

spend five years and get paid to put the Bradley thing together-they are cataloging it and doing all that stuff-which helps them pay their way through school. There won't be any black scholars involved in that. That bothers me. Nobody really fights for making sure that some African Americans will be involved in that, in that process. You know what I'm saying? And they'll spend five years doing it, maybe ten, grant after grant after grant, cataloging and doing all the things that form an academic process of Bradley's memoirs. Because Bradley was in office for twenty years. That's good for them. And then they say they don't have any money for you to go to school, right? See, that's an easy grant, Bradley. The Bunche stuff they're probably still working on. You know what I'm saying?

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

When you bring that up to black people in power, they're so Eurocentric trying to make positions for themselves that they'll tell you, "Well, we offered it to the [California] Afro-American Museum, and they didn't want it," that kind of garbage, right? If they offered it to the Afro-American Museum and they didn't want it, then that process should be put out to the populace to try to make someone understand, "Why doesn't the Afro-American Museum want this? It's very important to African American people." And if they're not accountable and give good reasons why they don't want it, then these people who run the Afro-American Museum should be gotten rid of. You know what I'm saying? So they want me to pack it. I went down there, and of course they don't want to have one meeting with me. They don't want to deal with me anymore.

Mason

They wanted you to pack the photographs?

Ferguson

Pack up all of his [Bradley's] stuff from city hall.

Mason

Oh, I see.

Ferguson

And catalog it, right? Well, one conversation with me and that's over with. Because I don't see why some of it isn't going to the [Los Angeles County] Museum of Natural History. It's in the black community. I don't care what anybody says, Westwood is divorced from the African American community. You've got to drive there; it's outside the African American community. It's never going to be a part of the African American community in the history of the state. Sure, some middle class of blacks-three, four, or five-their children will have [access] to the history of Thomas Bradley and his twenty years as mayor in Los Angeles, but people outside of Los Angeles aren't ever going to see those files. So I'm very concerned about that. But you can't get any support from the people in power, especially African Americans in power. And Bradley really doesn't care, because Bradley's strong suit never was the culture, not of the African Americans, [or the] cultural affairs [department] wouldn't be in the shape it is in now. He appointed a Jewish man from New York who was very incompetent, Fred Croton.

Mason

What's his name?

Ferguson

Fred Croton, who had no interest in African American culture and history and whom Bradley finally fired. Then he turned around and hired Al [Adolfo V.] Nodal, a Cuban who came to the United States as part of the [Fulgencio] Batista [y Zaldivar] overthrow in Cuba, whom I suspect came from a very strong class system in Cuba. They rarely represent black people in Cuba. He came over as a young man with the early boat people after Batista fell. And I still feel like he still has some of that class system where black people are considered inferior to mulattos, those light-skinned Cubans in Cuba. Because we go down in Miami now, and most of the people who came over earlier were the light-skinned Cubans. Now, in 1994, there are a lot of Cubans who are trying to come to the United States again. They're darker Cubans, and now they have all kinds of sanctions of "They can't come," like the Haitians who want to come to Los Angeles now. And Bradley hires these people. He never considered an African American for that job.

Mason

Competence in cultural affairs has never been a strong suit of any politician in California's history, except maybe "Jerry" [Edmund G.] Brown [Jr.].

Ferguson

Yeah, Jerry Brown was the best one.

Mason

I can't think of anybody who's had a real interest.

Ferguson

But he had a chance. He was there for twenty years, right? Mr. Bradley had a chance to do something about it. He was very compassionate with the Jewish population. And we can see that maybe the Jews kept him in office as long as he was there. But culturally he should have had some responsibility to the African American community. Of course, a lot of people would argue with that because he created some jobs for African Americans on the staff for the center. But those were the people who grew up with him basically and came from his same generation, like Bill [William] Elkins and some other people. They have the same problem that Mr. Bradley has culturally. And no one wants to speak out. Like the Romare Bearden show now at the [Los Angeles County] Museum [of Art] [*The Graphic Odyssey: Romare Bearden as a Printmaker*]. African Americans who want to [say], "That's a wonderful show"- It's not new, though. Alonzo Davis did it twenty years ago, prints by Romare Bearden. The prints are fine, because any work by Romare is fine. But the problem that I see in Los Angeles, in that museum, is that museum has never initiated an exhibition of works by an African American. So the museum takes a position that it's not a museum show like they did with Jacob Lawrence. Jacob Lawrence was a Hampton [University] show.

Mason

But *Two Centuries of Black American Art*.

Ferguson

Was a museum show? But that's almost twenty years ago. Eighteen years.

Mason

They did that during the bicentennial year, *Two Centuries*. I remember that they did it then.

Ferguson

But that was a group show.

Mason

Right.

Ferguson

And no one says anything, because the African Americans who have some power in this city politically and culturally, they don't say anything. They're so busy trying to identify with the majority culture, you know.

Mason

I think most people these days are trying to keep food on the table. But that's always been the way.

Ferguson

Yeah, I can't let that go as an excuse. I was born in the Depression, right? This country has a history of trying to put food on the table. When they need money, though, they get it, whether they go print some more or whatever, they get it from someplace, right? This country has always had a problem putting food on the table. But this country has money- That's why this country can get away with things like the Rodney King beating or the O. J. Simpson [trial], because the majority of the people in this country are not homeless. The majority of the people live pretty good, although they might be one paycheck away from-

Mason

That's not living good to me. [laughter]

Ferguson

Oh, yeah. Well, you know that old cliché about "It's the best place compared to other places." Well, what does that mean? It means nothing to me. They used to say that during the 1960s. America is a better place for black people than any other country. All that's like what Mr. [Dick] Thornburgh said the

other day on TV about the justice system: "It's not perfect, but it's better than any other place. We have the best system." But the best system for whom? It's sure isn't for the African Americans when a white man has never been executed for killing a black man in the history of this country. So what is he saying? He's saying that we've got the best system, but for whom? It sure isn't for the African Americans. They've been killing us for three hundred years. It surely hasn't been best for your children and your children's children. It's best for white people. They've got no-class blacks who will argue the same thing because they will feel like they're part of the system. A lot of black people are bragging because of how the black middle class has grown since the sixties. But they never look at the simple fact that the black underclass has grown, too. It's the biggest now it has ever been in the history of this country because of integration. Certain things we don't maintain anymore, like certain institutions-stores, restaurants, barber shops, or meeting places, hotels- because now anybody who has got any money who wants to do something at a hotel, they go to white hotels.

Mason

Is that something that you documented in your show for the Watts Towers?
What was the name of the show?

Ferguson

Memory, Fire and Rebirth.

Mason

Okay. What were the dates?

Ferguson

Seventeen [hundred] something.

Mason

No, I mean the dates for the exhibition.

Ferguson

Oh, I forget.

Mason

Approximately, more or less.

Ferguson

Well, I think it was '93, around December or November '93, when I finished it. I forget.

Mason

It was around the end of '93, basically. And it was at Watts for long?

Ferguson

A month in each place.

Mason

So that changed over time, the economic and social conditions within the African American community, something that you were trying to document in these photographs? Or was the-

Ferguson

My main thrust ever since I've been involved in the African American community in the last twenty-five years is to do what I can do, document certain things, and make sure that they'll be available in case at some point in our history somebody will do something about it, whether it be my children or your children. I was always concerned, because every time I had to do something, I had to start at day one. I had to dig up somebody who's ninety years old to get any information. Nothing was ever written down! And some things, programs or events, had handbills or things, and somehow they never had the year on them.

Mason

Right, that's true. I've found that in my researches.

Ferguson

They say "May through June," and not a year, right? So I'm going to create a file. And maybe my seventeen-year-old son [Kinte K. Ferguson], after he goes off to college and comes back- Whatever he does in life, it will be here.

Mason

Another thing I found in my research-and I've probably done this with my interviews-is that sometimes the name of an organization will come up, and they'll talk about the beginning of it, but you'll never know what the ending date was and why it ended or anything like that. So that's just something that's frustrating sometimes when you're doing research.

Ferguson

Yeah, because the African American, because of his second-class status, he was constantly trying to find a place for himself as an individual in his own time and space, never taking into consideration that it's important in history. You know what I'm saying? It's all about "me, me right now," right? And because of their paranoia about putting into place an organization that can grow once they're not there anymore, they never did that. So consequently a lot of black organizations who were very viable at a certain time would die, because the people who ran it, they would never allow younger people to come in and be a part of it, because they were always scared of a takeover. You know what I'm saying? They never put any [effort in] to train people to take over after they're gone. So usually the organization was dynamic at one time, and then they would just phase out. So they have no historical content, because the majority culture has never bothered to document the contributions of the African Americans. Consequently, generations of African Americans aren't considered important. So who considered that what was happening was important? That's why they say Roland Hayes was appearing at the First AME [African Methodist Episcopal] church May through July. [laughter] They never looked down the road to say, "This is going to be an important program to have at this church" in 1927, because it only became important at that particular time and that particular group of women or men who were presented to them at that particular given time. But we shouldn't keep making those mistakes, because people like you and other people like you-and I've met a lot of them-are going to make sure that that doesn't happen. It's your responsibility not to let that happen. It's just that when they had all these programs during the last fifteen or twenty years, most of you guys got your jobs inside of a Eurocentric institution like UCLA, Cal Arts [California Institute of the Arts], Getty [Center for the History of Art and the Humanities], etc. So what happened is those young African Americans trained in that arena, they're so concerned about and brain-washed that the only way

they can go forward is they have to become part of the Eurocentric [system]- Which may be true, but not entirely. I mean, I meet a lot of bright African Americans, mostly women, who are working in those institutions. But they're just "gophers," because they don't have a system to get them from step one to step two to step three to step four, whereas the majority culture has a system. Someone graduates at UCLA with a B.A.-not a master's, a B.A.-in art history. They find those summer jobs at the museum, or else they will hire them into the museum as curatorial aides, curatorial assistants. What they do is, in their particular discipline, they learn the job on the job. But they take an African American who is interested in the same kind of thing, and they find them employment with the education department, and then they have you down there labeling photographs or doing secretary work, where you can never learn on the job. So an African American comes to the institution with all the credentials, and if he prepares himself where he has lots of credentials-master's, Ph.D.-then on the entry level into the curatorial world, the first [thing] they'll say is, "He's overqualified." Right?

Mason

I don't know. I haven't reached that stage yet, and I don't know anyone who has. But I remember you talking about that in the first interview.

Ferguson

I didn't just dream this up.

Mason

Well, I remember you mentioned that fact in reference to Samella Lewis and her problems at the County Museum.

Ferguson

How long have you been in Los Angeles?

Mason

Since '87.

Ferguson

You've been here since '87. That's seven years. You came here with a B.A.?

Mason

Right.

Ferguson

Or you got your B.A. here?

Mason

No, I came with a B.A.

Ferguson

You came with a B.A. And in seven years you haven't hooked into anything that can lead to a career?

Mason

Not yet, no.

Ferguson

Have you gotten your master's?

Mason

Yes.

Ferguson

You have your master's.

Mason

Yes.

Ferguson

They have an institution here, you know, the Afro-American Museum. Do you know anybody over there?

Mason

Well, I knew Lizzetta [LeFalle-Collins] when she was there. I don't think she's on their staff there.

Ferguson

Do you know-?

Mason

And I met Aurelia Brooks.

Ferguson

You met her?

Mason

That was when they were going to close the museum down. [laughter] We were out there picketing.

Ferguson

Did she show any interest in you? Of course not! Have you met Rick Moss?

Mason

Moss?

Ferguson

He's the interim director now.

Mason

Oh, he's the interim director. Did he mount some of the shows at the Afro-American Museum?

Ferguson

Yes. He has a history background.

Mason

I've heard of him, but I haven't met him.

Ferguson

Do they look for anybody?

Mason

I don't know.

Ferguson

So what happened to-?

Mason

When I first came out, Lizzetta offered me a job as-

Ferguson

Lizzetta was paranoid herself-you know what I mean-because she has no power.

Mason

Well, she was thinking about going back to school at the time.

Ferguson

She's been doing that for nine or ten years. She has no power, right? It's just that she made a friendship with Aurelia. It's the people with power like Ms. Brooks who need to seek out people like you so that the museum can run with some efficiency, because you have been trained, right? The museum needs a permanent director and curators. There are no professionals over there to run an art museum. All the shows they give are already packaged; all you have to do is put them up. I mean, how long does that take you to do? You can call over there and ask for certain work and nobody can tell you anything about it. It has no structure.

Mason

Well, that's now, and I'm hoping that things might change over time as more people-

Ferguson

So eventually you'll end up working for UCLA.

Mason

Whatever will put food on the table. [laughter] You bet I will.

Ferguson

Yeah, I understand. But I'm saying that's the crime of it all. Eventually you'll end up working for UCLA making that institution stronger. You won't go

working for [the] Afro-Am[erican Museum] because they don't have anything to offer you, right? Lizzetta was an artist, you know.

Mason

Right.

Ferguson

I like Lizzetta, but she- She just wrote the catalog for *John Outterbridge: [A Retrospective]*. Have you seen it?

Mason

Oh, because when I went to the show the catalog hadn't been printed yet.

Ferguson

It just came out.

Mason

I haven't had a chance to see it. So, yeah, I want to go over there.

Ferguson

It just came out. I have it in the house here.

Mason

Is it a catalog of collected essays? Or is it just one essay?

Ferguson

There are two essays, and both of them are very poor as far as I'm concerned. Some Ph.D. named Robinson or something wrote one.

Mason

Not Beverly Robinson?

Ferguson

No. Maybe not Robinson. But she has a Ph.D. in African American art. She's big-time. But how could you write an essay on a man when you never spoke to him once?

Mason

Well, art historians do it all the time when we write on Rembrandt and all these dead people.

Ferguson

But that's different from an artist like John Outterbridge. There are collected things about Rembrandt. There are all kinds of books on Rembrandt. There aren't all kinds of books on John Outterbridge.

Mason

Did they ever refer to that oral history that Richard [Cándida] Smith did with John Outterbridge a couple of years ago?

Ferguson

Well, when it comes to African American history and contributions, black professionals should research for facts the same way they do for European history. But the essay- And then Lizzetta I think is basically lazy sometimes, because she doesn't follow up on historical things that she doesn't see as important. Like it seems like she's always on the money when it comes to European history. When it comes to African Americans, though, she takes the words of anybody and prints them. She does some things in the catalog about the Black Arts Council, right? I live right here in L.A., and I know the history of the Black Arts Council. I know Lizzetta. But she said that Claude Booker was a security guard. I mean, Claude Booker was never a security guard. And she made it seem like Claude Booker and Stan [J. Stanley] Sanders founded the Black Arts Council. That's not true.

Mason

Aurelia Brooks was part of the Black Arts Council.

Ferguson

But Aurelia Brooks doesn't know the history of the Black Arts Council; she came later.

Mason

No, I'm just trying to imagine whom she might have talked to.

Ferguson

She talked to Aurelia, because Aurelia always quotes the untruth. [laughter] Because she doesn't know the truth. Rather than Aurelia telling her to go to somebody who knows the truth- Because Aurelia came later in the seventies. Plus, she never was concerned about the history of the Black Arts Council. And then Lizzetta said that we started doing shows at galleries and things and getting on the County Museum, and she referred to Claude Booker as "the agitation by Claude Booker." It's a bad word to use, agitation. That's a bad word. That's demeaning. But when she talks about white people she doesn't ever say anything demeaning. She could have said "through the efforts of Claude Booker," "through the commitments," but not the "agitation." You see what I'm saying?

Mason

No, I understand what you're saying.

Ferguson

If she can't write any better than that, then she should write nothing. And John Outterbridge said he's never talked to the one who wrote the main article.

Mason

I wonder who it is.

Ferguson

I can show you, because I have a catalog in there. Our black scholars, when it comes to doing European, boy, they'll be sure that they get the information right. But with black people, they go like, "Oh, it doesn't matter." [tape recorder off]

Mason

We're looking at the *John Outterbridge: A Retrospective* catalog, copyright 1994, California Afro-American Museum Foundation, with two essays by- With an essay by Lizzetta La Falle-Collins, who is the curator, and Leslie King-Hammond. I was saying that Leslie King-Hammond I know. She works for the Maryland Institute [College] of Art as, I think, the dean of admissions. She got her doctorate from Johns Hopkins [University], and the topic was on William Mates-Johnson. So it looks like she was trying to do a historical overview of-

don't know how to say it-arts in the sixties, basically. It's kind of a historical sketch, a thumbnail sketch.

Ferguson

Of art in the sixties, not John Outterbridge.

Mason

Well, you find that a lot with art historians from the East Coast. Every time I pick up a catalog where an art historian is from the East Coast and they talk about the arts from the West Coast, there's this enormous gap in knowledge, because the only things they have to refer to are Samella Lewis's survey, *Art: African American*, or the book with Ruth [G.] Waddy [*Black Artists on Art*], and those books are good and useful, but they're kind of old, even though Samella Lewis has updated her book recently. But I just picked up a catalog of Mel [Melvin] Edwards's work. He had a big retrospective [*Mel Edwards Sculpture*] in New York. And these writers at least tried to phone people and talk to people who are a part of the movement out here. But still, a lot of the information is kind of popped out there with no context. For example, they talk about Mel Edwards working with Tony Hill. And there's no mention that Tony Hill was the husband of Frances Williams, who came from Chicago. So all of it is-

Ferguson

And his impact on the arts in Los Angeles.

Mason

Right. But nobody knows about that. And we hope through some of the oral history interviews people will be able to-

Ferguson

Well, Samella and Aurelia hired this woman to write this essay because she is a Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins, I guess. That would enhance the catalog. She did an overview of art in the sixties. I thought the show was about John Outterbridge! You can catch an airplane to come talk to John Outterbridge, or at least phone him.

Mason

I agree with you that it's time that we as scholars stop trying to introduce the world to black people and our history; we can finally talk about work and ourselves. We can say things about Romare Bearden; we don't have to talk about the history of African American art.

Ferguson

We can talk about Romare Bearden.

Mason

We can just talk about his work and whatever it is in his work that we want to talk about. We don't have to go all around the barn-

Ferguson

That's twice that- When it comes to African American art, Lizzetta seems to me to deal with the art as a movement rather than aesthetically important as to the artist and his or her work. Now she's just treating John Outterbridge as a participant in that movement. It takes all the credibility away from John Outterbridge as an artist. And John's a nice guy, right?

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

So he doesn't insist on- Now she's going to Brazil with John, you know. There will be another catalog. I was talking to John the other day, and I said, "John, you have to have some responsibility to stop that from happening." He said, "Well, I'm just an artist." And I said, "No, you have some responsibility to make sure that this won't keep on and on and on." Because no curator is going to do that to a white artist, because I came from that institution. Those white artists don't let any people say anything about them that isn't true. You know what I'm saying?

Mason

Yes, I know what you're saying.

Ferguson

So they just started getting her to write. I know Aurelia. She thinks that because she associates with some names that gives credibility to the catalog. You know, that's not true. And of course, Lizzetta thinks by writing in the same book with this woman that has all these credentials, it enhances her career. So the whole thing isn't about John Outterbridge, it's about these two people's careers who wrote the essays. Well, they can have both! You know, it would be different- If you're going to mention the Black Arts Council, at least put in historical truth. It would be different if this was a hundred years from now and there wasn't anybody living who was a part of the Black Arts Council. Sometimes [because of] laziness or [because] you don't care- Because in the African American community you can be incorrect and get away with it. With the European community you can't do that, and they know that, because some other scholar will call him down on that, right? So they will go and do their homework if they write something about some of them. They will go and do their homework. They're not just going to say, "Oh, Aurelia, tell me about the Black Arts Council."

Mason

Okay, well-

Ferguson

I wasn't going to start with you. When I read all the things up to the last time we talked, I wanted to- Community arts had a lot to do with me as a person, because community arts became a saving force with people like me in the African American community who wanted to have some expression in arts in America, since you can never do it from a majority institution. So community arts, as a result of all the revolts that took place in 1965 throughout this country- There were movements all over the United States with people doing art of expression because of oppression and because of being shut out of majority institutions. So it gave us a chance to exhibit and talk about and meet about artworks that have something to do with some of our own images for the first time in this country, not just from a historical context in terms of dealing with some certainly important people in our history-Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, [W. E. B.] Du Bois, etc. It was the first time that people could visually put down a historical meaning to the people from that era that these people come to. And that's what happened mostly in

the beginning of the seventies when a lot of black artists started doing the things that the majority culture referred to as social commentary, political, revolutionary art. Because by definition, I think all art is political since the beginning of time. It's political, right? It just seems so ironic that now a lot of white artists are doing social commentary work, and that's being accepted-the same thing a lot of black artists were doing in the 1960s. There are mulatto, European-type artists who are making social statements through the art and getting a little like a fat rat. If you go around, you'll see a lot of that. But in the 1960s, the majority culture, they were experimenting with new forms of art- acrylics and beautiful little cute things. So the critics of that time will say that the African American artist was like ten years behind the European-type artist because the African American artists weren't doing those pretty little acrylics and vacuum forms and abstract expressions that the majority culture was doing. But it was just a phase in the majority-culture art history of that time. It wasn't that black artists were ten years behind; it was just that African American artists were doing what they wanted to do. I am no writer, although I write from time to time if it's necessary, but I'm no writer, but I think that that period from 1966 to 1975, I think that the art that came out of the African American community at that time- The name of it was black art because the majority culture called it black art, because black people did it. But I think there was something more important about those ten years than just the simple fact that black people did it.

Mason

Why did you choose the date 1966 over 1965?

Ferguson

'Sixty-five is when it all started happening in terms of revolt against oppression and equal rights and civil rights and all those things. The whole thing probably had its momentum from the Emmett Till murder in the fifties, when Emmett Till was murdered down in Mississippi. But it takes a while for people to become involved, especially for people who've been having three hundred years of oppression. I was looking at the television the other day, and they had that period when President Rutherford [B.] Hayes withdrew the federal troops from the South after the Civil War and allowed the southern states to have

states' rights. It's when all those Jim Crow laws in this country came about, as of Reconstruction.

Mason

Right.

Ferguson

And the hideous thing that happened to black people was that they had no support, where they hung them daily! And not just one or two, but where they hung four or five people just to make examples out of them. That kind of history is hidden from our young people historically over the years. And even now when they do it on PBS [Public Broadcasting System], it's late at night, and usually our community is so inundated with rap music and with sitcoms on TV, they're not going to watch it. And it's not a part of American history as taught in the school system. The problem with African American history right now in this country in the school system is that because some African Americans are teaching their children about their history in their homes, when those kids get to the classroom-

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Ferguson

So the teachers know less than the students. Like my son, for instance, Kinte, he goes into the classroom, the teacher is teaching history and telling lies about our history, but since I taught him our history in my home, he knows that they're lies. Well, suppose our history hasn't been taught him in our home; then that teacher can do the same injustice that has been done to us all along historically. Because I've talked to many European American schoolteachers, and they have copped to that. They don't know anything about African American history, so how can they teach it in school? Some of them had gone on crash courses and dealt with the contemporary: Malcolm [X], Martin [Luther King Jr.], Jesse Jackson. Well, they get their history out of the newspaper. They don't have to go to a classroom to get that history. But that's just something that we have to deal with. Black studies was criminal when it was introduced, because it was just something to pacify the people at that time. So how can you have black studies at majority institutions when

African American history is American history? You can't trace it. You can't look at it as a separate entity. So what they have is they have a lot of young black people who have a social conscience taking African American history as best they can by these people who trained themselves to teach it on a very infant level. They took the classes, but once they got the information that was available, what could they do with it afterwards? Where can you take an African American history degree and go get employment? Where could you take a special African American art history [degree] and go get employment? After you get your degree, where are you going?

Mason

I don't know. So you were saying that in '65 there was the social movement, and then the art maybe developed in '66, because I was asking why you chose '66 over '65.

Ferguson

Okay, the thing that really amazed me is- Because sometimes, when you're involved in the making of history on whatever level, you have a tendency not to recall or think about what you're doing; you just do it. But then years afterwards I can look back at the importance of those ten years. And during that time, it seems as though there was some school of African American art taking place in this country. Because black people are always comfortable doing the same thing, and yet we still didn't know each other. You know what I'm saying? From one coast to the other, they didn't know each other, but they were making the same social statements. Like if you studied European history, they have schools of art. Or even in America they have artists who are influenced by other artists who went on before them. But here is a group of people in this country, people of color, who had no influence. They were just doing it out of their spirit. Do you know what I'm saying? So I would like to see some books written about that, somebody who would really get into that, really try to define what was this thing called black art, that was named by the majority culture's critics and newspapers, which has nothing to do with the art- It has something to do with the people who created art. I think that that would give some validity to the art that came out of that period. Through this movement, I was able to meet people from both coasts. Sometimes we would do this in Los Angeles, and sometimes we would have access to each other.

Plus, I had some mobility, because I worked at the art museum. So when people came to town to see a Richard Hunt or an artist who was being accepted by the white critics and curators, I was able to meet them because of my involvement with the art museum.

Mason

That was interesting, that relationship, because in New York the cliché is that New York artists- When you speak of a group of artists in general, New York always looks down on Los Angeles, Los Angeles art is always inferior. But if you look at African American artists during that period, it seems that there was much more parity, as far as respect goes, between the artists on both coasts. It wasn't this competitive thing in general. Is that true, is that your feeling?

Ferguson

Yeah, that is true, because it wasn't supported by anybody on either coast. All the old money was in New York back then, and new money is in Los Angeles. But that's one thing I could say about Maurice Tuchman at the museum with the European American artists here on the West Coast. He supported West Coast artists by doing exhibits of their work over and over and over again. Every time you turned around, [Richard] Diebenkorn, [Ed] Ruscha, [Edward] Kienholz were over at the art museum. If you go through all the old catalogs- And the German expressionists and the French nineteenth century- you know, Bonnard, van Gogh. He just did those over and over again. That didn't make it necessary for white artists in this state to go to New York to find fame and fortune. It used to be Europe, too. You'd got to go to Europe, because that's where all the critics and the galleries and-

Mason

And the public as well, a public that was interested in art.

Ferguson

Probably, yeah. Well, you could say that the migration to New York at the turn of the century and clean through to the 1940s was from Europe, from most of the artists who got run out of Europe-Russia and Germany-the Jewish artists. They sell in New York. And probably the abstract expressionists was the first base push of art in this country by anybody, to my way of thinking, the way I

can see that. I never attended any art history classes, but just by being there- I got to the museum in 1948, less than two years after World War II. So just by listening-That's why community arts and African American art grew out of the uprisings of the 1960s. That's why it irks me when black scholars, young black scholars now, don't want to deal with that. It's like somebody handed them something, and now they're just going to go from here, never realizing that someone is responsible for you being where you are at this point. They just block that out. The Harlem Renaissance was a group of black literary and artist people who in some cases were worse than white people. It was a select group of people who were working in Harlem who had their own little culture, and they thought they were better than other black people because they could paint and write. That's what I get out of the Harlem Renaissance.

Mason

It seems that there was a mix if you look at people like Zora Neale Hurston and Wallace Thurman and maybe Langston Hughes, the people who were interested in folk culture, whose careers developed more in the thirties.

Ferguson

But it was created for white people. All the stuff that came out of the Harlem Renaissance eventually became very important to us. That's why I'm not talking about it; I'm talking about the intent from the beginning. Richmond Barthe said till he died he wasn't black.

Mason

You mean the artists created art for white people or the patrons-?

Ferguson

Yes!

Mason

You're saying that the patrons created this movement for themselves?

Ferguson

Yes.

Mason

Oh, yeah, okay.

Ferguson

And the artists did what they wanted.

Mason

Yeah, that's been documented.

Ferguson

They didn't go there and invite a whole bunch of kids out of Harlem up to the gallery to see the show. It was the rich Jews in Harlem who came to their shows and supported their art and bought it. Although they did nice little stories about black people.

Mason

Yeah, the Harlem Renaissance has been described as part of the whole jazz scene.

Ferguson

The music in Harlem.

Mason

The people would go slumming in Harlem, and the arts were part of that.

Ferguson

And the people bought the art. The white patrons bought the art, unlike the sixties, when the art pointed at their guilt! They don't want to buy that! They'll buy some old boy in a cotton field sitting on a watermelon crying.

Mason

Why did the L.A. County Museum of Art buy David Hammons's *Pray for America*? Why did they pick that piece? Because they wanted to hide it in the basement forever? [laughter]

Ferguson

They bought that piece because-

Mason

No, wait a minute. Was it *Pray for America*? Or was it *Injustice Case*?

Ferguson

Injustice Case. They couldn't bring themselves to buy *Pray for America*. There was a whole lot of things with the history of *Pray for America*. We almost lost the contract with the Bank of America because of *Pray for America*, because it's a black man all wrapped up in the American flag. *Injustice Case* they could deal with. It did have Bobby Seale tied up in that chair, but the whole thing about the whole Bobby Seale- That led the way for what you see right now, where they bring people in court with shackles on them. They used to not do that. The Bobby Seale case started that in America.

Mason

I didn't know that.

Ferguson

You said that you didn't know about that? You think they are going to give Bobby Seale credit for anything but being a [Black] Panther? You never saw Al Capone tied up in court, did you?

Mason

I never thought about it much. I don't know-

Ferguson

Well, I think about it. And Bobby Seale was way after the 1930s. Europeans have respect for the English law, because it was for them. They respected the police, the guards, the judges, the attorneys. Well, why should African American have any respect for them? They're the same people who hung them and put them in jail. They had no rights. And Bobby Seale was one of the first people to say, "Hey," you know, to call the judge a "faggot" in court. That brought on changes in the courtroom. I don't think I've ever seen the Menendez brothers handcuffed by their feet going to court. They show O. J. Simpson every time he goes to court. They show us his feet shackled.

Mason

Oh, I didn't know that. Luckily I don't have a TV. I haven't seen any of that and I don't intend to. [laughter]

Ferguson

You can't hide from it.

Mason

I try.

Ferguson

You're in art; you can't hide from it. I'm not saying that you're supposed to be a TV nut. I know a lot of black scholars like you don't watch TV.

Mason

It sends my blood pressure up.

Ferguson

And they give reasons why they don't. They all give the same reasons why they don't watch it.

Mason

It sends my blood pressure up by twenty points. [laughter]

Ferguson

I watch it religiously. I'd rather watch that than *All in the Family* or *The Cosby Show* or *South Central* or *Menace II Society*.

Mason

Well, it would be one thing if you watched it and then every time you watched something you'd have the time to write an article and you could get what you wanted to say off your chest. But if you're trying to do your homework and then you're watching this stuff, and it's driving you crazy and you think, "What can I do-?"

Ferguson

Well, I can make a memory ignite, and I never will forget it. I'll just do it later. Well, then there came that period-that's 1970-and I'd been in the

museum for-what?-twenty-two years already. I had held every position that you could hold in the arts on a low level: custodian, helper, everything, right? And by 1970, I had been working in the contemporary art department as a preparator for a long time. It's probably the most exciting part of my whole history at the museum, my work in the contemporary art department, because I got to meet a whole lot of artists. That was kind of like my job, to go out and be "my man Friday" with the artists, which turned out okay.

Mason

I remember you talking about going to the studios in Venice.

Ferguson

Yeah, and all that sort of thing. So 1970 came, and the museum did this show *Art and Technology*, for which I got to go to Japan with the show. Upon returning from Japan, after six weeks with the show, we were going to have it here in L.A., so that means more involvement in the show. But by this time, the Black Arts Council had begun to generate a lot of support. We had done a lot of things in the community. We had done successful things at the museum in terms of a lecture series. So then Claude Booker, who was a main person who propelled that movement through the Black Arts Council, he thought it was time now that we have a show at the museum and create a department of African American art. So we started putting a lot of pressure on the museum to do that. Finally we were able to convince the museum to let us do an exhibit, and it became the basement show, which was the *[Los Angeles 1972: A] Panorama [of Black Artists]*. And that's where I met Aurelia. She became a part of the Black Arts Council during that period. And I mentioned that sort of because now I want to talk about community arts. So the museum knew that the two people who had been in their institution who were doing all this were Claude Booker and myself. And it's so strange how the museum supported us but didn't support us officially. It could have been the first big outreach program in the art community if the museum at that time had taken the same posture as the Getty and Cal Arts and all these institutions that have outreach programs. Claude Booker and I were doing outreach programs because we were members of that staff. So the museum supported us with lumber and paint. [They] even supported us to the point where officially we were supposed to be at work, and unofficially we'd be in the community doing

something at the same time. But nobody ever complained. But since it was unofficial that we were out in the community, your job was always at stake, because how can you be two places at the same time drawing a salary from the County Art Museum?

Mason

So when you say the museum supported you, you mean that the curators and staff supported you in spite of what the board of trustees thought-?

Ferguson

No, they supported with supplies and stuff: wood, paint-

Mason

I guess I'm not clear about whose support you got from the museum.

Ferguson

We didn't get anybody's support individually. I'd asked the director for twenty pieces of plywood, and I got it.

Mason

Oh, you went to the director, who was-

Ferguson

[Kenneth] Donahue.

Mason

Donahue.

Ferguson

You know, old plywood or some cases or some pedestals. And then physically I was there and drawing my salary from the art museum. I did a show on tennis courts *Emotions in Black Art*, you know. By 1976 I was already a curatorial assistant, having won my case with the FEPC [California State Fair Employment Practices Commission] and all that. But the museum wouldn't let me function as a curatorial assistant. A curatorial assistant is no big-time job, you know what I mean? You do what you're told by the curator. A nut can do that! You know what I'm saying? You don't have to be an academic giant to be a

curatorial assistant. A curatorial assistant is just an entry-level into the curators. Well, they have a system already where white students come from UCLA and other universities and they learn their job on the job. With a black person, they don't give you that same option which could lead to a full-time curator or [give you] any initiative to go to school and get a degree. So in 1970, at the same time, also through community arts, I became the head person of the Watts Summer Festival [of Art] and the Festival in Black.

Mason

Right.

Ferguson

I was able to do that because of my museum expertise and taking it to the community and also getting them the equipment from the museum—all this unofficially. One time at the Watts Summer Festival, not only did I get equipment, I got painters and carpenters from the art museum. They loaned them to the Watts Summer Festival unofficially. They didn't want to be identified with it, but they supported it.

Mason

Did they think that would keep you quiet and keep your stuff over on your side of town?

Ferguson

Of course! "Now they won't bother us. They'll leave our institution alone." But that wasn't true. We kept pressure on them, right? But then that was good for me, because after twenty years of dealing with nothing but Eurocentric culture, I was able to connect with my own community, my own artists, my own people of color, Latinos and blacks, and by doing things in the community, which eventually led me to form a relationship with John Outterbridge at the Watts Towers [Arts Center]. So not only was I curating these two shows once a year—once at the Watts Summer Festival and then the Festival in Black—but I also started doing shows at the Watts Towers in conjunction with the festival. Like the first year that John was there, he got me to curate a show during the Watts Summer Festival, and I curated a show

inside the building, because the festival was outside, called *Art from the Community*.

Mason

What year was that?

Ferguson

'Seventy-six. Community arts started to give me visibility in terms of being involved with the arts. The main thing I had going for me was my training at the County Art Museum. I knew it was important to document stuff, and I also knew it was important to get credit for something that you do. And nobody wanted to say anything. The powers that be didn't want to say anything because it would seem like they were racist. So the cultural affairs department- Who didn't like the fact that every time I did something for the institution my name was on there. They didn't like it, but they didn't say that. "Oh, well, this will just blow over in time." But I knew how important archival information is, because I worked at a museum and saw how painstaking they were in documenting that history. Then I began to support a lot of the artists in the African American community and in the Latino community, supporting them not with money, because I had no money, but supporting them with my expertise and my own exhibits-with my expertise and knowing something about what art history was about, or spending a lot of time with them. My home became- What shall I say?

Mason

A salon?

Ferguson

Yeah, a salon! People stayed over here. I was married twice, and both of my wives [Laura Lorraine Vaughn Ferguson and Miriam Ferguson] had problems with that. I finally divorced my first wife. My second wife had trouble with it to begin with. But I met her because I did a show in a women's prison where I stayed a week, and she was working at the parole department. I convinced the prison assistant that I had to live there to do an art show. It wasn't as if I were a musician, where you bring your horn, blow it, put it in the case, and go home. In prison, I had to bring the art and the walls to put the artwork on.

Mason

What was the name of this prison?

Ferguson

The women's prison in Frontera [California].

Mason

Frontera, okay.

Ferguson

The Manson family was there when I was there. My wife was working for the parole department. And what caused this program was that they had some internal problems among the black and the white people. A group of inmates, African American inmates, formed an organization called SHACCO-Self-Help African something-within the prison. They convinced the prison to let them have this one-week cultural program: music, art, history, dance. By then I had a track record of putting stuff together, because the year before that I was instrumental in getting, as part of the Watts Summer Festival and the Festival in Black, some art from the prisons. A special part of the exhibit was prison art.

Mason

In the Watts Summer Festival? Oh, I never knew that.

Ferguson

And that's the first year that we did awards. See, the community wasn't into that, but it was because I came from the art museum. I'd seen that kind of program. I just duplicated them in the black community. We did an awards program at that Claude Hudson Auditorium, which is down by Martin Luther King [Jr.-Charles R. Drew] Medical Center, on the same grounds that Martin Luther King Hospital is. And they brought the prisoners down to get their awards accompanied by a special guard.

Mason

Oh, how nice! Do you remember any names in particular of some of the prisoners?

Ferguson

Yeah, I remember some of them.

Mason

Can you just name a few?

Ferguson

I know one guy named Peachtree, who was a hell of an artist. He did art where the pupils of the eyes of each thing he did was an insect.

Mason

An insect?

Ferguson

I have some around here. He used to mail them to me. Like one would be a bee, ant, roach. The pupil of the eyes, you know. It might be a pregnant woman with a baby on her back; her pupils might be a butterfly.

Mason

That's really interesting.

Ferguson

Yeah, that's hip. He was a little bit too political for me in terms of "physical"-revolutionary. Not only did he become a political prisoner- He didn't become a political prisoner by his art; he became a political prisoner because he physically defied the government, and I just wasn't into that. I used to get letters from him. I don't know how he got them out of the jail. He scared me to death, right? And then I used to get like my phones were tapped or something. So I had to get rid of the relationship. But those programs, although they were only held once a year, had gained so much positive imagery in the black community that the establishment didn't want them. I mean, they had a parade every year with the Watts Summer Festival. The Watts Summer Festival art show had grown to be the biggest art exhibition in America in terms of participation. And during that period, there weren't any black men in jail, because the movement done rescued them, a lot of them. They didn't like that. They wanted to see black men in jail. That's before they introduced that crack to us and dope and all that. They destroyed the Watts Summer Festival; the police department destroyed it. And then the Festival in

Black was even bigger than the Watts Summer Festival, because the Watts Summer Festival started in 1966. In 1967, recs and parks [Los Angeles City Department of Recreation and Parks] in the city of Los Angeles, they started the Festival in Black. Well, the Festival in Black had something that the Watts Summer Festival didn't have.

Mason

What's that?

Ferguson

The Watts Summer Festival, they'd get funded from the outside, and the Festival in Black got funded by the city of Los Angeles.

Mason

How is it connected to the festival that takes place in Atlanta sometimes?

Ferguson

Atlanta?

Mason

Yeah, that's also called the Festival in Black.

Ferguson

They accepted us as the model.

Mason

Oh!

Ferguson

They said it was a model. The Watts Summer Festival is the granddaddy of all festivals in this country. Nobody ever writes about that. They had no festivals before that.

Mason

No black artists' festivals?

Ferguson

They didn't have any. The Watts Summer Festival is the granddaddy of all festivals in this country. See, because white people don't do festivals. White people do fairs. "Faire" or "fair." People of color do festivals.

Mason

What's the difference?

Ferguson

It's what's happening. You go to fairs there are hogs, pigs, chickens, dogs, hee-haws; it's a cultural statement, where festivals are gay and people [are] in dress, you know? It's like what you do when you go to a festival. That's innate. Nobody can destroy that for a people. You can steal their culture, but you can't take- That's why music is so hard to take from Africans, because the music is [there] individually. And since the African is going to do art his way anyway, as [opposed to] a concept of what art is from a European point of view- Because what is known as African art now is about things that have something to do with everyday life in America in African culture. All the figures had to do with birth or marriage; it was functional.

Mason

Well, since you brought up the Watts Summer Festival, what other things took place during the festival?

Ferguson

Music, dance, anything cultural. Motion pictures or- For the first two festivals, the community had security. For the first festival, Watts was still burned out. People just came out and put up booths and sold food with no- You didn't have to get the health department to come out and say, "You've got to do this and you got to do that." And it didn't cost anything. Now, of course, the festival is going to grow, because this is America, and it's going to grow into entrepreneurship. That's the way it is in America. But the people who founded the festival didn't know how to organize that, because they were mostly people from the community, right? [It was] their idea; they put it together. But they had never dealt with this monster outside of that. This monster which had spent three hundred years trying to destroy you, why are they going to help you? No way. So they got carried with beer companies and cigarette

companies pouring thousands of dollars into the community. And that's always bad when they do that. [laughter] You think about it!

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

I used to meet with them, because I had the expertise. I wasn't of their generation, because my generation came from a real religious point of view. I came from where my mother [Jewel Kirksey Ferguson] and father [Henry Ferguson] were real religious. They were about "Turn the other cheek." They were about loving those who hate you, that whole kind of submissive Christianity kind of crap that they put on the African after they enslaved him to give slavery validity. Now I'm dealing with some young people who [are] just the opposite of me. I mean, I come from a generation where one white cop could disperse three hundred black people-just tell them to go home and they'd go home, that kind of power. But now I'm dealing with young black dudes who aren't scared of the police, who will tell the police, "Your gun ain't got no trigger in it." [laughter] And then I worked at the museum for twenty years, so it was hard for me to- I could relate to them culturally, but they didn't trust me, because I worked at the "plantation." My whole idea of art presentation was slick museum-style. You know, because Bill [William] Wilson wrote that in one of his articles; that's where they got it from. When I did that exhibit on the tennis courts, Bill Wilson wrote that. He didn't write about the art; he wrote about how I had presented a slick Los Angeles County Art Museum-style [exhibition].

Mason

Maybe that's all he could relate to.

Ferguson

It was. That's all he could relate to. But in the meantime, I did exhibits- I had become so obsessed with my own history and culture that I did exhibits everywhere. I mean, Claude and I were the Black Arts Council. I mean, we must have been to every college in south Los Angeles with the art show. We did an art exhibit one time at the air force base in San Bernardino [Norton Air

Force Base], because they had a special program honoring the sisters in the air force. But none of this was documented! You know, Claude is dead, and I'm the only living person who knows what happened. Maybe some sisters who were there, who now are twenty years older, [remember].

Mason

Yes, well, maybe somebody took snapshots and accidentally, in the back, they captured a picture of him.

Ferguson

That's the funny thing about people, there are some pictures. Historically there have always been. But I wouldn't know how to begin- I wouldn't have the time or money to try to find them. I'm sure that the air force took some, because they gave the show because of some problems in the air force. And the white air force, they documented some of it. But I'm talking about if I had had the means of documenting- Like when the truck came to get the sculpture stuff- I can see it now. It's such a great picture, right? Here are these air force guys standing on those red, blue, and white trucks with a big eagle on the side, and they're putting in John Riddle's piece about *There's More at Stake than Just Attica* and this other piece called *The Operation*, which is this white figure taking the brain out of this black figure, a cubist-looking sculpture. And here are these white soldiers, these white air force men, hammering it and pushing it into the red, white, and blue truck.

Mason

Yeah, I remember you mentioned that.

Ferguson

Now, just think what kind of picture that would be in 1994? Well, we didn't have a camera. You know, Claude and I were just doing that. It drained us. See, a lot of people joined the Black Arts Council, but they didn't join the Black Arts Council to do any work, just to come to the shows. We raised money, we gave "art-ins." I was the first one to show the [Henry O.] Tanner pictures.

Mason

I remember you said that the museum would let you take the Tanner-

Ferguson

In a minute. I just asked them. Outside of the museum, I was the first one to show those. The museum purchased them because a young white boy who had been a helper at the museum and went to school on museum time-

Mason

Right. Is this-?

Ferguson

Joe [Joseph E.] Young.

Mason

Joe Young, right.

Ferguson

He became a curator.

Mason

I wonder where he is now.

Ferguson

In Arizona. He's the director of a museum in Arizona.

Mason

I wonder if he ever does any shows on African American art.

Ferguson

Now? Oh, I'll call and ask him!

Mason

Well, it's somewhat in fashion now.

Ferguson

That would be a good question, because I know him well. Maybe I'll call and ask him if he's got a new show on at the University of Arizona, see where his head's at now. That was all part of his career. But it turned out all right, because in one way the museum bought probably three of the best paintings

to come out of our community at that time. They got them for nothing, something like \$3,800 apiece. They got David Hammons's *Injustice Case*, Charles White's *Seed of Love*, and Timothy Washington's *One Nation under God*, which are two dynamite pieces. You've seen them.

Mason

Which one is the Charles White piece?

Ferguson

Seed of Love, a pregnant black woman. He got no support from the African American community, although the Black Arts Council opened up the doors for them to come to the museum. Once they got inside the museum, they just wanted to associate with the majority culture. They even bought a Richard Hunt sculpture, and I asked them to insist on the label reading "Richard Hunt, African American," and they wouldn't do that. Because it's a very abstract form. You've seen it, haven't you? So black kids could know an African American did that. They wouldn't do that. And then I asked Richard Hunt to ask for it, and he told me that he's not interested in politics, he's just an artist. I wouldn't know what he was by that statement. He is into politics; he isn't just an African American artist. That's too important, because one day he's going to die. I thought that it was very important that black kids who go to the museum know that he's African American. I wouldn't have been so motivated by that if it hadn't been for the simple fact that when I first went to the museum in 1948, the labels used to read [like] that: "German American," "English American."

Mason

I didn't know that.

Ferguson

Too young. Because of the melting pot of the European culture, right? But each European culture in America wanted to make sure that their people got credit for it, making their cultural statement. When I first got there, the museum was into "all these people who were the melting pot of Europeans are Americans," you know? Of course, forty-five years later, they're all Americans. Forty-five years later, two wars, and they're all Americans.

Mason

So that changed when they moved to the new space?

Ferguson

Yeah, they just started saying "American."

1.22. Tape Number: XII, Side One August 12, 1994

Ferguson

I've gotten myself into a position where the artists trust me. They'll do what I ask them. The other day some woman called me from New York who works for LeVar Burton and that *Rainbow Reading* thing that he does on television. You know LeVar Burton, don't you?

Mason

Right, from *Roots*.

Ferguson

Yeah. Well, he wants to come out to Los Angeles to interview some artists. She wanted me to fix it all up for her at the Watts Towers [Arts Center] So I said, "You've got to pay." "We don't have a budget." "Then you don't have an interview." [laughter] Then she gives me the spiel about it's for the kids in the community and "Have you ever seen LeVar Burton's show?" "Well, sure I've seen it. I didn't want anything to do with it. "The artists that I'm going to ask to be there, they have to buy canvas, they have to buy paint, it's their time. I'm not giving it to you free."

Mason

Good. [laughter] Good.

Ferguson

Then she comes down and spends two hours with John Outterbridge. And I told each one of the artists that I asked to be there, "If I don't get you some money, you don't have to do it. Now, if you want to do it on your own, then I won't stand in the way. But it isn't going to come from me to exploit you. I'm not going to do that." She offered to pay me! Who would you ask? "I don't

want to do it. If you can't pay everybody, I don't want it." See, my relationship with the artists is more important than the \$150 or \$200 that she's going to pay me, right? Having the artists hear about it and say, "Well, Cecil got paid for something we did!"- I'm not going to do that. I'm just not going to do that, because I'm not going to be an art hustler. It isn't worth it! I wouldn't do it for any amount of money, but I'm just saying it's worse when they aren't going to offer you anything. All I was asking them to do was to pay each artist \$50 and me \$100 for administration costs, and she said, "We don't have any money." "Then how are you flying from New York to here?" She probably didn't give John anything. Well, that's John, right? He's a fine person, I love him, but he's an artist. He does his thing through his art. Whatever statement that he has to make, he makes it with art. I make my statement with my mouth, because I don't paint. [laughter] And I get criticized for it. I don't care. That's my commitment to the art community. Because I've seen how racism works from spending thirty-eight years over there on Wilshire [Boulevard at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art]. Now I'm not going to- I really had a good career at the museum, you know? All the artists, historical artists that I met- Clyfford Still, Harold Perry, John McLaughlin, Lorser Feitelson, these people I could call off of the top of my head. DeWain Valentine, Bob [Robert] Irwin, [Ed] Ruscha, [Edward] Keinholz, Ed Moses, collectors that I've met in my life, the [Sidney F. and Frances Lasker] Brodys, Norton Simon and his wife [Lucille Ellis Simon], the Batsons, the Warner brothers, Martha Hyer [Wallis], Jane Wyatt, and David Bright-all those people I had some kind of direct or indirect contact with because of the arts. Vincent Price and his wife [Mary Grant Price] and all those artists who came out to the [San Francisco] Bay Area when we had the *[American] Sculpture of the Sixties* show that Maurice Tuchman did in the early sixties. So I've had a good career there. I've been able to go to New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Japan. These things I would have never done if it hadn't been for the arts. At least I don't think I would ever have done them. So I had a good career there. But that had nothing to do with the racism in that institution. For me, I can look at it and say, "It's fine," but for the cultural me and my people, that museum is a racist institution. And they still continue to do racist things, and nobody says anything-until somebody will [finally] say something. She [Leslie King-Hammond] will continue to do this, because it's all about her career. And maybe Aurelia [Brooks] isn't academic enough to know that this is a piece of garbage, because maybe she goes like this [thumbs

through catalog]. Because the average person who gets this catalog will go through it like this.

Mason

You're talking about the John Outterbridge catalog. [*John Outterbridge: A Retrospective*]

Ferguson

Yeah. They go through it like this. The layout is dynamite from a graphics point of view, but the information is second-rate. As an historical document that will be here for future scholars to look at the work of John Outterbridge, what can they get out of this? Anybody could have reported this just by reading Samella [Lewis]'s book and putting it inside this book. Do you see what I'm saying?

Mason

Yes, I understand.

Ferguson

So if somebody wants to seriously write about that period-You know, I think Noah Purifoy is a dynamite artist, even after I went and found him. I went and found Noah before Lizzetta [Le Falle-Collins]. Also, I went and found the piece *There's More at Stake than Just Attica*, because I knew it was at the Gilbert Lindsay [Community Center] mental health institution over there [Kedren Community Mental Health Center]. Because I went over there to hang a picture right in front of it one time and saw the work there with dirt and rust all on it. And then, when they took it back to the [California Afro-American] Museum to be in the show, they didn't even restore it. They set it right on the floor and exhibited it. Do you know how easy it is to restore that piece? It's paint. They washed it up and exhibited it. They didn't [even] put a plinth on that. The first time they did the sixties show [*The 19Sixties: A Cultural Awakening Re-evaluated*], the museum had pieces in their collection given to them by Miriam Matthews [that] were better than the pieces that they showed in the show. And then they had some contemporary pieces of the artists in the show and called it sculpture of the sixties. You can't do that. If you don't have but ten pieces in the show, you can't augment the show with pieces you did in the seventies and call it the sixties. Can you?

Mason

I've given up long ago trying to understand what goes on up there. [laughter] I can't even imagine what goes on there. I try not to think about it too much.

Ferguson

See, to the average black American who goes through there, it's a good show, because it's so new to them. But those European scholars who go through there, they know. And they know they don't have any competition from you either! [laughter] And then I'll be accused of always bitching about everything. But anybody knows you can't have pieces in the seventies and eighties and a show that says the sixties. So if you don't have time to find those pieces, then you don't do the show. Or you do the show with what you've got. She didn't know that Claude Booker owned all those pieces from the sixties. Aurelia didn't know. I knew. One of the finest jobs John Outterbridge did-people call it *Ghetto Merchant*-I knew who owned it. That's why she had the show about body art and didn't include David Hammons.

Mason

Oh, I don't remember that one.

Ferguson

It's at Santa Monica [Museum of Art]. She said that [they couldn't use] David Hammons because he is in Europe. A lot of David Hammons's work is in south Los Angeles because he painted here. You've got to go find out where it's at or ask people who know where it's at.

Mason

Yeah.

Ferguson

You can't do it from a desk and a telephone down there at the Afro-Am[erican Museum]. Because our community is not sophisticated enough to have a library like the County Art Museum where you can get catalogs and information. We just haven't gotten any yet because of money, time, and nobody doing it. But it will come. But that's how you create that, though, right? Because now you say, "That is from the collection of Ann Booker," right? If you

say "courtesy of Ann Booker," see, I find something wrong with that. I mean, there's a new way to do it. When you say "courtesy of," that means that I found the piece and just made it available to you; it doesn't give me any credibility as a collector. Do you know what I'm saying? So it's my courtesy to you. Well, I can be courteous enough to show you where there's a thousand pieces of black artists in America because I know where they are. But we need to build credibility with African Americans who collect art, and this is how you do it. You look at it, and when you say, "from the courtesy of," what does that mean? I figure that might be the new way they do it. I just don't know about it. So you look at community arts. You look at that fact. [Look] to the community arts, not to institutions. Community arts gave you John Outterbridge, Charles Dickson, Richard Wyatt, even Betye Saar on some level.

Mason

Is that the [Compton] Communicative Arts Academy?

Ferguson

No, just community arts. Because these artists showed in churches, playgrounds, parks, libraries. They didn't come from an institutional forum. So community arts becomes very important to the African American community. Now it's becoming very important to the European American community, because now they want to gain control of all the community arts. That's why they want to privatize community art institutions like the William Grant Still [Community Arts] Center. It's all about control. You take the mural. I love Judy Baca, but Alonzo Davis was truly one of the first people who got into murals. Alonzo Davis got off into that twenty-some years ago. And the reason why the African American really started doing murals is because there was no institution where the artists could paint. So he started painting on the walls, right? So now Judy Baca becomes the mother of all the mural programs of south Los Angeles. They never mention Alonzo Davis. See, I don't have to like you to give you credibility for your contribution. I really don't have to like you as a person. I could like you as an artist and hate your guts as a person. You know what I'm saying?

Mason

Right.

Ferguson

Because it's my responsibility to tell the truth, right? For Noah to tell me he didn't think I liked his art, well, why in the hell does he think I went and found him? But he doesn't know I went and found him. Do you think Lizzetta is going to tell him? She doesn't have any sense. She thinks it takes away from some of her own credibility just to tell Noah, "I sure appreciate Cecil for going and finding you," right? Then he wouldn't make that statement to me that he didn't think I liked his art. I honored him last year in the Third World [Art] Festival.

Mason

Oh, did you?

Ferguson

Noah, William [E.] Smith, and Bill [William] Pajaud. It's been hard for me to sell the Watts Health Foundation on that idea. They sponsor the Third World [Art Festival].

Mason

Yeah, what's it called? The Watts-?

Ferguson

Health Foundation.

Mason

Health Foundation. I don't know what that is.

Ferguson

Well, the CEO [chief executive officer] over there is Dr. Clyde [W.] Oden [Jr.]. He is a unique person, because he understands that culture is one of the main ingredients toward our good health. Self-esteem, to know who you are, that will heal you! So he has always built in a cultural component with the Watts Health Foundation. Then he called his idea Third World Art Festival. I hate the word "third world" because I don't know what that means. I know what the U.N. [United Nations] said in 1948, but to me "third world" is just another way of putting certain people in a pigeonhole.

Mason

Like the term "developing nations," right?

Ferguson

Yeah, "developing nations."

Mason

Where are they going? [laughter]

Ferguson

All apart from the European community. Or "multicultural." "Multicultural" just means a buzzword for "minorities." Because how are you going to have multicultural in Los Angeles that doesn't include European types? It's not multi, is it? I hate that word. And I fought hard against saying the "Third World." But I was ruled out because it's catchy, right? I said, "We need to come up with another word." Oh, sure! "The World." [laughter] I mean, anything but the "Third World."

Mason

I wonder where Dr. Oden got the idea of connecting the health and culture. I wonder if he comes out of some culture in the sixties? Because I was thinking earlier about when you were talking about your program in the prisons and the air force program and how they were going to solve these racial problems through cultural programs, and I was just curious-

Ferguson

It came out of the sixties.

Mason

-how people make the connection, because-

Ferguson

It came out of the sixties. You see, Dr. Oden came to Watts right after the revolt. He was an eye doctor; he made eyeglasses. He was going to school to get his business administration [degree]. The Watts Health Foundation started out as a little organization that started inside of some bungalows down on

103rd Street. Because people in that community were complaining that when they'd go to the hospital they'd have to go to the [Los Angeles County] General Hospital. There weren't any hospital facilities there in south Los Angeles. If your wife got pregnant, you'd go to the General Hospital. If you got shot, you drove to the General Hospital, which was a long way away. And out of that commitment by some community people, the Martin Luther King [Jr. - Charles R. Drew] Medical Center and the Watts Health Foundation grew. Now the Watts Health Foundation grew into the general United Health Plan. This is a big corporation now, part of the eighth or ninth biggest institution in the United States. But Dr. Oden, a long time ago, understood that the whole thing grew out of the cultural. He keeps that alive. Like he does Juneteenth every year, he does Cinco de Mayo, and now, with the problems between Koreans and the black community, he also hires a lot of Koreans. He gets a lot of money from the Korean community to do programs. That car out there I won because a Korean car company put it up and I won it in a raffle, a two-dollar raffle.

Mason

Wow.

Ferguson

So it did come from culture, right? And Dr. Oden is one of those unique African Americans who understands that, who understands that for him to get to where he was, it wasn't just on his own personal endeavor. Like the board of the Watts Health Foundation is made up of community people. That's why it can survive. If he had made that board up of bourgeois black people from Baldwin Hills, it would have been gone by now. [laughter] You don't believe me?

Mason

Oh, I believe you.

Ferguson

So all these things are community arts in Los Angeles. But now the establishment, they're putting programs together now about community arts. That's all you hear now is community arts. But they aren't putting [forth] the

truth! It's like a hundred years from now, if we don't watch it, jazz will be created by Europeans and "Charlie Parker was a white man." Just like Alexander Dumas and [Alexander] Pushkin and a whole lot of other people who were black, Hannibal- Because we don't record our history, and they do. They do it with the written word. Western historians change the whole course of history just by writing about it. I read a book the other day that John Outterbridge had where this writer had written this book with documented facts that African people were not humans. And cited!

Mason

That was a big topic in the nineteenth century. Was it a recent book?

Ferguson

I don't think so. I'm going to get the book, though, because I didn't get a chance to read it; I just got the chance to gaze at it. But if you don't refute that, you become an animal. And how many people of your generation have seen this book? I went to an art show one time at this black girl's house, and they had all these mixed people there from Cal Arts [California Institute of the Arts], right? They had this brother get up there, and he was talking about his art. He's a homosexual, and he had done this piece, and he was referring to black women as bitches. Mixed audience. And they had invited me there as the godfather of the arts, right? All these people, thirty years younger than me at least. So when he finished, I got right up. I said, "I loved your work, but I didn't appreciate some of the stuff that you said." I got very stereotyped in what I had to say. I said, "Maybe it's because I'm from another generation-" I was sixty-two then. I said, "I'm sixty-two years old, and maybe I just don't understand, but I don't appreciate anybody referring to my women as bitches in any context, me personally!" I said, "I'll never understand. You might have some justification." And I said, "I really don't understand it with mixed audiences." The room got quiet. Because the white people there were disadvantaged, right? So I saw her later on, and she was saying, "Oh, Mr. Ferguson, you have to understand, he's a homosexual, and he's coming to grips with himself." And I said, "Well, he has to come to grips with himself in another way when I'm around." I said, "Plus, I try to be as open-minded as I can." Because although I was born in another time, in another place, I stay pretty active. So it's not like I cut myself off from the younger generation. I

know some of the things that they're wrestling with socially and emotionally-right-the whole trip. And I said, "I loved him as an artist." Because when I first got there, I spotted his work. He was one of the first ones I went to, to say something nice about it, right? And I don't care who he sleeps with; that's his own personal thing. Me, personally, I can't see loving anything but a woman. I can't see how a man can love another man-I mean personally. I just don't understand, right? I have nothing against it, but I was just born in another place, so maybe it's because of my father and whatever generation I come out of, right? And this new comedy that comes out of the black community with these comics up there talking about what's under young women's clothes and calling them bitches and all that and getting laughs about it, I can't get into that. And I can't go for the excuse that it's "real." Because a lot of people criticized me about the way I raised my child by keeping him as far away from certain kinds of conditions as I possibly could, right? I hear from friends of mine saying, "You shield him too much. He needs to see the other side of it." He does see the other side of it, because I'm a product of the other side of it! [laughter] How much closer can you get to it than his own father? He could live a lifetime and never know anything about drive-by shootings and dope and absentee fathers. You don't need to be next to that to grow up into a nice young man. That's crap! That's the kind of thinking that's out there now. I don't apologize for what I believe in. Wrong or right, that's just me. And I think he's a wonderful artist. I can see in his art that he had some problems, but aesthetically it didn't have anything to do with it; he's just got some problems. Plus, it's impossible to hate homosexual people in the arts, because the arts is full of them. I mean, some of the brightest people in the world are homosexual and belong to the art community. And I grew up in the art community, so- [laughter] But to me, at this time, in our place and time, our agenda has more to do with something else besides that, you know? It's just that the field of art is what I have chosen to pursue, to make whatever my contribution is through the arts. But we've got to deal with the whole thing: politics, army, navy, future, past. It's all relevant for the African American community. You might choose this position right here as your contribution. Sure you can't make contributions to the whole broad issue; it's too much for one person.

Mason

Right.

Ferguson

Like a teacher at [Los Angeles] Southwest College suggested to me that I should try to do more interracial things, since Southwest College has a huge Latino community.

Mason

Right.

Ferguson

I said, "I just can't. There's too much for one person to do. You'd have to hire somebody else, because it takes up all my time just to deal with the African Americans. What you need to do is hire another person on the same level I am, and then we can work together. I can't do it all." I had the same problem at the Third World Art Festival, because at the Third World- Well, I have a strong visibility in the Latino community because I've been around for a long time, so I can do a Latino community [show] because I've been around so long, but I can't do the Korean and the Japanese and- You know what I mean? I'm spread too thin. So I'm going to get some flak about this contribution that I'm doing because I said I'm paying tribute to five African American women. And I know because they get government money and all that that they're going to say to me that I should have found an Asian and a Latino. But I'm willing to- Last year the main artist was Toni Love. You've never met Toni. Toni is an African American-

Mason

He's not related to Ed Love, is he?

Ferguson

She's a girl. She's a female, a product of Compton. She makes statements in her art to do with the African American women. She did this boss piece about crack babies. It shows after the fact that the mother is on crack. Beautiful young lady. But she was the featured artist. And now there is a Korean lady [Bok Lim Kim] about fifty-some years old who donated a piece last year to the- [tape recorder off] This is in Lompoc where Richard Wyatt did a mural right

there. I took my family up there and we spent all day with this Indian woman named Juanita. We just kind of found out about the Chumash up there.

Mason

Is there some kind of center up there?

Ferguson

No, it was at her home.

Mason

Oh, he did a mural at her home?

Ferguson

No, he did a mural in town on a wall. She lives on a reservation. And the reservation is cold-blooded, boy! People always say there is hopelessness in Harlem on the faces of black people; they ought to go to an Indian reservation and spend a day. [They're] bombed out on either alcohol or dope. A whole genocide of a whole people. They say it's because the Indian wasn't able to adapt and the black people were. I don't believe that. I just believe that the white people destroyed the Indians because this was their country! [laughter] And it wasn't our country, so it wasn't necessary for them to destroy us. They say the Indians refused to work for the white man. Well, they could have done them the same way they did us. Within a couple of generations they could have changed that around. They had to wipe out everything this country was about, because it belonged to the Indians. That's the only way they could take control of it, because it's their land. So they had to wipe them out. I mean, that's the way I look at it. So now that the majority culture is taking another look at some black artists, some are making some money for people through them, right?

Mason

A little.

Ferguson

Of course. The woman [Leslie King-Hammond] who wrote the articles in there [the John Outterbridge catalog], she teaches at the University of Maryland.

Mason

I don't think she teaches. She's the dean of admissions.

Ferguson

Okay, she's the dean of admissions at Maryland [Institute, College of Art].

Mason

Yeah, as far as I know.

Ferguson

Where is [David C.] Driskell at?

Mason

Driskell is at the University of Maryland at College Park. But Leslie King-Hammond is at the Maryland Institute, College of Art, which is downtown.

Ferguson

Now, you know that they both have got to have a problem, because right there in Baltimore and [Washington] D.C. is where all the slave ships were. Once they get to be part of those institutions- Not only for the money, but just for the recognition that they get inside those institutions, right? Because she should have had more commitment than to write that thing and never even talk to John Outterbridge. And I know they paid her well for it. I'll bet you they paid her well. Even the NCA, the National Conference of Artists, they can't even stay together. It could be a viable-

Mason

Are they still meeting?

Ferguson

Every two years, anyway, when they go down to Atlanta and do that big party [the Festival in Black]. And you get things written about Atlanta. You never hear about any city giving Watts the recognition of being the granddaddy of all festivals. Because black people just don't deal in that vernacular. "This was my idea, and it has no historical context." It's nothing but hype. I used to have a hard time if I used to do shows for people and they didn't even include my

name in the information, just like doing it like I wasn't there because I don't know how important that is.

Mason

That's a big no-no in scholarly publications. Always in the beginning there's a big list of "I thank my wife, I thank the librarian who showed me how to use the card catalog-" People know how important it is to acknowledge the help they got. Otherwise, the next time they ask, people might not be so willing if they feel like their services or whatever have been taken for granted.

Ferguson

In the white institutions they include everything, right. In Hollywood, the pancake make-up lady, they include it. The black community doesn't. Somehow they think that that takes away from them. Why they think that I don't know, but they don't want to include people. That's one thing that I made sure of when I did shows; I included everybody. And that's how I became the godfather, because people don't forget that. I remember one time I was doing a show called *Blacks in Film*. There was a wino [Charles Maxwell] who used to come over every night and help me. He'd drink wine and help me. He was a wino because he had an alcohol problem. He was a brilliant man who was in law school when World War II came about. He was from Colorado. He broke off his education when he went into the armed forces in Colorado in World War II. Do you know how many black people were in Colorado during World War II? He was thrown in with that crowd of blacks from all over America, and he [developed] an alcohol problem. And then, when the war was over, he didn't go back to school. Well, he hasn't forgotten what he learned. Do you know what I mean? So when I got the chance to do this thing, this catalog, I included him. When I sent my thing in, all of the people that I included-and none of them helped me-one of the director guys said, "Hey, man, why did you include Charles?" And I said, "Because he helped me." "Charles, the wino?" "Yes, Charles the wino!"

Mason

Is that how you wrote his name?

Ferguson

No!

Mason

No, I didn't think so.

Ferguson

And, boy, when Charles got that catalog, you should have seen his face. It was worth it. And I could see Charles now on the street, right. He would be with one of his partners drinking that wine, and that's one of the first things he'd tell that partner. He'd run home and get that book. Because the next time I do a show, I want to have support, and you give people recognition. For a long time, the County Art Museum didn't include me in the catalog. They included everybody in my department but me. I got tired of that crap. The white secretary, the white curatorial system, everybody, nothing about me. Until I couldn't take it anymore. So now you'll find Cecil Ferguson's name in more catalogs than any other African American who worked there. I don't care how they put it in there, as long as they put my name in there. Because I understand that. And then, when I complained about it, the other black people would say, "What difference does it make? You got paid, didn't you?" Because they weren't a part of that process. I know I did a show for Aurelia [Brooks] one time; I did everything. Benny Andrews. They didn't put me in the catalog.

Mason

Where was that show?

Ferguson

At the Afro-Am. But this "Lizzetta [LeFalle-] Collins, curator; Eduardo Corosquillo, exhibition design installation." He got his name in there, but he's not an African American. [laughter]

Mason

Eduardo Corosquillo, the exhibition and design installation. A lot of people thought he did a really nice job installing that show.

Ferguson

A lot of people thought I did a beautiful job with Benny Andrews.

Mason

No, I wasn't saying that he was mentioned because he was better.

Ferguson

He was mentioned because he was not an African American, because you just got through saying, "Maybe we haven't survived through slavery." [laughter] You made that statement. You know, sometimes people close to you-and Aurelia has this problem-it's all right for her to become the director of an institution where I can't go into becoming a curator. Because she knew me when I was a helper, right? That's a black mentality that's a holdover from slavery. See, it's not important for her to be identified with me in print, but it's important for her to be identified with this guy with a Mexican name. That's somebody with a holdover to slavery. If I would win the lottery, that's what I would do: I would establish a center for the study of the history of slavery and its impact on African Americans.

Mason

That would be a big place.

Ferguson

Yeah. That would be a good place, too, where you could expose the [Congressional] Black Caucus who separate themselves from [Louis] Farrakhan because Jews don't like him! [laughter] And the Jews are the main people who put us in films showing us as buffoons, waiters, Amos and Andys, the Beulahs. The Jews did that in Hollywood. They wrote the scripts; they produced the pictures. That's all right for them to do that, but when Kaleeb [Muhammed] said that he's for the Nation of Islam, then he's wrong. He's anti-Semitic.

Mason

Oh, I guess like the O. J. [Simpson] thing. I have no idea what this man said either, because I have just been completely out of it. However, the irony about early Hollywood is that everybody was stereotyped: Jews were stereotyped, Italians were stereotyped, Irish people were stereotyped. It was a big marketing ploy.

Ferguson

Yeah, see, but you've got to look at it, though. See, the Irish and the Jews were stereotyped, but they aren't another rainbow. There was always some vindication. Not so with the- See, they stereotyped the Italian people as the gangsters and the Mafia and all that, but on the other side was the Irish kid who became a cop who put the other Italian people in jail. See, there was always some vindication for the other people. See, they didn't all stay savages. But with the African Americans and the Indians, they were always savages. And African Americans were always buffoons incapable of love and compassion. Even the worst Jews in the world, they still- Even when they stereotyped the Jews, they also had another side of Jews. And you know the Jews don't show that, because they controlled Hollywood from day one. [*The Birth of a Nation* by D. W. Griffith recalls lynching in America more than any other thing. Nobody ever talks about the impact *The Birth of a Nation* had on the social structure of this country. And how many black people died as a result of *The Birth of a Nation*, the film? Hundreds, okay? Hundreds.

1.23. Tape Number: XII, Side Two August 12, 1994

Ferguson

In California? But they're not here anymore. See-

Mason

Who's not here?

Ferguson

A lot of people who know about the contributions of the African American to the arts in California historically, like Tony Hill and Ruth [G.] Waddy- You know, Ruth Waddy is still here, but she's old, right. She doesn't give out a lot of information as coherent as she would have ten years ago. Samella [Lewis] didn't come in until the sixties.

Mason

Miriam Matthews is here, and-

Ferguson

Miriam. And Miriam got to the place where she's old, too, right? Some lady called me up and said there was an African American woman who painted at

the turn of the century who lived on Thirty-second Street. I have never heard of her. I forgot what she said her name was. So I figured Miriam Matthews would know, right? And Miriam Matthews said that she doesn't have time to deal with that. Well, Miriam is eighty-something.

Mason

Yeah, I know she's an older lady.

Ferguson

So if you go to Miriam, it would be hard for you to get Miriam to- Unless you catch her on one of her real good days.

Mason

Is she not feeling well?

Ferguson

It's just that she's eighty-something years old and she's tired. It's not important to her. Sometimes white scholars can get to her. You know, when she dies she's going to leave all this shit to UCLA.

Mason

What about her paintings, her collection?

Ferguson

She's going to leave most of that to UCLA. She has given the Afro-Am a lot of it, but the people over there at Afro-Am are so stupid that they never give her recognition for giving it to them. She gave them a piece by a woman named Gafford, right?

Mason

Right, Alice Gafford, one of the early black painters.

Ferguson

Yeah. I think Aurelia made a statement that any high school person could do that. They don't know how to court people to get their whole collection. Ten years ago they should have started a fund to build a Miriam Matthews wing to the museum and then have a program every year to raise money to do it. And

then, when Miriam passes away, she might leave them not only her collection but her house, too, to help them finish that wing. You know what I'm saying?

Mason

Right, I understand.

Ferguson

Because they don't understand endowments and how important they are. They talk to her like she's crazy. And then, when they had that show about the sixties, they didn't use any of her work that she gave them of artists who were in the show! They were from the museum collection given by Miriam Matthews. That's how you give the show validity! If she gave them a piece of Suzanne Jackson's that she bought in the sixties, and you've got Suzanne Jackson in the show, and you own a piece of her work from the sixties given to you by Miriam Matthews, you don't use that piece in the show? Come on! That means Lizzetta doesn't know anything about putting together an art exhibit! That gives your institution credibility! Also, it does something for Miriam. You think that Miriam won't come through there and see there isn't any of her work in there and see a piece that is not as good as the one she gave to the museum? And she goes off and tells that story to other people. That's how I found out; Miriam told me! Because I didn't have any knowledge of what she had given to the museum. And let's say some of Alice Gafford's work was no better than a high school student. Well, so what? That isn't the reason you- You deal with it from an historical context, not from an aesthetic point of view. Because when Beulah Woodward and Alice Gafford were doing art in Los Angeles, nobody else was doing it! So you treat that from an historical context, not from an aesthetic context. You don't compare her with Elizabeth Catlett. [laughter] That's madness. So how is an institution going to grow? One time I was talking to [Donald] Hoops, who was a big curator in American art, right? Well, we were having problems with the majority culture saying that we were ten years behind, that aesthetically we hadn't caught up to the Europeans and Americans. And I use the term European American with them because they use the term African American with me. They are no more American than I am. They're immigrants, and I'm a slave. So I don't call them whites anymore; I call them European Americans. So I was in a gallery during an American art show with Donald Hoops. So I started a conversation with him

about the fact that early American art was so poor. Because a lot of American artists used props, right? Then they just painted the heads in. That's why when you look at it it looks all funny, right? It was so poor that they gave it a name; they called it "primitive." If you study art history you know that.

Mason

Sure. Art was looked at as being closer to a piece of furniture than an actual art object. It was more like a craft.

Ferguson

See, they have tried to justify it that way, but it still has come off as American art.

Mason

Right.

Ferguson

But they make excuses for it.

Mason

Right.

Ferguson

And you say, "But it's American." That's the only steady quality you've got. It's just American. Well, that's the same thing with Alice Gafford. It should be the same thing. So they try to clean it up.

Mason

Sure. And you can look at an early American piece and talk about the vitality and the individualism in the piece. [laughter] Never mind that the technique is substandard. But yeah, I agree. I mean, from an historical context-

Ferguson

Well, I did have an advantage. I didn't get my art history from UCLA or one of those schools, right? I got my art history from the County Art Museum. I got my art history from listening to the professors lecturing to a select group of people-professionals, not necessarily students. And Western historians have a

habit of being truthful with their peers and their potential peers. I fought with another guy in a classroom, but I got to listen to it. Because I had heard the word "primitive" when I first heard it. I always thought that primitive was the Indians in the context of art. So art in America was nothing until 1945. But I was privy to seeing the collections of American families early on in my career at the museum, like the Chrysler collection or the Rockefeller collection, which was mostly European art, not American art. Because in early America the decorative arts were the biggest part of the medium early on. It wasn't until 1945 or '46 that American art in this country really took off. My introduction to other art, European art, was the exhibit at the museum called *The Berlin Masterpieces*.

Mason

Right. I remember your being surprised that so many people came to see the show. And that was held at the same time as the Freedom Train.

Ferguson

That's right. You've got a good memory!

Mason

Well, I went through my notes yesterday. I don't remember from 1990.

Ferguson

It was a big experience for me, being an eighteen-year-old kid out of Watts, to walk through this train and see the Declaration of Independence. I am probably the only person in Los Angeles who remembers that.

Mason

Maybe.

Ferguson

And then the van Gogh show after that. And Rubens, we did a show with Rubens, his art and also his drawings, because he was supposed to be so far ahead of his time with his drawings. And an Italian came to America and built a miniature of things from his drawings, and he exhibited them at the museum. I think it was Rubens.

Mason

An Italian copied his-

Ferguson

Drawings.

Mason

-and exhibited them as Rubens's drawings.

Ferguson

Yeah, well, along with his art. The art traveled. He also did like drawbridges from whatever time he lived in. That was interesting.

Mason

Yeah. No, I understand that was common in the early museum setting, where plaster casts and imitations were exhibited like original art objects, that that was just the way they did things here.

Ferguson

It's all they had at the County Art Museum. Well, you know that in my lifetime I damn well knew near the whole collection of paintings and drawings and sculptures at the museum. I know them visually by heart. So you can see how the museum has really grown since 1964, which hasn't been but thirty years. But money does that. Sometimes that's why I'm not too hard on the Afro-American Museum, because it's only twenty years old, and it still has growing pains, right? And it's probably farther along after twenty years than the County Museum was after twenty years, if you want to use that kind of analogy. Of course, you can't, because times change. But I do think that we have a responsibility not to let this kind of thing go on over and over and over. Because I think John Outterbridge is too important to our culture as an artist to keep doing that. I can understand the first little books that Samella wrote; that's all right. But John is sixty years old-sixty-one to be exact. And he still has to suffer through? And now he's going to another country, and the same person who wrote that essay [for the California Afro-American Museum retrospective] will be writing that essay. And she won't be writing it for John, she'll be writing it for the Brazilians. And then he will travel to South Africa.

And John said he didn't select her. I know he's lying. He said that she got picked from a number of people who entered. I don't believe that.

Mason

These artists must have an amazing spirit to just keep going year after year and producing work, because that's what they need to do, and yet-

Ferguson

Well, those are artists.

Mason

Yeah. But when they get a big retrospective like the John Outterbridge show-

Ferguson

You see, those are artists. There are two categories: there are people who do art, and there are artists. John Outterbridge is an artist. John has to do art. It has nothing to do with money or recognition. He has to do art.

Mason

Right.

Ferguson

Charles Dickson, he has to do art. Charles is someone who has lived at one time in some of the worst conditions in the world. It has nothing to do with monetary gain or- David Hammons, who lived in alleys. He has to do art. Those are the people who are artists. They can't explain to you what would make them do that. Like the guys in Georgia, in Mississippi down there. Did you ever see that on TV? Oh, you should have seen that character. Well, they beat them out of all their money and were taking their money out of the Delta of Mississippi and taking it to Europe to sell it for \$10,000 and \$15,000 and \$25,000 and \$100,000 and giving them \$500 for it.

Mason

Where was this?

Ferguson

In Mississippi.

Mason

What year was this?

Ferguson

It was on *60 Minutes*.

Mason

Oh, it's happening now!

Ferguson

Yes.

Mason

Oh! Well, it's like all those jazz musicians-

Ferguson

Here the guy can't read, can't write-

Mason

It's like the jazz and blues musicians.

Ferguson

Yeah, same thing. Same thing.

Mason

They'll make a record, and they'll get \$100 or something.

Ferguson

And here this illiterate man is telling them, "It ain't about money; I have to do art." And they say it looks like a Miró or a Giacometti. How could a man who can't read be influenced by Giacometti? You could say that about Europeans, but you can't say that about African Americans. And in this essay- You have finished reading it, is that right?

Mason

I just flipped through it.

Ferguson

She gives all this credibility to- She gives some to Noah [Purifoy] and Mel [Melvin] Edwards. But, see, what I don't understand, Karen, is why was it necessary to include this paragraph down where it says Outterbridge-?

Mason

Okay. It talks about how when Outterbridge was at the Pasadena [Art] Museum he became aware of Bob [Robert] Rauschenberg, Mark Di Suvero, Larry Bell, etc. He was one of the preparators for a 1967 exhibition. "When Andy Warhol painted his soup cans, Outterbridge was still in Chicago. But by 1965, he'd begun to insert aluminum and tin cans and literally deconstruct." This is on page eleven. Well, I don't know what to say. It's just wrong, and we'll have to do better next time.

Ferguson

[laughter] Yeah, I like your attitude.

Mason

I feel bad for John. As I say, he deserves better.

Ferguson

I feel sorry for Lizzetta too, because she thinks that that gives her some credibility so she can link up John with Claes Oldenberg, Donald Judd, Mark Di Suvero. These are important names in the established art community. So she's going to give John some credi-bility by including them in her essay. It's untrue. John always has made the statement that he saw these artists when he was at the Pasadena Art Museum. John was at the Pasadena Art Museum because he needed a job to help feed his family, right? And he might have had conversations with these people. If you ask Claes Oldenberg, "Do you know John Outterbridge"-? He knew me better than John Outterbridge, because I had direct contact with him, because I took care of his *Giant Icebag* for a year [for the *Art and Technology* exhibition] in Osaka, Japan, and here. See, she's writing for her own career, but she's so stupid not to understand that there are plenty of white people can do that. They come out of college every year. They don't need her to do that. She could have written that whole essay from a black perspective. Shit, I would have gone out and found somebody who

looked like they had been influenced by John. I'd have used Ruth Waddy. John Riddle did a cubist sculpture during the sixties. Why give Picasso the recognition? Why not just go straight to Africa? Why give it to who stole it from Africa? Because she's not writing for John, she's writing for herself, which is all right, but she doesn't have to do that. You know what I mean? Because there isn't any white institution that's going to hire her. If any white institution is going to hire her, they are going to hire her as a curator to go and get information about a white artist or as a curatorial aide or assistant curator. How many full-time curators are there in America at this point in any institution?

Mason

You mean, what's the total number of curators in-?

Ferguson

Black.

Mason

Oh, black curators.

Ferguson

Male or female.

Mason

Well, I could- In white institutions, there's-

Ferguson

Any institution!

Mason

Well, there's Lowery [S.] Sims at the Metropolitan Museum of [Art]. Is she at the Metropolitan? Lowery Sims, Kynastan McShine. They're both in modern [art]. Let's see. And then most of them-

Ferguson

They're curators in what?

Mason

Modern art. And then most of- The museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists in Boston- All of the black museums have black curators.

Ferguson

The [Studio Museum] in Harlem doesn't.

Mason

They used to.

Ferguson

Who.

Mason

Mary Schmidt Campbell was a curator before.

Ferguson

She isn't there anymore.

Mason

Right. She became the director and then she went to work for New York. I don't know who the curator is.

Ferguson

And most of the people at the Smithsonian [Institution] are there as curators and hope that they can get that museum off the ground floor. Well, they haven't passed the bill yet to build it, so they're doing busy work for other cultures.

Mason

They are learning skills they can pass on.

Ferguson

There's ten in the whole country? Are there ten in the whole country? Black museums or white museums?

Mason

I don't know.

Ferguson

The curator at the Museum of African Art in New York is a white girl!

Mason

Right. But I think that most of the museums of African American art have black curators.

Ferguson

Oh, they have black curators. They have people who work as directors and curators.

Mason

I know the director of the Museum [of Fine Arts] in Boston is black.

Ferguson

Barry Gaither?

Mason

Yes, Barry Gaither. I don't know. I'd have to think about it. And then at the university museums, like at Hampton [University], [Jacqueline] Fonvielle-Bontemps. There are some. But as far as Ph.D.'s in art history, I think there are far less than ten. There might be ten that I know of, anyway. So it's hard.

Ferguson

Yeah, because it's hard for people to pursue a career that you have no job for at the end.

Mason

Well, that's everybody. Even if you go into engineering, how do you know if they're going to need chemical engineers five years from now?

Ferguson

Oh, they gear up for it in the white community. I'm not concerned about any other community, because white people have a different system. They've got people in this country, first-generation Europeans, who have been here a lot

shorter than you, who have been here sometimes ten and under years, who can get better jobs in the arts than you can get. Or from Romania or Bosnia, because they're Europeans. There aren't too many American museums in this country. Most of them are European in architecture and focus. Because they've only had about fifty years to start developing American art-since World War II. Because all the artists who came here after World War II, they're European artists. [Franz] Kline, [Willem] de Kooning, and all those people, they're not American artists. You can say Jackson Pollock, Frank Stella, Claes Oldenberg, that group historically. So the African American art people aren't new, but they're lucky, because they're new in the whole art movement in America. You know what I'm saying? There just aren't any avenues for you, right? Even where Barry Gaither is, you know he's been there for thirty years. And they still start with him. And they're still down doing white things. I'll bet their staff is-what?-two people

Mason

Probably.

Ferguson

Because a lot of times when African Americans become rich or prosperous, they have a tendency to support the majority culture. It's not as bad now as it was fifty years ago. But our whole Harlem Renaissance, they never considered creating some culture about their own race of people. So all their work ended up in the Harmon Foundation or the Grunwald Foundation. It was controlled by Jews. Because that whole museum, that whole area is socialistic.

Mason

I think we talked about this before. I mentioned that I was reading that [Archibald] Motley interview in the Archives of American Art, and he talks about how one of his teachers at the Art Institute of Chicago went to some of the prominent black doctors in the Chicago community and said, "Look, we have a black artist, he's doing black subjects. Can you please buy a piece of work?" And Archibald Motley said they just weren't interested, and that was that. So-

Ferguson

Yeah, I remember one time when they contacted me about getting a photograph of a man who was the first black dentist to graduate from the University of Southern California [USC] dental school. His name was-

Mason

This wasn't John [J. Alexander] Somerville.

Ferguson

John Somerville.

Mason

But who did I talk to-? What's John Riddle's wife's name? [Carmen Riddle]
Anyway, somebody in her family also went to dental school.

Ferguson

He practiced dentistry. [John] Garrott was his name.

Mason

Yeah, Garrott, right.

Ferguson

He didn't graduate from USC. He was the first black man to practice dentistry in the state of California.

Mason

Oh, I see.

Ferguson

I know John Riddle's wife well, and she probably was my second or third generation, right? And she's unclear about that, but I wasn't unclear about it. John Somerville graduated from the University of Southern California in 1907. Probably at that same time Garrott was practicing dentistry. His wife, Vada Somerville, she graduated from the same school four years later. John Somerville also built the Dunbar Hotel.

Mason

Right.

Ferguson

And I can understand that black people at that time were not sophisticated enough to know it was more important not to change the name to Dunbar. They should change it back to John Somerville-right?-today! I have all the respect in the world for [Paul] Laurence Dunbar, but he was a poet. To the man who bought the hotel from Somerville when he lost it during the '29 crash, it probably was more political to have it named after someone like Paul Laurence Dunbar, right? But to people who live in California, from an historical point of view, it's more important to call it the John Somerville Hotel, because John Somerville had the vision and the commitment to build a hotel where black people could live. Because they turned him down when he went to San Francisco and they tried to get lodgings. But from an historical point of view, it's best to still call it the John Somerville, because Paul Laurence Dunbar didn't make a commitment to Los Angeles. He made a commitment to be a poet. Do you know what I mean?

Mason

Pardon?

Ferguson

Do you know what I'm saying? They should change it back to the Somerville. In 1927, for a man to build a hotel- He also built a group of apartment buildings on Berlin Avenue and called it the Vada Arms, named after his wife.

Mason

Right. Yeah, I remember those apartments.

Ferguson

Now, the Dunbar had been around there for twenty years. They aren't doing anything over there, because they've got a group of young people over there who don't have any idea about the historical, nothing about this street [Central Avenue].

Mason

Yes, they do. You'd be surprised.

Ferguson

No, I wouldn't. I meet with them all the time. What they know they got from me. But it goes in one ear and out the other.

Mason

Did you meet Tony [Anthony] Scott?

Ferguson

Yeah, I know him. I just got through doing a documentary over there for a TV company. I told him straight out when I got there, I said, "Look, if you want me to talk about Duke Ellington and Count Basie and all the musicians who came to the Dunbar, you've got the wrong person. You've got to get somebody else, because I'm not going to talk about that. Because this hotel has more meaning to the black community, and this street has meant more to the black community than [just] the place where people came to see Duke Ellington and Count Basie and those people. That isn't what this street's about; that isn't what that hotel is about. Now, if you want me to talk about what this hotel was about and what the street was about, I'll talk about that."

Mason

Can you talk about the marches down the street?

Ferguson

I can talk about that. The right to work, where you can shop, I'll talk about that. I'm not going to talk about entertaining white folks and how Bing Crosby and all those people came over to Central Avenue slumming to hear the music of the 1920s and early thirties. I'm not going to talk about that. I don't want to talk about that. Because black people are about more than furnishing entertainment for white people through music and basketball and football and track, etc., which is nothing but entertainment for white people.

Mason

Well, the whole jazz development was important for African American culture as well. So if you wanted to talk about the development of African American culture in Los Angeles, then you'd have to talk about Central Avenue.

Ferguson

But you don't have to talk about the jazz culture. Because you consider the jazz development means when you start getting paid. That isn't what jazz is about.

Mason

No, I didn't mean that.

Ferguson

[It's about] where the music comes from. It's all right to talk about that part, but you must also talk about how they had floral shops and barbershops. The Elks [Club] was on Central Avenue. You've got to talk about the *California Eagle*. You've got to talk about Charlotta Bass, Colonel [Leon H.] Washington [Jr.] early on at the *Sentinel*. You've got to talk about the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association], the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association], those people who started the black counterpart. The man who build the Liberty [Savings and] Loan. What's his name?

Mason

[H. Claude] Hudson?

Ferguson

No, he was Broadway Federal [Broadway Savings and Loan]. You've got to talk about him, too. Louis Blodgett. You've got to talk about him. You've got to talk about Angelus Funeral Home. You've got to talk about the Florence Mills Theatre; [it's] more important about Florence Mills. You've got to talk about the one who was with Duke Ellington, that song "I've Got It Bad [and That Ain't Good]"- Ivie Anderson. But you've got to talk about Ivie Anderson not as a vocalist who sang "I've Got It Bad and That Ain't Good"; you've got to talk about Ivie Anderson who owned [Ivie's] Chicken Shack on Central Avenue as a business venture. People flocked to buy her chicken. You've got to talk about Dolphin's of Hollywood, the record shop on Central Avenue. We had our own label in the late 1930s and early 1940s. But they come in and they film over and over about the same thing, about the music.

Mason

Who was filming? Was this a TV station? Or was it a student video?

Ferguson

No, it was from somebody who got a grant to do a documentary. But studios have come there before, right? They make movies, and they don't get into the history. Because it gets into the history where people- You see, lots of people who came here in the 1940s, they didn't know anything about Los Angeles. They're brand-new people. You've got to talk to people who got here in the twenties and thirties to find out anything about Los Angeles. There were white people coming with their cameras. They don't care. They come to the first person they could find. It's like going right to somebody twenty-five years old and asking them if anything has changed in Watts since the revolt, and the revolt is older than they are. How can they know? It's always a quick fix for the media. So I didn't participate in that. And I don't know whether they're going to print it or not. I have no way of knowing. But I know I talked for two hours, and nobody said a word. They didn't ask me one time anything about Duke Ellington and Count Basie and Herbie Hancock or Johnny Otis and Lester [Young]. I said, "You can ask me about the Plantation Club, but not from [the perspective of] who appeared there as a musician. You have to ask me about Joe Morris, the man who built it and founded it as an entrepreneur." They had a nightclub that served all of Los Angeles and Hollywood. But, see, they only want to talk about black people in the entertainment field. They said that O. J. [Simpson] would get cancer because he had a lymph node at that time. Now, results haven't come back, but "He's got cancer." They have no control over the media. See, now, when I do art shows, I usually include black history as a part of the component of the arts.

Mason

I remember when you talked about the Federation of Black History and Art, Inc. That was one reason that you and Claude [Booker] split up, because he wanted to do more art shows, and you wanted to do art and history, that kind of thing.

Ferguson

We didn't actually, as you say, split up. We just went our- I still supported Claude in all the art. Claude just didn't support me and the history thing because he wasn't interested in that. And I could never do that under the banner of the Black Arts Council, because Claude more or less controlled the

Black Arts Council and its programs. So I started the Federation of Black History and Art. And when I did art shows, I would just include- When I found that the founders of Los Angeles were more black people than anybody else, I started an annual thing called the "Night of the First Angelenos."

Mason

Right.

Ferguson

And it was pretty successful. And then I created the Biddy Mason Award, which didn't last a long, long time, but I gave it out to some important people. I remember one time I went down to the Music Center [of Los Angeles County] because Horace Tapscott was playing his composition with the Los Angeles Philharmonic [Orchestra].

Mason

What's his name?

Ferguson

Tapscott, a pianist. He just got through performing at the County Art Museum every Friday. [Bennie] Maupin plays now. Bennie Maupin? You're not a jazz enthusiast, eh? [laughter] And Horace Tapscott, also. I should have called to tell you to go. Bennie Maupin will be there tonight. It's not hard to get from your house to the County Art Museum.

Mason

It's not difficult, but it takes a long time.

Ferguson

This was twenty-some years ago, because this was before me and my wife [Miriam Ferguson] got married. We were just kind of seeing each other, right? And the Watts community had a symphony orchestra [Watts Symphony Orchestra]. They used to sit in with the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra. There was a man named Mr. Woodson, who was ninety-some years old. He played bass, and he was kind of one of the people who had organized and kept Watts Symphony Orchestra together. I thought that he should have the Biddy Mason Award. So I went down to the Music Center-

didn't have no ticket, hardly any money-and I went up to the door, and I said, "I'm here to present Mr. Woodson with an award called the Biddy Mason Award," me and my sister"-Miriam Ferguson, who was my girlfriend at the time, my wife-and they let us right in. Then, at intermission, I walked up on the stage and presented Mr. Woodson with the Biddy Mason Award.
[laughter]

Mason

He must have been surprised.

Ferguson

Everybody was surprised. See, that picture there is when I gave those people a Biddy Mason Award. Claude Hudson, the man next to him, Miriam Matthews, and Ms. Vassie Wright. That's the award I created using Beulah Woodward's sculptures of Biddy Mason and oxen.

Mason

Oh, right.

Ferguson

A guy named Bob Heliton produced it on parchment paper, you know. I gave quite a few for- I also created an award at the Watts Towers called the Charles Mingus Award. But I just couldn't make people understand, including John Outterbridge, how important that was for us to create our own awards and not just give out those dumb city awards that you see in my house, the Harlem City Awards. I say we need to create our own awards with our own images besides the California seal and make it mean something to people. That's what community arts did for me. Community arts was so important. The Watts Towers [Arts] Center, the directors that they had there like Curtis Tann, John Outterbridge, Bill [William] Maxwell, the Studio Watts that they had in Los Angeles with Jim Woods, and some of the really important artists to come out of there like "Sonny" [Nathaniel] Bustion, Charles Dickson-

Mason

Oh, in that Mel Edwards catalog, he talked about being a part of a group of African American artists called the Seekers? I think this was in the fifties, because he left in the early sixties. I was just wondering if you ever heard of-

Ferguson

Who did he mention?

Mason

I just flipped through the catalog in a bookstore. I haven't even had a chance to buy it yet. But that just popped out, because I'd never heard of that group of artists.

Ferguson

Well, you see, Mel was kind of hooked up with the established art community when he was here. I think his first wife was Caucasian. He and Danny [Daniel LaRue] Johnson and- What's the other guy's name?

Mason

Yeah, I know they were some of the first black artists to show at the County Museum.

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Ferguson

See, Maurice Tuchman in 1965 was new in Los Angeles, and they had just opened up the [Los Angeles County] Museum [of Art] here on Wilshire [Boulevard] in 1964. They started to organize an art council to support contemporary art, so they initiated what they called a New Talent Award every year to- And whoever won that award, the museum would purchase that piece for its collection or some collector would purchase it and give it to the museum. Well, the first one was initiated in 1964. They only gave out one award that year, and it went to a European American artist, Llyn Foulkes. Then they updated to three the next year, and Mel [Melvin] Edwards, Lloyd Hammoral, and a guy named Rich [won the award]. Lloyd Hammoral taught at UCLA for a while. Well, anyway, one of the biggest influences on Mel Edwards was Tony Hill, because I think Mel lived right there with Tony in the same- He lived in Tony's complex there on Arlington [Avenue] and-

Mason

Yeah, I asked John Riddle about that. He told me that they lived close to each other.

Ferguson

Because I went over there a couple of times for the museum in a truck before I even knew Mel. I knew Tony. I didn't know Mel. I really got to know Greg [Edwards] better than Mel, although I met Mel earlier.

Mason

Greg who?

Ferguson

Edwards. That's Mel's brother.

Mason

Oh, he's an artist?

Ferguson

A very fine one.

Mason

Oh. Is he still in Los Angeles?

Ferguson

Yes.

Mason

What does he do? Sculpture? Paintings?

Ferguson

Abstract paintings. He's a very fine artist. You need to meet him. If you ever want to meet him, I'll hook you up.

Mason

How did you meet Tony Hill?

Ferguson

Because when I got involved in black art and culture and heard these things about Tony Hill and Ms. [Frances] Williams-who was his wife-I knew right away that I had to know them. So I made myself available to know them. Frances and I are still good friends, although Tony is gone. So if you've spent all your life listening to European artists and historians who never say anything that has anything to do with you, can you see how refreshing that is? To talk to somebody like Frances Williams, that can tell you about the house in Cleveland. What's the name of it?

Mason

The Karamu House.

Ferguson

The Karamu House in Cleveland and about black dancers and artists. Although I wasn't that young at the time, that was young information. Every time I got a chance I went and listened to what they had to say.

Mason

She's done it all. She's amazing.

Ferguson

Plus, in those days-you won't believe this-I hardly said anything.

Mason

I don't believe it! [laughter]

Ferguson

People don't believe that. I would just listen, because I knew nothing about it, right? Well, I knew a lot about European art, especially in the nineteenth century, just by being in the museum for twenty years. But I knew nothing about African Americans or African American culture or African American history or African American art. I knew nothing. And here are some people whom I could get first-hand information from, right? And the amazing thing about me-and I have to pat myself on the back-I never took a tape recorder or wrote any notes. I absorbed all this in my head. That part of my brain must have been completely smooth! [laughter] Information just flowed, right? And I maintained it!

Mason

It must have been interesting for you to talk to different people and make connections between this person over here who's doing this and that person and how they came together.

Ferguson

It was like being in a movie. You know, Frances is an actress. Some African American lecturers and things, they're actresses, right? A lot of black people are emotional, and they can take a simple history thing and make it seem so exciting. Especially when you have no idea- You heard about [Toulouse-Lautrec and van Gogh and Gauguin and Pissarro and all those people which those Western historians have made personalities out of- right?-and now these are the counterparts of that, but from an Afrocentric point of view.

Mason

Did she talk about Jacob Lawrence's first show?

Ferguson

Yeah, Jacob Lawrence. You know, she could talk about Romare Bearden. She could tell you about everybody. Tony was kind of quiet, but he contributed to the- They were like me and Miriam [Ferguson], my wife, at that stage in their lives. They supported the arts. It must have something to do with me as a person, right? That's why I prefer to start out in 1931, when I was born, because I truly believe that everything that has happened to me has something to do with where I came from, who my parents were, and the whole thing. It just had to evolve into what I am today. So when I write my book, which I hope to write before I die, it's very important that I start with that day that my father and mother were going toward their hometown and my mother was pregnant.

Mason

Yeah, and the storm.

Ferguson

Yeah, and the storm. You've got a good memory!

Mason

Like I said, I read it all last night.

Ferguson

You ought to write my book. [laughter]

Mason

Okay.

Ferguson

You ought to ghostwrite my book! Or you can just review it. That's remarkable. You've got to take the time to do that.

Mason

Oh, yeah, after I get my degree.

Ferguson

And I'll let you take time to read it. You know, who am I?

Mason

Oh, Frances Williams just wrote her sort of autobiography. I don't know who she got to help her exactly, but I think she's finished with it. She's looking for a publisher now. That will be really nice.

Ferguson

Well, you know, I paid tribute to William [E.] Smith.

Mason

When?

Ferguson

About a year ago. Because he was at Karamu House with Frances, right? I was able to go around and draw up people from William Smith's past that he hadn't seen in years. Frances was one of them, and a lady who did dance at the Karamu House forty years ago. Curtis Tann came from there, too.

Mason

Yeah, I remember he kept-

Ferguson

So I was able- Through Curtis Tann and his wife [Ethel Henderson Tann], who also at the Karamu House before they had met, I was able to put all these people together for William. And I sold over \$1,000 of his work, too.

Mason

He still does prints?

Ferguson

He's not working. He's just selling those old prints that he's had for years. I've tried to get him to go back to work. So it was a good night for nostalgia. But the young people who attended loved it, to see Frances there to talk about the whole period in Cleveland at the Karamu House. It's very important historically. I got it on tape. The next person I'm going to do is Yvonne Cole Meo. And then I'm going to do Charles Hayward. Have you ever heard of an artist named Charles Hayward.

Mason

Does he do prints?

Ferguson

He does historical figures.

Mason

I don't think so.

Ferguson

I've got a show of his now at the William Grant Still [Community Arts] Center. We got all the black people there, you know. And then, again, it's not an aesthetic show, but it's about a man who donated his whole life to doing art. He's still doing art, and he's eighty-five years old, and through some of the most terrible conditions in the world, like going to Chouinard [Art Institute], which is now Cal Arts [California Institute of the Arts]. And the Chouinards, the husband [Nelbert M. Chouinard] and wife of Chouinard, they were the most racist people in the world. They had Bill [William] Pajaud already over there,

and they told him don't mess with the white girls or look up the white girls' dresses or something.

Mason

So this guy Hayward went to Chouinard?

Ferguson

True.

Mason

That must have been after Pajaud was there.

Ferguson

After Pajaud, although he's older than Pajaud. He spent a lot of time in Texas. I got to say something about his life's work. A very interesting man he was. See, again, I don't deal with those people from an aesthetic point of view. He's another one of those people who had to do art. They don't do art, they're artists. Bill Pajaud will do at least six, seven pieces a day. Like it's a job. He's committed to the arts, right? It's not about selling; it's not about that sort of thing. It's something that you can't explain. And when people ask me why I do the things I'm doing, I say, "Well, I can't explain that." Why would a man want to climb up Mount Kilimanjaro to the top and risk his life? You don't know why they do things. There is some kind of burning desire within you so that you just have to do that. I got acquainted with the arts, and I love the arts, right? Every day I do something that has something to do with the arts. I wish I could explain, because it sure hasn't been of any monetary value to me. When I used to work at the museum, I did everything free. I got no money. But I think I was selfish, too, because I had this burning desire to find out about my people. I had already served twenty years inside an institution that only talks about the European all the time. And I think that has hooked up with my grandparents, who moved to Oklahoma when it was a territory, right? Because I heard stories about racism, etc. So I think it all has to do with each other. Like sometimes you have no control of whatever happens to you in life. It's something that's laid out, and you've got to follow that course. There's nothing you can do about it. It goes from A to Z, and you're just a player in it. You know what I mean? Because several times I started to quit the museum.

The very day I got hired I thought, "Can I go back?" You know what I'm saying? So I loved the arts. Also, I loved the people who created it because of that statement that you made. Here these people do this and hope that somebody else will like it besides themselves, right? They might not sell a painting in months or years, but they keep on producing. Like John Outterbridge, right? Do you know how long [it's been] since John has been paid? He hasn't been paid for forty years. You know, he's just not getting any kind of recognition that means something. That's why I was so upset about this [points to catalog for *John Outterbridge: [A Retrospective]*]. And then he had a commitment to sell one of the best pieces in the show-which we call *Olivia*; *Olivia* is a tribute to his mother-to the Afro-Am [California Afro-American Museum] for almost nothing. The County Art Museum wanted to buy the same piece, and they would have paid him big bucks for it, because this piece is going to be in that thing in Brazil. So, you see, the art museum would love to have this piece for it's own visibility in Los Angeles and to be represented in that Brazil thing. It was just natural, right?

Mason

Do you know what that show is called that he is going to be in in Brazil? [the Bienal Internacional de São Paulo]

Ferguson

I was so pissed off when you told me that Lizzetta [LeFalle-Collins] was curating it. I don't want to talk about it anymore. [laughter] And I have nothing against Lizzetta except that she's- I like her, in fact. I really like her. But- She told me one time that she thought it was good that I did exhibits of people who weren't of museum caliber. I said, "Well, I get them ready for you, Lizzetta! When I get through with them, they'll be ready for you." All that is career-minded, right? And I think that's one of the biggest mistakes that Afro-Am made. They gear their whole exhibition to blockbuster shows instead of building the museum from the local level. Do you know what I'm saying? But sometimes, when people are incompetent, they do that. They surround themselves with the best people so it makes themselves look good. I love Aurelia [Brooks], but she should never have been director of that institution. She doesn't have the- She's never published anything, you know. I think she should have had a job inside the museum, but not as a director. And right now

they don't have a director. I think that's on purpose. I'm sure they could find a director if they really wanted one. And I didn't find much wrong with Terry Rouse. Did you ever meet her?

Mason

No. She wasn't there too long.

Ferguson

You never did? Except Terry, she went through a big school, a white school, and she came to Los Angeles carrying that on her sleeve, rubbing it in, and trying to find out who the players were in Los Angeles and to deal with that, right? She was young.

Mason

What school did she come from?

Ferguson

I forget. Was it Rutgers [-the State University] or something? Some big school. You see, I've seen a lot of white people make that mistake. Whenever you come to Los Angeles, you've got to deal with those people who are in control. And Aurelia never liked her, I don't think. And she took the attitude "I'm the director," right? So now she says she never got any support, but I'll bet she caused that to happen to her. But I thought that eventually she would have made a good director, because she started including a couple of local artists, the grassroots people. You see, Afro-Am is not an art museum; it's a museum of art, history, and culture. So you've got to include the whole rather than just art. I think Ms. Brooks wanted it to be an art museum, but it's not just an art museum, because art is the kind of thing that you have to be-In this country, you have to be educated, too, because the majority culture, the whole Western world, developed the art scene in the Western world like some special kind of extended entity. Do you know what I mean? Like most museums, art museums, used to be housed in science and industry museums, right? So they created this whole mystique about art to separate it from the whole cultural spectrum, and they set certain aesthetic values that they could control. I really believe that. I never read that anywhere, I never heard it anywhere, but I've heard them talk about it.

Mason

It's called high art.

Ferguson

Yeah, high art. You've heard about it before?

Mason

Yeah, it's too much to go into now. But there are the high arts and there are the low arts, and then there are the popular arts.

Ferguson

Well, I just drew that own conclusion myself just by being around. Because to hear them talk about it, it's way out of context, right? They determine what that aesthetic value is, and nothing else has any value as much as this thing has. And I came to that conclusion by just watching the people who control it. So if [Andy] Warhol makes a soup can, and it has some aesthetic value to them, then it is high quality, right? If John Outterbridge made the same can, it wouldn't have the same value. Now, they would probably deny that.

Mason

They would deny what?

Ferguson

That that's true, if John Outterbridge did the same can exactly.

Mason

Because his can would be about life in the ghetto. [laughter]

Ferguson

Or his can would be done by a black man. His can would have been a sardine can or a Camel [cigarettes] carton. I guess some of that rubbed off on to me too somehow. And I guess maybe if I hadn't been black I would never have dealt with that high art and all that. I would never have known what that meant. But they fashion a system that could endlessly turn out people to perpetuate that, right? So it's hard to break into it. It's so well defined from maybe-what?-three hundred years ago, or longer! It probably started with the

Roman empire, I imagine. I know that some of the women that I see in Renoir's paintings and Degas's paintings, I'm sure that European women didn't really look like that, all those rosy cheeks and very white skin. [laughter]

Mason

Yeah, there's a whole issue about the drawings of, say, Mary Cassatt, for example. She used a lot of domestic help as models, and they are taken out of this sort of class context, so- Well, it's well known that a lot of the artist models during that time were prostitutes and actresses. But if they had a nice face and a nice form-

Ferguson

I just simply don't believe that they looked like that.

Mason

Oh, well, that's an artist's interpretation.

Ferguson

I think paint did that!

Mason

Oh, that's the artist's interpretation.

Ferguson

Do you know what I'm saying?

Mason

Yes, I understand what you're saying.

Ferguson

That was all part of the Western world, using the Western world women as the-how should I say?-as a model for all creation. They did that also after the Civil War or after the Reconstruction period. When Rutherford [B.] Hayes gave them back their states' rights, they used their white women again to justify all the killing and the genocide of black men. The Western world set their white woman up as a prize and that black men were going to taint their whole

existence, which made Western white women become more vicious than the men.

Mason

You know, a lot of feminist scholars today have talked about that, because they recognize that this idealized image of womanhood oppresses women, also. So it's in their interest to kind of expose the whole ideological program behind the production of that kind of imagery. I can see you in an art history seminar now! [laughter]

Ferguson

I just came to that conclusion from listening, because I never attended no classes or anything. One of the first feminist movements in this city, I was invited to one of their first meetings. I was the only male there. I never figured that out.

Mason

This wasn't the-what?-Womanspace?

Ferguson

I forget. Judy Chicago was there.

Mason

But this wasn't the house that they made with all the different rooms-

Ferguson

It was at a house. I'm trying to figure out where it was located.

Mason

But you would remember this house. The whole house was an artwork inside, and they had- In the kitchen there were eggs all over the walls.

Ferguson

It was in the sixties.

Mason

Yeah, they did a lot of-

Ferguson

Well, I'll tell you, Samella [Lewis] and Ruth Waddy were there. I was the only man there. And Ruth Waddy was lecturing when I came in. They had Ruth Waddy sitting up on a pedestal in front of everybody, right? This was real weird to me.

Mason

Okay. I know she got an award from the Women's Building.

Ferguson

Maybe that was it.

Mason

That was downtown. They had two buildings.

Ferguson

That came in the seventies and eighties.

Mason

Yeah, that was later.

Ferguson

This was earlier. This was before I met my wife. Well, anyway, guys get invited to- See, a lot of movements use black people because you're identified with protests and mistreatment and oppression. So if you are open and voice that, a lot of movements will have you as their friend, especially black. Because black people are synonymous with oppression, right? That's why they can never explain to me how a black feminist could have the same agenda as a white feminist, because she's black first and female second. And when you go through those programs, usually black females are never part of the ruling power of that particular movement. Like why is it necessary to have a minority AIDS program? AIDS is an international problem. Why isn't it just about AIDS? The reason is because in all the money generated for AIDS by different people, sometimes a small fraction of it finds its way down to the black population. Like all that money raised by Elizabeth Taylor and all those Hollywood people are the results of that guy- What's his name? Rock Hudson? Does that money

get down to black patients? No. So they're saying that a white AIDS victim will live twice as long as a black person with AIDS because of the funds. Well, that's the way I feel about the black feminist movement. Why is it necessary? I think that just creates another wedge in the black community to do a genocide on the African Americans. Because it seems to me that African American women could rationalize why they are so free in this country and black men aren't. Why do they buy into the hype? If we're all born the same, endowed with the same makeup from birth, why is it that black females can progress so much faster than black males? I think that's not a genetic problem, it's a social problem. Why, all of a sudden, when the workforce for the female is about forty years old in this country- Yeah, you know.

Mason

You mean the-

Ferguson

Since World War II, for any female.

Mason

When they entered the workforce?

Ferguson

Entered the workforce.

Mason

I'm not sure what you mean.

Ferguson

Why is it that the African American female in the job workforce has more power than the African American male? More doors were open-

Mason

But black women didn't enter the workforce after World War II.

Ferguson

No, I said they were at the beginning of the whole workforce, white or black, for women. That's one of the things that the white male- In order to include

more black people in the "club," they had to include white females. White females slid with black males, because the laws they had to rewrite for black males they couldn't rewrite if they didn't include white females. And then the white male structure decided if they wanted to contend with anybody on any level for these positions, they would rather deal with a black female than a black male. Because those curator jobs that you just mentioned, most of them are females. [There are] more black females in corporate America than black males. I know it's pretty hard for you to deal with that, being a 1994 black female. Boy, me and Varnette [Honeywood], sometimes we'd really go around and around about that. But I get tired of hearing black females say that they can't find anybody on their same level. Even my own daughters, that I had to wrestle with early on. But then I can't- "You keep trying. You'll find somebody." I said, "I'll tell you what you should do Regina [L. Fergerson]"- that's my older daughter. I said, "You go find your garbage man and fall in love with him. Then every day when he comes home, you get out the water hose and wash him down." So she was telling me, "Well, what are we going to talk about when we come home from work?" I said, "After you come home from work, what do you want to talk about?"

Mason

[laughter] Turn on the TV.

Fergerson

I said, "I hope that you would want to talk about you and his relationship with you. I'm sure you don't want to carry on an intellectual talk. Come on!" So she found somebody, and they're very happy. He hadn't got a whole lot of degrees either, but he's good to her. He's got a good job.

Mason

Is this your daughter who's a dentist?

Fergerson

No, my daughter who's a dentist [Melanie Fergerson Montgomery], she married a chemist [Charles Montgomery]. And he's more stupid than my daughter, who's not that kind of a professional, because he's one of those new black men who's making it as a chemist. He works for Helene Curtis

[Cosmetics]. He's the only black man in his department, and he likes it that way. He's a very sick young man! I can't see how my daughter came out of this house and married him. It must be economics, because they have no children.

Mason

Do you know the term that they use these days? DINKS: double income, no kids. [laughter]

Ferguson

Yeah, I hear it all the time. I don't hear it said that way, but I hear it from my daughter, my career daughter. She'll probably never have children. She'll probably be a miserable old woman. I feel sorry for her. And I'll just be straight out with her, right? I said, "I want you to have some children because I'm a selfish old man. I want you to have some children so that I can have some grandchildren from you. I don't give a damn about you to be truthful with you." And she goes, "Pop, I'm not sure I want to have any children. I'm not sure me and my husband should have any children." "Then why did you marry that sucker for? Because he's a chemist? Because he's got a big house in Pill Hill?"

Mason

Where's that?

Ferguson

It's a suburb in Chicago where all these black doctors and lawyers live. [laughter] You never see your neighbors, and people come home in the evening and don't speak to each other. I'm from California, and I'm standing out in front dressed in African clothing, and they drive on by and don't say anything. Because I was there for ten days last summer. But women do that, right? Men don't usually do that. They marry you because they're attracted to you.

Mason

That's worse.

Ferguson

How many times have you been married?

Mason

I just can't imagine spending my life with someone because they look good to me. That just doesn't make any sense to me.

Ferguson

That's the first step, though.

Mason

Sure.

Ferguson

No matter how we fight it, no matter how many lies we tell ourselves- Women can tell that to themselves until they're blue in the face: "I want a man who falls in love with my mind." Yeah, right. Divorce you, too, because of your mind. That isn't the way it is, a relationship between a male and a female. Sure you don't want to marry somebody who can't spell cat. How do you spell cat? D-A-T? I mean, you don't want to marry an idiot. Of course! They have these magazines who contribute to African American women's thinking now, like *Essence*. They have this monster that they've built with this tennis racket and the white pants. And the Jheri Curl that doesn't exist. My daughter was foolish enough to think that she could find that artwork. It's a work of art created by an artist and also a monster. And that's what the art theory is right now. They hardly have any male involvement or their own potential curators, directors of- You have Jeff Donaldson, Barry Gaither- Does Carroll Greene still work with an institution?

Mason

I'm not sure. I haven't heard his name in a long time. I don't know what he's doing now.

Ferguson

A whole lot of African American women there, though, on some level. And not just in the art field. My older daughter [Regina] is into health, right? She ran the claims department for the Watts Health Foundation. And almost everybody in her office is female. But then, I get accused of being a male chauvinist pig, but I'm not. Because I have two daughters whom I love

tremendously. I mean, they're both brats, but they're not spoiled. But they're brats in terms of the relationship with their father. "My daddy." I don't know how they ever stay married, because no man wants to be compared to your daddy that I know of, including me. But there are other kinds of things that we have to deal with. Why is it that your daughter can [leave] the house in the morning and come back in a day and she's got her job making ten dollars or more and your son can't? The best he can [do is] come back [working] with a fast food chain. And they came out of the same house with the same values. Most of my kids have the same values because they're raised by the same people. But that's why it was a hassle, why girls can always find work when they get beyond puberty and get out of school. My boy [Kinte K. Fergerson] always got [that]. Because I believe there is a plan to do genocide to the African American male, and African American women have bought into the hype to complete that cycle. So what's happening now is there are a whole lot of African American men who are marrying other people. And I'm not talking about people from the majority culture; I'm talking about people from Central America. Because you've got to be an O. J. [Simpson] to get people from that [culture]. [laughter] You've got to have megabucks! I don't think you have to be concerned if somebody marries you because you look good. I think you should be concerned if those were the only criteria for marrying you. But that certainly would be one of the special reasons. But I know a big problem in our country today around the black community is that the professional blacks have bought into the whole idea of middle-class America, which is [having] one child and in some cases not getting married at all. Because they have those favorite clichés, "I can do better by myself." So the only people having babies are the middle class and not the underclass, and they're only having one child. [This is] perpetuated by the majority culture who in number are-what?-eight times more than us? So it's all right for them to practice that one child thing because there are two hundred thousand of them. It isn't right. What are there? Forty million of us and two hundred-? Whatever. We only make up 13 percent of the population. And one of the first things they did was- I think the [birth control] pill was designed for African American women and the Latinos. And now you might say, what does that have to do with art, right?

Mason

Okay, let's say that.

Ferguson

Everything has to do with art. I like John Outterbridge's definition for art. He says, "Art is whatever I want it to be at any given time." I remember when I met Charles Dickson. His whole medium was the black nude form. He used to get a lot of criticism-you know, tongue in cheek-because he likes to sculpt or carve black women, where you've got to take your clothes off to pose for him, right? No one understood really why Charles chose that medium, right? Charles had no formal education in art. He's just born to be an artist, right? It's a gift that came from God, right? But he would read a lot of books, art books from the Greek and Roman- Because he's dealing with sculpture, right?

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Ferguson

So some of his best work is early on, when he did carvings and-

Mason

Yeah, it is an interesting fact that if you look at the whole history of art- Unless you want to look at, say, African American sculpture, maybe. I don't know that much about so-called folk art. But in so-called high art, there are far fewer images of African American female nudes than you would expect, since there is a whole academic tradition of the nude in art. So it's an interesting kind of art historical problem to think about the way that is.

Ferguson

But then, again, it's really- Since I've been knowing Charles for a long time, and I used to show his art a lot- Just by him doing that, it made those people who came in to view his art- It made the women feel good because it had something to do with them, and it made the men appreciate more their mothers, their sisters, and their girlfriends through the visual experience. By me being in the museum, I've been in a lot of life drawing classes in my life. And when I went down to work at [Los Angeles] Southwest College, they had all these black students drawing from white models. So I told someone here in the art department it doesn't make sense. You see, besides the white female

that the white man had always used any kind of way he wanted to, it also was economics, because sometimes they paid those models well to come sit there for an hour compared to what you'd get [working] at McDonald's. Because you never had a problem getting models. It was quite- You might not consider it quite good, \$200 a modeling session, a couple of hours; \$100 an hour is pretty good.

Mason

I thought artists' models got \$5 an hour, basically.

Ferguson

No. Where?

Mason

Just in most art schools.

Ferguson

Not in universities! They have guilds and things at the university. Nobody at the college level makes \$5 an hour, not even the janitors, not nowadays! Except maybe if you wanted to believe that. They do all right. But then they got some black models. Then it was so funny; the students down there said, "Mr. Ferguson, you must be responsible for that." No. And then this teacher down there, she was white, and she would go through the newspapers and get things for her students to draw, and it would be white people. Then they'd go on field trips, and they would go to the County Art Museum. I said, "Why don't you ever go to the Afro-American Museum? Why don't you schedule trips for that?" And this is not an art history class; this is a drawing and painting class. So when we have all that to contend with, why is it strange that we go out and buy images of other people? You know how hard that is to fight? All you've ever learned in your whole career up to now is probably basically ethnocentric.

Mason

As I said before, I think it's just a phase. You have to expect that things might change over time. Well, I didn't bring any questions with me because I didn't know exactly what we were going to talk about today.

Ferguson

But I'm sure you could just get some from up on top of your head.

Mason

Well, I think I asked you all the questions that I had. And you said that there were-

Ferguson

The wrong question?

Mason

Well, you just said that there were other things that weren't mentioned in the first part.

Ferguson

What did you ask me? I forget.

Mason

During the first interview?

Ferguson

You said "the wrong questions." I told you they were the wrong questions?

Mason

No, no. I said that I didn't bring any questions with me, and I didn't know what exactly you wanted to talk about today as far as your work in the community.

Ferguson

I said what I wanted to say today.

Mason

Okay. Because I know in the first interview we did talk about Southwest College and-

Ferguson

I just wanted to add to the community arts. I didn't think I remembered talking about the Watts Summer Festival [of Art] and John Outterbridge, the Compton Communicative Arts Academy, Mafundi [Institute].

Mason

Those were mentioned, but we didn't go into depth.

Ferguson

I probably talked about it in passing. What I really wanted to do today was to show how institutionalized community arts were, and maybe I missed it. Although they didn't have a building to exist in, it was like a museum without walls. Community arts didn't always have a brick and mortar kind of conception, you know; it came straight from the people. Whether it was under a tree out in the vacant lot or some walls put up in the park, it was very institutionalized, because it had to do with the people, and that would institutionalize it-the people who presented, the people who came, the people who participated in institutionalized community arts, the same as if it had been in a museum or gallery or university. And that part of art, from the 1960s until now, has been passed on in a real, institutionalized manner, but not a collective European setting as we know it, perpetuated by Western culture by being in a building with typewriters and microphones, etc. Although I feel like that's what we need to do as we go forward now. We need to create institutions that have brick and marble, institutions that have a place for our young people when they finish these "clubs" that they have to go to like USC [University of Southern California] and UCLA, etc., so that they have someplace to come back to to continue the legacy of their history of our people who have gone on before. The brightest ones, of course, always get absorbed by European institutions and become their gophers in perpetuating Western European culture. They didn't want a young artist [Noni Obalisi] to paint a painting about the history of the [Black] Panther [Party]. Because one part of the mural had to do with all the altercation in Marin County, when the Panthers with George Jackson and Angela [Y. Davis] and all of them killed the judge up in Marin County.

Mason

Angela Davis never killed anybody.

Ferguson

No, she was implicated in it. Because George Jackson- You know the George Jackson affair, right? I just said she was implicated because that's when she had to hide after that, because they said George Jackson was her lover or whatever. They didn't want her to do a mural of that because of the guns that she perpetuated as being a part of the Panther's getup. And at the end of the mural she had this gun pointed at the judge's head, right? So the [Los Angeles City Department of] Cultural Affairs didn't want to fund it because of the guns, because they said that guns- We have a problem with guns in the community now. But can you believe that the cultural affairs department refused to fund that when the Congress of the United States just turned down the anti-crime bill banning assault weapons and all that sort of thing? The movies constantly [show]-our kids see it every night-guns, guns, guns, guns, guns killing people, right? John Wayne and Charlton Heston have been portrayed in art for years in full gear, right? All they did was kill Indians, all those movie guys, and they want to turn down this. They don't want to fund this mural for something that weak! Because they want to make sure that for generations of African Americans to come that you wouldn't hold the Panthers up in high esteem, or Malcolm X or [W. E. B.] Du Bois. They want to make sure that you never find out about [Patrice] Lumumba and [Kwame] Nkrumah. Boy, you'd be surprised. I'll bet if you interviewed all the black kids who go through that academia, and you asked them something about Lumumba, I'll bet you that 95 percent couldn't tell you who Lumumba ever was. And I understand, of course, that a whole lot of you- Because things they do in your time, that you can relate to. But when you're talking about going through the whole academic process and you don't know anything about any of the first men who sought to unify Africa-if you're African American-right?- Or a man like Nkrumah, who's going to turn around, along with Lumumba- If he hadn't gotten thrown out of Ghana, he'd get rid of all the old books along with the laws, do the language over. Because everybody knows that that's one of the main things that they're afraid of in the case of Africa. No one wants to see that. And Jomo Kenyatta and those people were some of the first ones to head in that direction, right? And if you don't do that in your home, your kids will never know about these people. Because they're going to keep on feeding them Napoleon, Alexander the Great, Hitler. But you don't watch television. If you watch television, boy, they make Hitler the most talked about person in the twentieth century. He's

always on the tube. Mussolini- Well, that will be good because of the rise of fascism in Europe again, especially in Italy. It will be good if they are presented in that context, but I'm sure that they couldn't possibly ever do anything like that. It would just be for shock and entertainment value.

Mason

About black Americans?

Ferguson

No, about Hitler and Mussolini, if they were presented in the context of sort of neo-fascism in Germany and Italy. But they don't do that, I'm sure. I hope nobody is relying on TV for their total education. Your children, if you don't watch them- When you have them, make sure you are just as totally against TV then as you are now. And don't let the TV be a babysitter, because you'll be surprised at the amount of American students who get their current events from the tube. It's hard to control television in our society. Because if you take it away from your kids totally, then they become misfits, right?

Mason

Oh, that's true. [laughter]

Ferguson

So you have to join it and fight it at the same time. Usually I watch television with my seventeen-year-old. And he gets tired of me, because I'll be sitting there, and I'll be talking about it. [laughter] He doesn't like that. He'll say, "Please let me watch." And then I'll tell him, I say, "Hey, man, I'm sorry. It's my responsibility that I don't raise you on just a dose of constant TV. I'm sorry. You're seventeen now, and pretty soon I won't have much control over what you do. You'll be going to school next year. Well, for these last seventeen years I had to have some influence over your life. Now, whether you forget it or not, there's nothing I can do about that. I won't feel like I've not done my job. If I had ignored that, then I would have felt pretty bad." Then he goes like, "Daddy, you did it! Lighten up." "Not until you leave." Because this is the dangerous stage now, seventeen, for an African American male in this country with the whole Nicole [Brown] Simpson thing, this "angel" who's been done

badly by this African American male, right? This goddess. You know, he watches every minute of that.

Mason

Oh, no.

Ferguson

Which is all right as long as I'm sitting there to fill in what's left out. Now, you tell me, "What does that have to do with art?" That has everything to do with art! O. J. [Simpson]-

Mason

Oh, we don't have to get into that today!

Ferguson

No, I'm just saying that that has everything to do with art. No, that's just too long, Karen. I wouldn't put you through that. Because we might differ, anyway. I don't know. What are you, about thirty-five?

Mason

No, I'm thirty-one.

Ferguson

Thirty-one. You're young still. You've got a lot of bald spots on your brain. I'm sixty-three. I'm thirty-two years older than you. But you're on the right track.

Mason

I hope so.

Ferguson

Oh, you're an amazing young woman.

Mason

Thank you.

Ferguson

And I meet a lot of them. Whoever your parents were, they taught you to listen. I talk to a lot of people, and the first thing a lot of young people want to do is compete with me, show me how smart they are, right? Not to say that I'm smarter than them. But I can't fill in any gaps of what they learn in school. I try to fill in the gaps I know they couldn't have gotten from school. And I know they didn't get it from school, because I've talked to too many of them not to know. I know young people always have their ideas about everything, because that's one great thing about being young. You can formulate your own ideas. When I was growing up I formulated my own ideas about everything. And I'm not making this statement right now because I'm older now, but my generation was disciplined enough where you never competed with the elders. That was just something that you didn't do. [That was] handed down to you by your father and your mother, right? "You've got an opinion, keep it to yourself." You could add, use their opinion coupled with your opinion, and it would be fine, right? And a lot of people accuse me and say, "You're old, and you want to perpetuate that." I was the same way as all young people. Young people aren't any different from one generation to another. It's their time and their space. And my seventeen-year-old, he'd probably think you're an old woman.

Mason

Okay. I feel old.

Ferguson

I'm not talking about you personally- I mean, anybody from your generation, right? Because I know people your age, and my seventeen-year-old is around them, and he always says, "They're old!" Because by the time you're thirty-one or thirty-two, thirty-three, thirty-four, you've gone through a phase in life. My seventeen-year-old, he's into rap, and they don't understand the rap thing when they're old, that part of the rap thing he's into. So every now and then I have to remind him that I was seventeen once, too. "That's no big thing being seventeen, because I was seventeen. That's why I understand you so well." I really believe that through my involvement in the arts over the last forty-five years, it prepared me to be a better citizen, a better father, a better grandfather, uncle, and friend. I'm not saying the arts do that for everybody, but they did it for me. And I can't explain how they did it, but they did it. I feel

that if it hadn't been for the arts, I'd be a couch potato, a grandfather who just sits at home and watches television. And the thought of that scares me to death. The thought of me this morning as a retired person down on the golf course hitting a little white ball rather than be here with you? And I'm sincere about that. People say, "Oh, he's just putting people on." That's what the arts have done for me. Now, I don't have anything against people who play golf. Golf is a good game, but it sure isn't a force to anybody but the ball. [laughter] I came out of Jordan High School and wandered into a museum and got hired. I never set this as a career; it just happened. And maybe that's what's good about it, because thirty years ago I could have read through this and thought it was fine, too. And it's okay because it's a record, and you can't beat records, really, of any nature. Have you ever heard of the words "an" and "'nan"? It's part of the black English vernacular. Like "an woman is better than 'nan woman." What it means is "Any woman is better than no woman."

Mason

Right.

Ferguson

So "An catalog is better than 'nan catalog." It's the way some people in the South pronounce "nary" and- Well, it's just how you pronounce those two words, right? It becomes very romantic in terms of the way people communicate with each other. I know for years and years my family never used the word "chest of drawers." Whenever they sent you to that place to get your shirt out, they said "chifforobe."

Mason

A what?

Ferguson

A chifforobe. "Get some clothes out of that chifforobe." My parents used it all the time, and I used it all the time. I never questioned what the word meant until someone went to the "chest of drawers" and got something out. Then, when I started at the museum, I was good friends with the man who ran the decorative arts department. His name was [Gregor] Norman-Wilcox. I saw the word and thought maybe that was it, right? So I asked him, "What is this?"

And he said, "It's a certain kind of chest of drawers." It's a French word. And then I understood it. My mother's people came from Louisiana. Louisiana was a French possession, still influenced by a lot of people who were French who lived there. The word was handed down from generation to generation, when all it meant was chest of drawers. But it was a certain kind manufactured in France that they were doing in Napoleon's time or something, so that's not incorrect in terms of usage. That's why I told my kids who went off to college, "You had better have a good command of the English language, because you cannot compete in American if you don't know English." Because everything else is about English, right? I said, "At the same time, though, it's very important that you maintain words and actions that are very dear to your own culture, and you shouldn't feel ashamed if sometimes you slip back into that area, because there's nothing wrong with it." I said, "But your first thought should be get your strong English background." Because all the tests are in English. Do you know what I'm saying? One time they wanted to put my daughter [Regina] in a class with a professor who said he was writing a book about black English. [It was] not part of an elective; you have to take it at [California] State [University] Long Beach. I had business down at that school. So my daughter didn't have to take it. I said, "I can teach my daughter all the black English and slang she'll ever want to hear myself! I don't need her to go to school to learn how to talk that. I need for you to teach her something that will make it easier for her to compete when she finishes this institution and needs a job. It's just that simple." Because I know how when I was growing up, I had white teachers in schools who taught black kids, and they never would tell you how important it was. They would always play English down. That's a part of institutional racism. In fact, some of them would encourage you to become involved with trades rather than pursue any other- If you were black. That's growing up in integrated schools, because I grew up in Los Angeles with integrated schools. But when we became integrated, usually that integration tilted one way or the other. You get more whites than blacks or more blacks than whites. There never was an even quota. And then in the 1940s, the schools that I went to were no longer integrated. They became totally black because of migration of the black people to the West Coast. But the teachers were still white, and in most cases it was old teachers left over from 1865. [laughter]

Mason

They brought them out of storage, I guess.

Ferguson

They sent them there to finish out their careers. To die. There never were interesting teachers. Okay?

Mason

All right. Well, unless there's anything you want to add, I'll just turn it off, and that will be the end.

Ferguson

Like when I went to San Bernardino with that exhibit I was telling you about? That's a whole half an hour in itself. Why it's had such an impact on my life, and why the-

Mason

This is the last tape, also.

Ferguson

Yeah, the air force was having some interracial problems, so they decided to try to offset some of that tension by paying tribute to the African American women in the air force. This was held in San Bernardino. It's an air force base [Norton Air Force Base]. So as a part of the program they invited Claude [Booker] and I to do an art show there-which means that culture must be very important if they want to use art to help with that problem, right? So once we got there- Because you know how sometimes you get involved with your own life and your own children and your own wife and you forget about everything else that's around you, right? They had a dance to kick off the program, and we all went on the buses and stuff from where we were staying. Claude and I could have lived in the officers' apartments. We chose to live with the enlisted men. That was a bad mistake. [laughter] I'm not going to make that mistake again. We could have had an apartment instead of these barracks, right? But anyway, we're on our way to the dance, and I'm sitting there, and I see all these young black Americans in the air force, and they look like my own children. These really young sisters, maybe eighteen or nineteen, twenty at the very oldest, and then these young men looked like eighteen, nineteen

years old. So we go to the dance, and they've got the *Soul Train* [television series] music on. You know how they do the line?

Mason

Right.

Ferguson

And I thought, "These are people who are fighting for us. These are the people who go off and lose their lives in case of war. Why are all these young sisters in the air force? Why do they choose this instead of going to school, getting married, having children, whatever?" So on our way back on the bus, I had to ask, so I started interviewing some of them. And they were all in the air force because of the same reason-and most of them were from the South-all for the same reason: economics and a way away from home. And in some ways it made me kind of sensitive in terms of relating to that and my own children. I had a problem with that for a long time after I came home. I had the same problem when I stayed in prison for that week. Most of the young women in that women's prison were twenty-five and under, and most of them were there because of victimless crimes like bunco check cashing, prostitution, hanging paper. And if you have children of your own, I guess- All of these young people incarcerated. And most of them were there because they trusted some man who added to that. The reason they were forced to steal checks and do prostitution or whatever was our social structure. That was quite a week that I spent there. I'll write about that in detail when I write my book for a couple of reasons. One reason is that it helped change my life around a lot in terms of saying what you must do and what you can't stop doing. Plus, I met my wife [Miriam Ferguson] there. So it has a romantic twist to it, too. Some good stories came out of it. If we had time, I'd tell you about them.

Mason

Okay.

Ferguson

But a week is a long time.

Mason

Right. Well, I'm going to turn this off now.

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*. Ferguson added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

Cecil Fergerson . Date: August, 2003
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