A TEI Project

Interview of Kinshasha Conwill

Contents

1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE SEPTEMBER 2, 1992

MASON:

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

CONWILL:

I was born April 11, 1951, in Atlanta, Georgia.

MASON:

Who are your parents?

CONWILL:

My father was M. Carl Holman, who was a poet and a civil rights activist and a professor of Humanities at Clark College in Atlanta. He later worked with the Civil Rights Commission and was, at the time of his death in 1988, the president of the National Urban Coalition in Washington [D.C.]. My mother is Mariella Ama Holman. She is a retired schoolteacher. She taught French for a number of years in the D.C. public schools and prior to that in Atlanta at [Booker T.] Washington High School. And that's what they are.

MASON:

When you say your father was a poet, was he a published poet?

CONWILL:

Yes. He published mostly in the, I guess, forties and fifties, and his work is in a number of anthologies. *Kaleidoscope* is one, which is a collection that includes people like Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, and others. *Soon One Morning*, which is a collection of poetry and prose; and I believe he's also in *The Poetry of the Negro*. That was a collection that Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes put together. He was also a playwright. After getting an undergraduate degree at Lincoln University in Missouri, he went to the University of Chicago and got a master's degree. Then he went to Yale [University] drama school in New Haven and got a master's in the fine arts and as a student at Yale produced at least one play, if not more. And he wrote short stories. The short stories were published in magazines. He briefly published under a pseudonym—which I didn't realize—which he made up, which was a combination of his mother's maiden name and a first name that he made up. But most of his work is published under M. Carl Holman. And his work continues to appear in college and high school anthologies. A number of his poems, "Notes for a Movie Script," [and] "Mister Z," are republished from time to time.

MASON:

What was the subject matter?

CONWILL:

Of his work?

MASON:

Yeah, his poems and plays.

CONWILL:

His poems were a combination of personal things, notes and things that I think in terms of their being republished have a kind of historical interest. "Notes for a Movie Script" is a poem that's written in the style of literally notes for a movie script. So, I mean, the lines go like, "Open with light on this," and da, da, da, da—but it's really about a woman during World War II who is basically in her living room vacuuming her floor, and a bit of it is like a reverie of her thinking about her husband who is abroad in the war, and there's a kind of

flash—I don't know if it would be flashback, but there's—it's movie imagery in the language, where you see that this man has been killed, and his body is lying in a trench or something. Then there's a kind of fast forward to the doorbell ringing and something about her smoothing her skirt to answer the door. And the last line is something like, "Close, with no music, on her smile," and it's her opening the door. That's the way the poem ends. That has been published in a number of anthologies as a way to indicate some of the poetry of the forties and some of the interest in that. "Mister Z" is a poem, actually, about a black man who is very much an assimilated person. It talks about how he eschews all the kinds of accoutrements that would show that he's a black person. Like he doesn't eat collard greens, and he doesn't do any other things, and he's an Episcopalian. I mean, he does all the things that one does to make sure people do not know that one's black. And his wife is white. This is a poem of, I think, the fifties maybe, maybe the early sixties at the latest. Then another poem is—and these are ones that I know have been published—"Picnic: The Liberated." And some of these have been published in foreign languages. I think "Mister Z" has been published in Korean and maybe Italian, maybe German. I'm not sure. But the last one, "Picnic: The Liberated," is about an annual picnic of black people in Atlanta when everything was segregated. It's this group that goes off on the Fourth of July to have a picnic and the fact that their lives are circumscribed by the segregation that they live in.

MASON:

And who are your grandparents?

CONWILL:

My father's father was Moses Holman, who I believe was originally from Mississippi. I must say, I mean, I knew my grandfather, but I don't know a whole lot about his background. He did eventually work in the steel mills in Granite City, Illinois. I remember my father saying that. My father himself did as well briefly. He was a laborer. To my knowledge, he surely didn't have a college education. I don't know if maybe he had other education. And he lived into maybe his seventies. He died in I guess the mid-to-late sixties. My father's mother [Mamie Durham Holman] died actually a few years ago. Let's see, she was close to ninety but wasn't quite ninety, maybe in her mid-eighties. I remember her telling me that her mother died at an early age, so she was

raised by her father and other relatives. My father was born in Minter City, Mississippi, so that's at least where my grandparents were at one time. I'm not sure where they were originally from. Durham was my grandmother's maiden name, and the name that my father used as a pseudonym sometimes when he published was Macon Durham, which was partly using her name. Other relatives, other Durham people—I mean other members of my extended family—have looked up our history, and there were other Durhams in a Carroll County, Mississippi. Then, a number of Durhams and also Holmans separately at some point migrated to Chicago. A relative of my father was Richard Durham, whose full name was Isidore Durham, who was the publisher of the Muhammed Speaks newspaper. My father had one sibling that survived, a sister who still lives in Saint Louis, which is where my father grew up, in Saint Louis, Missouri. My mother's father was actually Japanese. His name was Kiushu Amakawa. He was an immigrant, a Japanese national, who immigrated sometime evidently around, give or take, around the turn of the century. My mother was born in 1922. He had been in America for a while then, and she was one of—I guess Frank [Durham], her older brother, died, but Frank, Charles [Togo Ama], Lloyd [Shogi Ama], Robert [Basho Ama], Mariella [Ukina Ama]—she was one of five children—four of them survived into adulthood. [All had Japanese middle names. The family changed its name to Ama.] And he was a cook. I don't know. I'm not totally sure if he worked in private homes or if he worked in businesses. My grandmother, who's African American, my maternal grandmother, was originally from I believe North Carolina. They met and married in Philadelphia, and they lived in south Philadelphia in an Italian neighborhood, basically. As I said, they had five children, and my mother was the youngest of five.

MASON:

Are you the only child?

CONWILL:

No, I have two brothers, one older and one younger.

MASON:

What are their names?

CONWILL:

My older brother is Kwasi Holman. He lives in Washington [D.C.], and he's actually now a fundraiser, and he's also worked in the D.C. government as a business administrator. He was a banker, and he's trained as an attorney, but he now works as a consultant to the Smithsonian Institution. My younger brother, Kwame Holman, is a journalist. We all changed our names, which is another story. My younger brother is a journalist, correspondent and producer for the *MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour* in Washington.

MASON:

Oh. That name should have rung a bell.

CONWILL:

That's Kwame Holman, right.

MASON:

Was your family involved in a kind of an artistic circle in Atlanta? You said that they were involved in a lot of activist things in Atlanta. Was there also an artistic circle that your family sort of moved in?

CONWILL:

Yes. I think there was really no real border between the two in my mind. My father was very involved in the Civil Rights Movement, as I mentioned. Our home was really a center for a lot of gathering. I mean, people like Julian Bond and Charlayne Hunter-Gault—at that time she was Charlayne Hunter. And at the time she was first a high school student and then was, along with Hamilton Holmes, the person who integrated the University of Georgia. James Gibson and John Gibson were young students, as well. All of them worked on my father's newspaper that he started, the Atlanta Inquirer. So I was always around writers. My father was a writer and poet, and I was always around educators and scholars. I mean, there were a lot of people at Clark [College] and Atlanta University. I knew a lot of professors. They were in and out of our house all the time. The visual arts as well were apparent around me. I remember—though I can't tell you exactly what they looked like—seeing Hale Woodruff's murals at Clark. We went to a lot of plays. A lot of them were student performances or mixtures of student and semi-professional performances there. I was in a play when I was about seven called *The King*

and I. which at the time I thought was made up by the people at Atlanta. I had no idea it had another life. The people in it included the family of Howard Zinn, who was at the time a professor at Atlanta University and later wrote a book about the Civil Rights Movement in Atlanta. Mrs. [Rosalind] Zinn played Anna, and I was one of the many children of the King of Siam. So being around poets, writers—I don't remember, per se, the visual artists too much except for one couple. There was a couple, Nese and Ves Harper, who now live in Copenhagen, and he works for Danish television. They were very influential to me personally. I mean, they were what in the fifties was quite an unusual couple—I mean an African American couple. They drove a foreign car, a Fiat. They had a Siamese cat. They were totally exotic and wonderful. He was a designer. He painted, as well. He gave at least one painting, if not more, to my parents. So to this day there's a sketch by him, a watercolor and sketch in my mother's home. It was in our home all the time. There was always art in our home. If it was an original piece, it tended to be by an artist that my parents might know, like Ves Harper or by someone like Samuel Brown, the painter from Philadelphia whom my mother, I guess, grew up with. So we had a Sam Brown and a Ves Harper. Then we had paintings later through the years from artists who mostly are not well known but were people whom we encountered or people who my parents knew or later my own work and my husband [Houston Conwill's]. Then we also had reproductions. I remember we had Picasso's *Three Musicians*. And again, as a child I assumed that this was a painting that we owned, not knowing that it was a reproduction of a very famous work of art. And I remember opening a book as I got a little older and seeing it and wondering why our painting was in this book. But music was a huge part of our lives. I mean, hearing, singing—you know, the different choruses at Morehouse [College] and of the other colleges. Music was played in our house all the time, everything from the blues and jazz to European classical music to popular music. So the arts were really kind of interwoven in our lives. And from an early age I had an interest in drawing, and it was encouraged, I didn't take formal art classes for a number of years, but my interest in art was encouraged. We went to movies. Things were segregated then, as I mentioned, so we didn't have access to everything, but we went to whatever we could.

MASON:

I was going to ask you, what do you remember about the Civil Rights Movement in Atlanta when you were young?

CONWILL:

I remember very vividly people that I still know, of course, like Charlayne Hunter-Gault and Julian Bond, as very young students. To me they were kind of like big brothers and big sisters. I still knew, though I didn't understand fully, of course, that they were involved in some kind of wonderful and noble enterprise. A number of people through the years came through our home. Eunita Blackwell, who's a mayor down in Mississippi now and was important in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, came through our home, and a variety of people through the years, whether they literally were at our house or I knew that my father knew them, like Marian Wright, who was then Marian Wright and later Marian Wright Edleman. I don't recall which one—I think it was Mrs. Schwerner—but one of the young widows of the young civil rights workers who were killed—

MASON:

[Michael] Schwerner, [James E.] Chaney, and [Andrew] Goodman.

CONWILL:

Yes, was in our home shortly after the murders. As I mentioned, my father was involved with an organization called the Atlanta Committee for Cooperative Action, which was a civil rights kind of civic organization, which was an integrated organization. I'm pretty sure that people like Jesse Hill, who is now the president of Atlanta Life [Insurance Company], was in it, and probably Reverend Borders, William Holmes Borders, was there. I think maybe Ivan Allen, who later became the mayor of Atlanta, was part of it. He was not then the mayor. The *Atlanta Inquirer* itself, the paper my father founded, was basically a paper of the movement. I mean, it basically documented the movement, and it documented sit-ins. It carried news from other parts of the South. As I said, its main reporters were the young students like Charlayne and Julian who were literally involved in the movement itself. So the movement in many ways was my life. I mean, I was a kid, and I wasn't literally involved in it, but it really shaped and formed my life. It formed, in many ways, my attitudes about race, my belief in not only freedom, justice, and equality, but in the kind

of promise of a better America. One of the things that I was just saying to my mother last night that happened because of my parents themselves and because of the movement is that I was able to distinguish the fact that the attitude of white racists towards me was their problem. Because I was nurtured in a home where I was made to feel that I mattered. That was a problem, and it was a threat, and it was a threat that could kill me even, it was that dangerous a threat, but it was not about me. It was about these other people. There were a small number of whites involved like the Zinns. We had other neighbors—I think their name was Christiansen—who taught at AU [Atlanta University]. As I said, members of the Civil Rights Movement who came and went through Atlanta would often come to our house. My mother was and is a wonderful cook and was very generous and would welcome people. People spent the night at our house on a regular basis, people whose names I no longer know but young people from Mississippi or Alabama who were coming through. So that kind of concept of fighting for something you believed in and the righteousness of our cause and kind of at the same time seeing these people as regular people—because I saw them eating grits and eggs—but also knowing that somehow what they were doing was very, very important to me and to black people—it was a very major influence on me.

MASON:

When you decided to go to Mount Holyoke [College], what were some of the factors that contributed to that decision? What made you decide to choose Mount Holyoke? Had you chosen a career path before you decided to go to college?

CONWILL:

I hadn't. To be quite honest, the two main things that compelled me were my brother and my brother's girlfriend. My brother, my older brother, at the time was my idol, and whatever he did I thought was just the thing to do. He was at Wesleyan [University] in Middletown, Connecticut. I had visited there with my younger brother and a friend and really had been struck by the whole milieu of these African-American students, who then were "black" and were just really calling themselves "black" in these New England schools. It was very heady. They seemed to be onto something quite exciting. Everyone had grown Afros, and they were talking about Black Power and the [Black] Panther

movement. It just seemed very exciting. I was still in high school, and I was involved in the black student union and a number of other entities—the school newspaper, the yearbook, all that. But this somehow seemed to be on quite a different scale. It seemed to be the real thing, and, as I said, my brother was my idol, so I figured anything he did must be wonderful. His girlfriend at the time, who was Sandra Green, was someone whom I initially saw as a rival for my brother's affection and later just came to adore. She remained a friend, a life-long friend. She recently, recently died. But she was at Mount Holyoke. She actually had graduated by the time I came, and she actually told me that I probably shouldn't go to Mount Holyoke because she knew me pretty well by then and figured I probably wouldn't like it. She was right, but I didn't know and I didn't care. I just wanted to do that. I originally went to Mount Holyoke thinking that I would major in English, because, though I'd been interested in art for years and years, I wasn't able to quite think of that as a career; it just didn't quite mesh for me. Although my parents had both been English majors, and I like to write as well and dabbled in poetry in addition to my art—so I went there thinking that I would major in English. But Sandra was right; I didn't like it. But it was, again, very important. I very much liked the people I met. I met people who, again, are life-long friends, not only at Holyoke but at other schools around: Smith [College] and Wesleyan and others, and at Amherst, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. But I didn't really like being at Mount Holyoke, by and large, and I left.

MASON:

Why?

CONWILL:

I think a couple of things. One is, I was much more unready to leave home than I realized. My family circle was very tight, and I felt very comfortable at home. It gave me a lot of nerve to do other things, but I always could come back to this nest in this very secure place. It seemed a lot further away than it was in miles. It was very different from Washington, where I was then living. It was New England. It was cold. South Hadley [Massachusetts]—which wasn't even a city, really—the town where Mount Holyoke was, was very small. The only industry there was Mount Holyoke. And though I had by then surely been in an integrated environment, the overwhelming number of whites and the

very small number of black people and the fact that it was a one-sex school, a single-sex school, had more of an impact than I thought it would. I think mostly that I was young, and I wasn't quite as brave and as adventuresome as I thought I would be. I was lonely. I got physically ill because I think I was just unhappy. But as I said, I met some wonderful people. My roommate was a great person, Juanita Brooks, and people—Constance Wheeler and Joyce Wilkerson and Carolyn Harvey and a number of other people I met there—remain my friends till now. So it was an important year for me but not a happy year, by and large.

MASON:

What year did you go there?

CONWILL:

I went there from '69 to '70. I came in the fall of '69.

MASON:

I guess the women's movement was beginning or picking up momentum by then. Was that a factor in the intellectual life at Mount Holyoke when you were there?

CONWILL:

It may have been, but I wasn't very much aware of it. What's interesting is that I've seen Wendy Wasserstein's *Uncommon Women [and Others]*, which is about Mount Holyoke. In a way I recognize it, but I don't recognize it because it was about white women at Mount Holyoke. I mean, the circle of women that are in that play are all white, and it was around the same time that I was there. Though there were obviously women who had friends of both races, there were basically two races at Holyoke. It was a time when black people were forming black student groups and—though at Holyoke we had a rather pathetic black house. I mean, it wasn't quite the same to be at a single-sex small college as it was to be in the big universities where—you know, these large—

MASON:

Like at Yale?

CONWILL:

Yeah, where it really meant something. So we had our little house, which maybe developed more after I left, but at the time it was kind of barely there. We had our student protests like a lot of others did, but again, it didn't have the same impact of a Cornell [University] or Columbia [University] or anything like that. Our president at the time, whose name I don't remember—it was a man—was very stern, and he basically told everyone he would put them all in jail and expel them all. It petered out, as I recall, fairly soon. There were some remarkable women who, during that time, stepped forward. There was a black woman, whose name I do not remember but who was just magnificent to me, who spoke not really just for black women. She didn't associate terribly much with the black women, but she was just kind of known. People held her in awe because she was just very well-spoken. She may have considered herself a feminist. Some of the other women may have, but I was largely very self-involved at the time, very involved with the other black students at this school. I spent a lot of time away from Holyoke. I went a lot to Wesleyan, where my brother was. I went home, which wasn't that close. My first trip home was two weeks before Thanksgiving. I couldn't wait till Thanksgiving to go home. So, you know, in hindsight I sometimes think maybe I didn't really take advantage of those years, but it was important. And I had wonderful moments. I mean, I had—again, I don't remember her name—an English professor who was really wonderful and who, though I didn't stay in English, really kind of reinforced my interest in literature and in writing and the written word. She told me wonderful stories about how disenchanted she was in her freshman year in college and how she kind of stepped away and spent all her time in the drama department and didn't go to class. And since I skipped a lot of classes at Holyoke, that made me feel good, as well. As I said, I met people who became life-long friends, but it really was—when I left I was glad to leave. I don't regret having left, and I think going to Howard [University] was good for me. It worked for me.

MASON:

How did you make the decision to go to Howard?

CONWILL:

I think largely I wanted to be back home. I realized that I wanted to be closer to my family, and again, that struck me as ironic, because I thought I was this real rebel and independent, but I wasn't. I realized that I wanted to go into art. I took a class in art at Holyoke, but art was minimal there. There was an art history class, and there was one studio art class by a professor who seemed to despise young women. He was one of those kinds of guys who thought of all the women as these privileged daughters of the rich, which obviously I was not, and many other women weren't. And even the ones who were, some of them weren't bad people, anyway. He was very disdaining and awful, but I realized that, though I didn't like him, I really was very much still interested in art. So Howard was there. I decided to apply. At Holyoke we had to make, sometime in the late spring, a decision as to what dormitory we wanted to be in the next year. I remember being kind of dragged to the place where you signed up by my roommate because I'd been telling her, "I'm not coming back." She said, "Oh, sure you are" because a number of people were saying that. It came time, and I was in line, and I don't remember exactly, but it was time for me to sign up, and I turned around and just walked out. Because I really had said, "If I'm going to do it, I'm going to do it." So I applied to Howard and was accepted as a freshman with advanced standing. Eventually I graduated in three years, so I completed college in the four-year term.

MASON:

So you enrolled in the arts program at Howard?

CONWILL:

Yes. Because the interesting thing was you had to make a decision at Howard because the School of Fine Arts was its own school. So even though it was an undergraduate school, if you wanted to major in art you had to enroll in the school of fine arts. So I thought that was important that I had to make that decision, because I couldn't—if I wanted to kind of mess around, I'd have to enroll in the liberal arts college. I think that was good that I had to make the decision, and I did, so I was accepted to the College of Fine Arts.

MASON:

Who were some of the faculty at Howard? Was Lois Mailou Jones—?

CONWILL:

Lois Mailou Jones was there, though she was not my professor—she was my husband's, Houston's, professor—and she was a very profound influence on everyone. I sat in on her classes. She would do demonstrations of watercolor, which anybody who was around who had any sense would come to see, because she was just magnificent. She could do a watercolor portrait better than most people could do a sketch with pencil or pen and ink, and she would talk throughout the lesson. She would talk about the colors. And I remember when she was talking about—she was painting this woman and was talking about the purple in her skin. I thought, "Purple? What is she talking about? This is a black person." But she was really talking about the colors that are everywhere and the colors that make the colors and about light and shadow and form. So just watching her was just magnificent. One knew that this was an artist who had had a whole career already. She'd lived in Paris, and she was married to a Haitian artist. I mean, she was quite exotic in some ways. In other ways she was a bit marginalized by those who were of the latter period who thought that she represented kind of the old guard. But by and large, people had to give her her due because she was such a fine artist and such a figure. She was and is someone who's quite aware of her own stature, which I think is fine. I think it's great. She talked about studying in Paris, and she would tell anecdotes that didn't seem to be arrogant or bragging, they just seemed fascinating. I mean, they really did. I think she had a lot of influence on people, not so much that they did work like her, but she, like a number of the artists at Howard, inspired one to be an artist, inspired one to believe that you could be an artist as a black person. I think at Howard and through the years other black artists for me were an inspiration in their lives, and the fact that they had struggled. She told a story of having won—I mean, it resonated with me, because I'd heard a similar story from my father, and I later read a story that Langston Hughes wrote about the kind of thing that's happened to many a black artist of being selected anonymously to win an award and showing up and being told that there must have been some mistake and being shown out the door. She told that without rancor but with—obviously it stuck with her. It was a story that even then was several years old. So you got the sense that she had been through a lot, but she had a kind of grace and style to her. Jeff Donaldson was the head of the Art Department when I came. I actually had met Jeff and Ed [Edward] Love that summer in Atlanta. My father and brothers and I had gone to the Congress of African Peoples, which was really, I think,

kind of the brainstorm of Amiri Baraka. And it was in Atlanta, right off the AU [Atlanta University] campus, as I recall. It was this congress that Baraka and others had called to kind of set up a series of agendas for black people in this country. Obviously it was not an elective group; it was not a fully representative group, but that never stopped anybody in the sixties. The participants, who were only a few hundred people, broke down at some point—I mean, not only broke down, fell apart, but broke out into groups. I was in [what was] called the visual. I think it was only visual, but maybe it was—I only remember the visual artists, and I must say, because Jeff was in it, Ed Love, I think some other artists from Afri-Cobra, it was this—it was clear. It was very much a late-sixties group. I was a high school student. I was literally. I was viewed as a high school student, although it was really a transition between my first year of college and my next year, but I was one of the youngest people there. I was elected to be the recorder of the session, and I was just totally in awe of these artists who were talking about an art that would reach people in their daily lives, an art that would be painted with inexpensive material, that would be accessible to people, that would be produced in mass production. I was already aware of art like this. I was very much aware of the art of the Black Panther Party, because my father had gone to Oakland and had brought back just tons of posters from this artist, Emory, who was—

MASON:

Emory Douglas.

CONWILL:

Right. So I had these posters all over my walls. That, along with black athletes and any other poster of a black image I could get, was what I had on my walls at Mount Holyoke and when I was in high school. This interest in visual representations of black people was really strong, so I was ripe for this group of artists who were talking about Kool-Aid colors and images of black people and positive images. All that was right up my alley at that time.

MASON:

I'm just curious. Why did your father go to Oakland? To see the Panthers especially or—?

CONWILL:

My father dealt with everybody. I mean, he knew everyone from—Whitney [M.] Young Jr. lived down the street from us. He was friends with Whitney Young, Roy Wilkins, Jesse Jackson, Martin Luther King [Jr.]. He met, and I know he knew, at least somewhat, Malcolm X. You know, Cleve [Cleveland L.] Sellers [Jr.], Stokely Carmichael. All of those people were people who, either in Atlanta or in Washington, were in our homes. He was really very much a behind-the-scenes person who really was a counselor to all kinds of people, no matter what stripe, and I actually often think that my father was a lot more radical than his exterior would have shown. I mean, he was surely someone who believed in the tenets of integration, who believed in equality and all that. I remember vividly particularly times when black people were murdered—like Ralph Featherstone was a person—I believe he may have been from Washington—who was murdered in the South during that time. My father and a number of other poets and writers and activists had a ceremony for him. A number of them read poems, and they spoke of the fact that we could no longer allow our sons to be killed and all that. So he was very involved throughout the whole spectrum of the movement. Jeff was one of the professors. He was really at the time someone I looked up to a lot. He was my drawing professor, and he was very involved in the kind of political activism and in—Afri-Cobra is and was a highly political organization. He was also an excellent artist. He was an excellent draftsman, and in his drawing class he took no prisoners. You really had to do it right. You couldn't get away with having black subject matter and not being able to draw it. He wanted you to have the skill of drawing. So he was quite influential, and he remains a colleague and friend till today.

MASON:

What major did you choose within the School of Fine Arts?

CONWILL:

I had a design major and a painting minor.

MASON:

What did design mean at Howard?

CONWILL:

It's a good question. The design I did was not commercial design, it was not graphic design, and it was not—it was called design, and it was—I don't know what the people at Howard thought, but I felt that it was quite a flexible notation. I mean, mostly what I did was paint, but I was also very interested in things like fabric design. And it started around that time, both Houston—who was not then my husband—and I designed greeting cards and made posters and did a lot of graphic things. At the time I thought I was going to—I might go into some kind of design, clothing design or something of that nature. But I really didn't have, like, fashion design background and a whole lot of graphic design background. I mean, I took everything, you know, painting, sculpture, photography—and this course which was basically called design, which really was the basic elements of design: form and composition and color. So I was really basically a painter, though my major was design.

MASON:

I'm sorry, I interrupted you. You were talking about some of the other professors.

CONWILL:

Yes. Ed Love was my sculpture professor. Again, I had met Ed as well in Atlanta. So I kind of felt like I had a leg up, having met these two professors who were major figures in my mind and I think very strong figures in the Department. He too was very influential. Again, the influence of people like Jeff and Ed really went beyond whether one copied their work because I really didn't. Anyone who did metal sculpture under Ed kind of looked like they were copying Ed Love, but it was really more that we kind of watched—and I know I did—how they lived, what they wore, how they taught, if they drank coffee or tea, just literally kind of studying them as individuals to see, what is an artist supposed to look like? What is this artist supposed to act like?

1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO SEPTEMBER 2, 1992

MASON:

So we were still talking about Howard. Some of the professors you had mentioned—Ed Love and taking a sculpture class with him. So in other words, you were exposed to different aspects, the whole spectrum of the arts.

CONWILL:

Right, which was great because—and also Wadsworth Jarrell was the photography teacher there. For a long time—or what seemed like a long time, it was probably only several months—I was very interested in photography and spent a lot of time in the darkroom. Again, I look back and realize how good the technical side of the training at Howard was. At the time I was almost, at times, oblivious to that because I was so taken with the personalities there, and I was so much looking to them. Just as I was mentioning, as Lois Jones was such an incredible painter and watercolorist, which was—watercolor was something I hated, because I was terrible at it, I thought. It demanded a kind of control and discipline which I didn't master, but she was wonderful. Jeff was an incredible draftsman. Ed taught a lot about the kind of physical aspects of sculpture and how to—all of them really taught you how to translate ideas into some kind of visual reality which was more than a notion. In my first classes I was basically in freshman classes, because although I had advance standing, I hadn't taken any art yet. So I kind of accelerated in the second year, but my early classes had a number of students who had no real professional training, people who may have been, you know, the person in the family that everyone said that could draw, some people who were already kind of calcified into these ways that they were going to do art because this is what everyone in their family had always liked. They really made you break out of that and really—I remember one of my painting teachers was Skunder Boghassion, the Ethiopian artist, who was really a wonderful artist and a funny teacher. He was this just incredibly cool and hip kind of guy, again someone who'd been a figure in the art world for a while and internationally, an African, someone who had studied in Paris. He was just really—I remember when I'd seen this movie *Paris Blues*, and it pans in this coffeehouse scene, and there's Skunder in the movie. It just made him even more exotic than he already was. I was doing this painting, and he came up to me and said, "You know, you seem to be having problems with this, that, the other." I don't know, for whatever reason he suggested that I turn it upside down. Now, this was a painting that had been done from a live model, so it

wasn't like an abstract painting turned upside down. This was a portrait of a nude woman. I said, "Hmmm." So I did. I turned it upside down, and I don't remember that that was a great revelation for me, but that was a kind of metaphor for what these folks did. They got you to turn your ideas about things upside down. Frank Smith was another teacher of mine. The course I took was not a studio course; I think it was a course about art which included something about children's art. Then my design teacher, I've forgotten his name, but he was actually very good. He trained at one of the major art schools and really probably taught me the most about color of any artist and teacher I had. I was, as you can see by my work, interested very much in bright colors, but also, in later years in terms of hues and value in color and really—I think eventually, as I did murals and other things through the years, I was able to mix colors fairly adeptly and fairly unconsciously because I really did have this very firm grounding in the training. Tritobia Benjamin, who is still at Howard, was my art history teacher. She was one of the youngest professors we had. She was really not that long out of school herself. And she was very lively and funny. As a woman I kind of watched her as—we didn't have that many women teachers. I mean, she was there. We briefly had a Korean professor, Hee Jung Yu, who was really wonderful. Her English wasn't great, but she came out with these wonderful, funny things that were kind of poetic. You never were quite sure it was what she meant, but she was very smart. And you could tell that she knew a lot about art. Then Lila [Oliver] Asher was another drawing teacher I had, who was also an excellent teacher. She had us drawing popcorn, and it drove us crazy. But if you could draw, you could draw popcorn. Because if you couldn't draw a popcorn, you were dead. You couldn't fake it, and you couldn't make up the—each kernel couldn't look the same. It was excruciating, but it was incredible training. Then Star Bullock, Starmanda Bullock, was another design teacher, and she was completely exotic to me. This is a woman who was married to an Italian, a black woman married to an Italian at the time. She had traveled in Italy. She would, in a way that was a little more self-conscious than Lois Jones, drop things like, "You know, when in Florence, you must see the—" And I'm like, "Yeah, I'm going to really get to Florence, Star, right." She's a very petite, tiny woman but very powerful emotionally in terms of art. So the women were very interesting, because there weren't that many of them. And they were very distinctive because some of them overlapped tenure but some of them didn't. Lila Asher, Tritobia

Benjamin, and Star Bullock were there at the same time, but I think—Hee Jung Yu was there for a while, and then somebody else came. And then even then I think Lois Jones was on a fairly reduced schedule. She was really an emeritus who was still teaching almost, it seemed. She didn't have a lot of classes. Tob really knew her stuff, and while she could play around and be funny, she was real serious when it came to the work. When it came to her tests, she didn't smile. You had to know what you were talking about. I think, those were the—I mean, I had another teacher who taught ceramics. I did terribly in ceramics, so I tended not to think about that too much. I mean, I loved it, I loved the clay and all that. The wheel drove me crazy. My stuff would usually jump off the wheel, so I did a lot of hand-built stuff and a lot of sculpture, really, out of ceramics. That I liked. But throwing pots—I'd throw them in the garbage. I hated throwing pots, I really did.

MASON:

Would you say that there was a dominant aesthetic at Howard in painting? And how would you describe that?

CONWILL:

Oh, yeah. I think the Afri-Cobra sensibility dominated at Howard at the time I was there. Jeff was the head of the art department. Wadsworth Jarrell, another Afri-Cobra artist, was there. Frank Smith, at some point during that time, joined Afri-Cobra. Eventually James Phillips came in; he was part of Afri-Cobra. Nelson Stevens, though he didn't teach there, was, at the time I was there, at least, a visitor fairly frequently. The work of Afri-Cobra was surely a touchstone for us. It was interesting, because here we were at—I don't know if this is evidently what Howard called itself, but it was a kind of a running joke slogan that Howard was the "capstone of Negro education." In many ways there was the old Howard and the new Howard. I mean, there is a Howard that was one of the traditionally black colleges, very staid. Those of us who grew up in D.C. had very mixed feelings about Howard. It was ironic that I ended up going there, because some of us disdained it because we thought you settled for Howard if you couldn't get in somewhere else. Because it was the hometown school. The fact that it had produced some of the most important scholars and thinkers in black life didn't make any difference to us. We were kids. All we knew was that's the hometown school. You're supposed

to leave town to go to school if you knew anything. But in many ways it had the vestiges of many of the black colleges: of propriety and a kind of dignity and an upright kind of idea, many old-fashioned notions. But this was also a school that had, a few years before I came, been through this major upheaval and had been taken over by the students. It was one of the black colleges taken over by black students, which was unlike the Ivy League schools and the white schools in general.

MASON:

It was supposed to change the Board of Trustees—?

CONWILL:

The movement was called Towards a Black University, because the contention, my understanding—getting this through the kind of history, the filtered history of the people who never graduated and others—was that it was too much a "Negro" university, and it had to become a black university. So it was about curriculum, as well. Our president at the time, James Cheek, was a very controversial president among the students who were the most—what they would think of as—progressive or what the administration tended to think of as radical. People thought he was too staid and too old-fashioned and not moving the University forward in the ways that they'd like to see. To me the Fine Arts Department and the Art Department themselves were kind of bastions and enclaves of what we would have thought of as militant views and radicalism. And, you know, looking back, we weren't that damn radical. We didn't really change the world or do anything, but we—in the theater department they put on Greek tragedies, changing the setting to an African setting. They did a black version of *Jesus Christ Superstar* called *Jesus Christ Lawd Today*. Again, my context has so often been where I am, and I didn't know that there was a *Jesus Christ Superstar*. When I found out not too long after there was, I thought, "How did they come up with the same idea that had started at Howard?" not realizing that it had gone the other way around. Debbie Allen was one of the prime drama students at the time. Charles—oh, God! What's his name? He was in *A Soldier's Story* when it was a play. God! I can't believe I'm forgetting Charlie's last name. He's a wonderful actor. I've seen a preview of a show he's supposed to be in, one of these many new crops of black shows. He's been in a lot of commercials. He's been in a lot of

legitimate theater but—Charlie Brown, a real hard name; that's why I couldn't get it. Charles Brown. Harry Poe, who's still now a producer, and another guy, whose name I can't remember, who has worked, I think, with a number of the dance and theater companies here in New York—then another guy who was a lighting expert. Many of the people at Howard in the various departments of art and music and theater went on to stay in the field and went on to be very famous, like Debbie, like Charlie, or others. They were there. It was surely a place where we all thought we were on to something and where the black aesthetic of the time, which was that kind of elusive thing we all tried to name, predominated in the sense that Africa was the touchstone. I also had an African art course actually in—

MASON:

Was it contemporary African art or the history—?

CONWILL:

It was actually traditional African art. And that was very important to me, because—gosh, the man's name was Kofi. I can't remember his last name.

MASON:

Herman Kofi Bailey?

CONWILL:

No. Actually I knew Kofi Bailey from Atlanta. He was actually one of my father's students. I knew him later in Los Angeles, as well, but I knew him first in Atlanta.

MASON:

I know there are a lot of Kofis.

CONWILL:

Yeah. And this Kofi was an Asante name. Kofi was from Ghana. [His name was actually Kojo Fosu.] Houston and I were both so influenced by this that we eventually, when we got married, had an African ceremony. This professor either wrote the book or surely gave us the book that we used to base our wedding on. So what would now be called Afrocentric curriculum or Afrocentric focus was surely the focus at Howard. And in general, I mean, not

only in our Department but throughout the University, when we had speakers like Stokely Carmichael and Louis Farrakhan and others—we had leading musicians and poets and writers and all that. In many ways it was dominated by a particular point of view, or sets of points of view, and heavily male and that kind of sixties sense of, you know, the women following ten paces behind, at least metaphorically. There were parts of that that I didn't like. Also I thought that what was not so good was the cause of the kind of confusing issues in the sixties, not just with black people but with everyone, as to roles. It's like the parents who wanted to be your friend instead of your parent. Well, some of these professors wanted to be your friend. I realized that I didn't really want them to be my friend; I wanted them to be my professors. So sometimes that was difficult, the kind of lack of boundary between professor and student that in later years I came to see as really essential. Not that they couldn't be human, but I wanted to know and assume that these people knew more than I did. Because if they were on the same level as me, then I didn't need to be going there.

MASON:

Why did you even pay money to go to school—?

CONWILL:

Right.

MASON:

I was wondering if you could talk about some of the slides that we have here from, I guess, '72 and '73 in terms of how you interpreted the black aesthetic at the time.

CONWILL:

As you can see, I did a lot of things with couples, I did a lot of things with families, and I did a lot of things with an African motif. I was very much enamored of African art. I still am. The faces I drew were very mask-like, and though I was surely aware of modernists like Picasso and others, I really saw myself looking directly at either the African art itself or the African-American artists who did the work. I mean artists like Romare Bearden. Though my work was not ever as realistic, artists like Charles White were also important to me

because of the kind of themes that they dealt with, and then also the artists that I literally studied under, though I think my work never really looked like Jeff Donaldson's. The palette, the very bright colors were surely influenced by Jeff and the other Afri-Cobra artists—the fact that most of my black people were often not black, they were like blue or turquoise or something. The kind of almond-shaped eyes really kind of come out of the African mask.

MASON:

Like the Benin head?

CONWILL:

Yes, yes, and the abstracting of form. I got into collage for a while and did a lot of collage paintings in the seventies. Around '72-'73—I guess it was '73, my last year at Howard—my husband and I and a couple of other younger artists had a show at the Smith-Mason Gallery [and Museum] in Washington, which was like a big deal for us. I don't know if it exists now, but there were some collections and collectors in Washington, the Barnett-Aden collection, the Evans-Tibbs collection, and the Smith-Mason Gallery and collection. They were really housed in homes there in Washington. Smith and Mason were the names of the couple, and I forget now which was which. They were an older couple at the time—I mean twenty years ago, when I was there. This was a big thing to get this show, because other than the student shows—this was showing at an entity that wasn't literally on the campus of Howard. So this was a major thing. I showed a number of collage paintings where I basically had forms which were basically abstracted from African mask forms and combined with tissue paper. I collaged them onto canvas and combined them with acrylic paint. I also did a number of prints, then—I forgot to mention someone very important. Winston Kennedy, who's still at Howard, was my printmaking teacher. He was also, again, someone who was just technically excellent. I did every kind of printmaking: litho [graph] and woodcut and linocut and all that. In those days I always smelled of some kind of acid or I had paint under my fingernails or I smelled of the photographic development fluid. I used to stay in my studio up at Howard—I mean, I didn't have a private studio, the classroom studio—up to two o'clock in the morning. Part of my bond with Houston, who became my husband, was that we were like workaholics. I mean, we loved being artists, and we just worked all the time.

I'd be in the darkroom, and he'd be in the painting studio. Or I'd be in the painting studio, and he'd be somewhere else. We eventually worked together making art, but at the time we didn't. We would stay up there—because by the time we were really dating, we were together a lot anyway. One of our big bonds was this artwork which we made. So whether the medium was printmaking or painting, the images of African mask figures, man and woman, woman and child, family images, tended to recur, and really tended to dominate the work during the time that I was at Howard. Though I eventually did much more abstract work, I would say that at the time that wasn't terribly—I don't want to say accepted; that sounds too strong of a word. It surely wasn't encouraged; I guess I could say, at Howard very much. The representational imagery was highly encouraged. While there were eventually artists like James Phillips and other painters, surely, particularly graduate students, who painted completely abstractly. Houston himself actually painted a lot of abstract art at Howard. It was not totally embraced. I remember Sam Gilliam, whose work I admired then and do to this day, showed at Howard at the galleries. Some of the comments in the sign-in book were quite negative. They revolved around the fact that this was a—he was doing his draped canvases then, which were marvelous, and—they didn't fit into some people's notion of what black artists should be doing, so they were really not accepted very much. I also did my first mural at Howard, at an elementary school near Howard, and that was a joint project with my husband and some other artists, too. I vaguely remember that perhaps that was even part of a class, that it may have even fulfilled a requirement. It was at an elementary school. We literally painted it on the wall. As you see, its images of young children playing, playing different games, and—again, I think, one was conscious of doing these, quote, unquote, "positive images." I had a real interest in children's art, and I had taken a children's art course. I think Frank Smith was the one who taught that. I had thought at the time that I wanted to do more illustration. I had turned in illustrations unsuccessfully for children's books. I actually kind of made some illustrations for a book and sent them to a family friend here in New York, Marie Dutton Brown, whom I later met. She's now a trustee of the Studio Museum in Harlem. So, though I've literally known her for about twelve years, I feel like I've known her almost twenty because it was about twenty years ago or fifteen years or more ago when I sent her my work, and she was an editor at Doubleday [and Company]. She sent me a lovely letter, which I

kept, that said that she loved the work. No one else did, evidently, but she did, and that was very important to me. So that was really what I was doing at the time, I guess.

MASON:

What year did you and Houston Conwill marry?

CONWILL:

In December of '71.

MASON:

How did you decide to come up to Los Angeles?

CONWILL:

Around the time we were graduating—we were married by then and lived on Hawaii Avenue not very far from Howard. We had both thought we would go to graduate school, and we had both applied, and pretty much to the same schools, and had been interviewed for a couple. We got accepted in Ohio at Bowling Green [State University] and got accepted with fellowships and all that. A couple of things happened: one is we realized that we didn't want to go there, and I realized I didn't want to go to graduate school. I realized that I wasn't sure what I wanted to do next. But Houston was very sure, so he applied separately and only on his own—I mean, I didn't apply—to USC [University of Southern California] in L.A., and he was accepted. So we had a reason to go there. He had applied to Yale, where he got through the first round but was not accepted in the last, and at first was really very unhappy about that. But I think today he would not be.

MASON:

It's their loss.

CONWILL:

Absolutely. And going to California was very important for us in just many ways. The first year—I'm sorry. I skipped a whole year. I'm sorry. The first year, actually, we went to Louisville, and we lived there for a year. Some of the work you see here includes work that was done there, the religious work. These two pictures here were part of murals that we did. We got a

commission for Saint Augustine [Catholic] Church, which is, I think, the oldest Catholic church in Louisville and maybe one of the oldest Catholic churches around. We did six murals—six murals that hung and still are there, that hang above the congregation—and two free-standing murals. Then we designed a stained glass window. That was our first major collaborative project. We had done that mural in D.C., but that was our big project. And it was our first paid job as artists of any significance. It was a commission, and we got paid. I have no idea what we got paid, but at the time it seemed like enormous amounts of money. But just being paid professionally to do artwork was just amazing. It was very pivotal, because to have just come out of school and have a paid commission was fairly unusual, and it made the other things we did easier to do, because when people would say, "What's your experience?" Well, we had this commission. And they would kind of say, "What do you mean?" "We did six murals, stained glass windows." So that was a marvelous experience. Sometimes Houston and I were ready to kill each other because we worked together, I mean, literally side by side for about a year, but—

MASON:

Who did what? Who did the design?

CONWILL:

We were very egalitarian, divided in half. There were six main murals. He did three, I did three. We came up with the ideas together, but we literally painted them separately. So he painted three, I painted three. Then there were two free-standing figures. One you see there of the Virgin Mary that I did, and then the other, which was of Saint Augustine, he did. Those were free-standing ones that stand in the church on the floor. We collaborated on the design of the Saint Augustine stained glass window, but he actually executed the cartoon for it. It was wonderful. We worked with architects. We worked with another artist who was a very good friend, Ed [Edward N.] Hamilton [Jr.], a sculptor in Louisville, who did the crucifix, which was a very unusual and wonderful crucifix. The architects—it was [Lawrence P.] Melillo and Associates did these windows. But they were very sensitive. It was quite a wonderful initial experience as a commission, because they were very sensitive to what our artwork would be, and we were engaged at the same point they were for the renovation of the church. So they saw our designs and

our colors, and they decided that since our colors were so bright, they would have these muted windows. So except for the mural, the window of Saint Augustine, which is at the very top of the church—at night you can see it if you drive by, because it's lit, and it's very bright and wonderful. They used mostly leaded glass; it was not stained glass. It was opaque, translucent, different shades of white and just plain glass. And it would have maybe small strips of red throughout but very subtle. The rest of the church was done in very low-key colors so that the murals really literally kind of jumped out at you. It was really quite a wonderful experience. We painted the murals mostly over the summer and fall as I recall, in the classrooms of a Catholic school. May have been Saint Augustine's school, but it closed. Around that time already, Catholic schools were closing and consolidating because there was a shortage of pupils. So we painted in the classrooms on Masonite, and then the Masonite was mounted on the walls afterwards.

MASON:

It sounded like a pretty progressive community to want such a—

CONWILL:

Well, it was interesting. We did have a little in or two for this. Houston's family is from Louisville. His family is Catholic. They're very involved in the church. His older brother [Giles Conwill] is a priest. At the time he was not a priest; he was in the seminary still. Houston's family had real influence with the church, but, I mean, as black Catholics in Louisville, they weren't taking over the Catholic church. But I believe it was at something at Houston's mother's home where the minister, Father [Donald] Fisher, at the church saw our work and kind of said, almost spontaneously, "You know, I really like your work. We're renovating the church. Would you like to do something for it?" It was very kind of casual, and we, just as casually, said, "Oh, sure," not realizing that it was going to be this really serious circumstance. It had its ups and downs. We had some arguments with Father Fisher and with the congregation. It's an all-black congregation. Some of them weren't so sure that they wanted all these black figures. They didn't see the Virgin Mary as a black person. Some of them thought the lips were too big on the figures. I mean, this is in a community where one was used to every day seeing a white Jesus, a white Mary, kind of very European notions of Catholicism or Christianity. First, the architects were

taking away the kind of old-fashioned stained glass windows with scenes from the Bible and replacing them with completely abstract pieces. The sculptor, Ed Hamilton, was taking the crucifixion, which had usually been fairly vivid, as in many Catholic churches, an agonized Christ on the cross, to a bronze, very stylized, as I said, very beautiful but very different kind of Christ on the cross. Very abstract. So it was a lot. At the time I thought, "Gosh, these people should really get it together. They're not progressive enough." It was quite a radical change, and the fact that they didn't run us out of town on a rail I think is something quite amazing. And everyone didn't feel that way. Some people thought they were wonderful. Houston's family was very encouraging, and other people in the parish, not necessarily younger or older, were—the parish council, which was really the governing group, was not unified in their response, but to their credit, they eventually let us do it. We made some changes, but compared to changes I know artists have to make from time to time they were fairly minor. Basically the idea that we put forward was accepted.

MASON:

Was the architect black as well?

CONWILL:

No. The architect was, I think, Italian. Melillo was his name. So the architectural firm was not black. But it was interesting, because the priest, who was also white, as most of the priests in Louisville were at the time, I think felt a commitment to having black people involved somehow beyond—it was the parish council saying "yea" or "nay" to things but really having black people involved integrally in it, so I think that was very important to him.

MASON:

We were talking about California.

CONWILL:

And then we went to California. Because we had basically thrown away all our applications. We declined the invitation to come to Bowling Green [State University in Ohio]. In that year I solidified my desire not to go to graduate school, and Houston solidified his desire to go to graduate school. That's when

he really applied to USC. He was accepted with an assistantship, and we moved to California. We had investigated California before, when we applied together the year before. We had applied to what is now CalArts [California Institute of the Arts]. CalArts was not called CalArts then; it was called something else.

MASON:

Chouinard Art Institute.

CONWILL:

Yes, right. But we were not radical enough. We were just two conventional black painters to them. I remember we were interviewed by a recruiter. I don't remember in great detail, but I remember getting the sense, interpreting, that they were really into these far-reaching things, and they had artists who were proposing things like housing for women and children or something. I thought, "Okay, fine." But again, I think it all worked out. Having lived in Washington, where my family was when we first got married—though we lived in our own place—we were around our family a lot. We visited Louisville a lot then. Moving to Louisville for a year I think was—I think it was timely that we moved away from our immediate families. Houston's brothers were in California, though. He has three brothers, and they were all in California—two in northern California, one in southern California. So it was not completely alien. So family was there. USC was quite something, and California was quite something. When we first came, Houston was much more open to it than I was. I was ready to leave after a few days.

MASON:

Why?

CONWILL:

It was so sprawling. I thought the people were very unfriendly. And having lived a year in Louisville, very close-knit family circle, community circle, knowing everybody, I just thought, you know, I would like to speak to people when they walk down the street. They would look at me like they didn't know me. Of course, they didn't, but I just couldn't understand why they wouldn't speak to me. I took it very personally. It was just alien. It was just very

different. I don't remember everything I didn't like, but I do remember thinking that people weren't friendly and that things were too far away. I didn't like USC. I mean, I wasn't going there myself, but to me it was this very elitist kind of enclave in the middle of what was a very interesting neighborhood of black, white, Latino. We lived in a place called Saint James Park, a very tiny little street off of this little park. Our building was a very integrated building with people from Africa and throughout the U.S., black and white. But then we were surrounded by fraternity houses, which were horrible. The guys yelled and screamed all night, and I hated it. But after a relatively short time I began to actually like Los Angeles. My father had a schoolmate who lived in Los Angeles, a woman named Eunice Kirvin, who basically adopted us as her children. We went to her house every Thanksgiving. Her children, who are our ages, became very good friends of ours. When we came to Los Angeles, actually, we stayed with them at first, because we didn't have a place to stay. We thought we'd live in married family housing. Mrs. Kirvin went over there. She said, "Oh, you can't live here." I'm like, "Oh, really?" And she said, "No, no, no." Again, fortuitous, because I later met people who lived there who said it was hell on wheels. It was noisy. It was just hard to live there. We literally walked around with her and I guess read papers and something and found this place, a newly renovated building, a Section 8 building. We had no money, so we qualified for Section 8 housing. So we lived in subsidized, newly renovated housing, a one-bedroom apartment, which was tiny by L.A. standards—I mean minuscule by L.A. standards—but wonderful as far as we were concerned. I didn't bring it—actually, I forgot—but there was a picture somewhere by our apartment with a table that we made. We made everything at that time. I really began to get fairly into—I mean after my initial reluctance—the aesthetic of Los Angeles, and the same things that I didn't like I liked. I realized that some of the distancing was not unfriendliness. I got very much into the laid-back aesthetic of L.A. I mean, I became quite an L.A. person over time and got very involved early on through Alonzo Davis. I don't quite remember how we met Alonzo, [but we] really entered L.A. in the best kind of way, because he introduced both of us immediately to most of the black artists in L.A. and a number of other artists who weren't black. So in the first several years and even months, I met people like Varnette Honeywood, Mark Greenfield, John Outterbridge, Betye Saar, Alonzo himself, his brother Dale [Davis], so that we had a community. So we

had this wonderful family that had kind of adopted us, and then we had this community of artists. Fairly early on we joined the L.A. Street Graphics Committee and started doing murals.

MASON:

We were saying before that this graphics committee is part of the Brockman Gallery.

CONWILL:

Yes.

MASON:

It may have been a city program but also maybe—

CONWILL:

At least one of Alonzo's programs was funded by the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts], I think. Yeah. It was ongoing, and it started before we came, and it kept going afterwards. I don't know exactly how Alonzo had the right to Crenshaw Boulevard, that long wall, or if he took the right or whatever, but that wall was really our main canvas, though we eventually did murals at a number of other places. We did everything from original murals to touching up old murals that were there and, as I said, to doing other commissions. We also had exhibitions. I was in an exhibition at Brockman Gallery.

MASON:

I actually have a flyer. [laughter]

CONWILL:

Oh, dear.

MASON:

January 3, 1977.

CONWILL:

Oh, yes.

MASON:

It was an exhibition of fifteen artists, but they're all women artists.

CONWILL:

Yes. My goodness. Now, this is interesting, because there was another show I was in, too. Oh, my lord. *Third World Women*is what this was called. Yeah. Before this, I was also in an exhibition called *Secrets and Revelations*, which was an exhibition that Greg Pitts, who was another artist whom we met early on, put together. Again, it was all women, but it was a much smaller show. I was in it, and Betye Saar and maybe Varnette [Honeywood], I'm not sure. Somewhere I have the poster of that or something. I don't know if I have this anymore. I would love to make a Xerox of this, because it's—and our dresses, oh, my God! That's great.

MASON:

I noticed that a lot of the works weren't for sale. Well, maybe about half of them weren't for sale. Is that how most of the shows that you participated in then—? You weren't in them to sell your work but just—?

CONWILL:

It varied. I'd had so many different experiences. At the Smith-Mason Gallery, for instance, our work was for sale, and I can't tell you to this day if anything sold. I think most of that work is either in my mother's house or my brother's house or the house of one of my brothers-in-law. One other piece that's from around that time I gave to my best friend in Washington, May [Ting] Jung. I gave a lot of artwork away. To this day both Houston and I give art as presents. You know if it's someone's birthday we give them a painting. Because we figure that's what we had, so we gave it to them. So we did a lot of that. Sometimes I didn't sell work because I wanted to keep it. Because we very early got into the idea of documenting our work and also keeping examples of certain periods of our work. So either literally by keeping it ourselves or by giving it to a relative or a close friend we figured we'd always have access to it. Also, quite frankly, our work wasn't selling like hotcakes. I mentioned earlier on that we had some design interests and had designed cards and things. In Washington, while still at Howard, we designed cards and sold them. We designed fabric and sold it. There were a number of fairs we

participated in. There was a fair at the park, which is called Malcolm X Park now, I guess, in Washington. It used to be something else, Meridian Hill Park, when we first were there. And in both the two kind of design communities in the Washington area, Columbia, Maryland, and—gosh, what was the one in Virginia? [Reston] They both had art fairs. We used to go to art fairs all over. We would spend hours and hours at art fairs and not sell anything. So part of it may have been self-protection, too. I'm not sure, because much of what we did didn't sell. We had a very successful show in Louisville at the time we did the murals, where work did sell. We had other works of art. Actually, now I do remember. Some of the work from Smith-Mason was purchased. I do remember getting a check and feeling like I was really an artist because I'd sold some work. And at Saint Augustine Church, right in the church itself, we had an exhibition, and some of the work sold there. Sometimes the work was for sale, but usually if it wasn't it was something deliberate: to keep the work, to give it away to someone, or something of that nature.

MASON:

So while your husband was in school, you just had time to paint?

CONWILL:

Well, I did a couple of things. I worked a couple of different jobs. I worked in a stationery store, in the art department of a stationery store, and spent most of my paycheck on art supplies, because I got a discount. So I bought all my art supplies there. And it was right across from USC, so I bought my art supplies and Houston's art supplies there to the extent that we could.

1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE SEPTEMBER 2, 1992

MASON:

So you were talking about being at USC [University of Southern California] and buying art supplies.

CONWILL:

Right. The other thing that I did was I taught art. I was what the Los Angeles Unified School District called a professional expert in art. Again, it was just a very wonderful experience. In those days I was very naive as to how one did

things, so I didn't let barriers stop me. I wanted a job, so—I don't know how—I decided the public school was a place to go. I got in touch with the guy who was in charge of these special art programs [Wayne Langram], and I showed him my portfolio. He said, "You know, I love your work. It's wonderful." It was just incredible. So I was this kind of itinerant art teacher. I taught throughout South Central L.A. and in Watts. I taught at about—gosh—seven schools maybe.

MASON:

Was this part of the Tutor/Art program that Bill [William] Pajaud at Golden State [Mutual Life Insurance Company] and—what's his name?—[Marvin] Rubin, I think, had organized?

CONWILL:

I was not part of anybody else's thing. I had just gone to look for a job, and I didn't know what kind of job. I thought I could just teach art, but, of course, you had to have credentials and a certificate and all that. But this guy whom I went to, whom I was lucky to have gone to see, said that the School District had something they called "professional expert in art." It was a consultant term that they used to bring people in, I guess, for a variety of reasons. And I got paid something very extraordinary like eleven dollars an hour, something that in the seventies was like real money. I didn't work a whole lot of hours, but it was just extraordinary. I had a degree, I had had this commission—he was very impressed with that—and I had already started working with Alonzo [Davis] and the L.A. Street Graphics Committee, so I had photos of murals. So again, I did a mixture of things. Houston [Conwill] and I, as part of the fulfillment of, I think, one of the grants that maybe Alonzo got, did a mural for the Thirty-Second Street [Elementary] School, which is right near USC. Then I was this, as I said, kind of itinerant teacher. I taught at 103rd Street [Elementary School] or something like that in Watts. I taught at the Normandie Avenue [Elementary] School. I taught at the junior high school that feeds into Dorsey High School, but I just don't remember the name of it. One of the things I do remember is that it was really the very beginning of any kind of recognizable gang activity. By the time we left L.A. in '80, the gang activity had increased, and actually a couple of people were murdered, more than a couple. Several people were murdered on our street in 1980 in what people

associated to be a gangland kind of initiation. It was a Sunday afternoon; people were shot just walking down the street. But right after I left the junior high school—I mean, it was literally something like the day I left or the day before I came; I think it was the day I left—a kid was killed in the playground, and that's when people were just talking about the Crips and the Bloods. It was a very vague kind of notion and surely nowhere near the level that one knows of it now. But it was still beginning. Mostly my experiences were great, particularly in places where the teachers accepted me, which was not uniform. Because, as I found in later years with the work I've done and with the work we do here at the [Studio] Museum [in Harlem] when we send artists in to teach in the school, there's the teacher who's there all the time who has to deal with all the things that the kid does. You come in for a few hours a week and have fun with the kids, and then you leave. Also maybe they were aware of how much money we got paid. But again, the only way I made a living is that and working at the—I'm sorry. I had stopped working at the store. But that and the fact that Houston had a fellowship and we lived in Section 8 housing and all that. It was also the seventies, when it was not as expensive to live as it is now. In each school I did something a little different depending on what was happening. In the junior high school I did a mural with the kids. In the school in Watts there was a woman who lived in Baldwin Hills who was very dedicated to her students. She bought a lot of the art supplies out of her own pocket. She would ask me what I needed, and I would tell her, and they would just kind of be there the next time I came. I thought, "Gosh, the school system works quickly." [laughter] And I found out that she just purchased them out of her own money. Normandie Avenue School was another wonderful school. The principal there eventually was kicked up into the administration. It was like a model school. It was beautiful. It was a very L.A. school. It was mostly black and Latino, but there were white students as well and probably Asian students. It was just beautifully run. The principal was known by all the teachers and the students. And it was immaculate; the campus of the school was immaculately kept. I was very sorry when they kicked him upstairs. I can't remember his name, but he was really a wonderful man and a very important person. They kicked him up into the administration because he was such a—his school was really written up very positively because it was such a wonderful school. There were a couple of other places where I taught that I don't recall.

MASON:

You taught at the Communicative Arts Academy. Or did you teach at the Watts Towers [Art Center]?

CONWILL:

Oh, God. I did teach at the Communicative Arts Academy. I did a mural there. [laughter] I'd forgotten that until you mentioned that. This is the mural right there. [pointing at photograph] I'm almost sure, the black and white one. Those were on the doors. Those are just black doors that go out. I didn't really teach at Watts, though, I don't think, but it shows you how bad my memory is. John Outterbridge was a real friend and a mentor. I hold him—oh, this also was the Communicative Arts Academy, the one with the women there [indicating].

MASON:

A lot of these are untitled. That's why we're not—

CONWILL:

Yes. The black and white one was literally done on the doors of the Academy. They were just literally the exit doors. Then the mural with the three women that's very colorful was done on a wall nearby. A number of artists were called in to do things. I think Houston did a mural there and a number of other artists. As I recall, that whole space in that part of the academy was just filled with murals that went around the wall. At that time I was pretty convinced that all I was going to do for the rest of my life was paint murals. I mean, I used to just love it. I loved mixing the paint. I loved working on that kind of broad canvas, metaphorically speaking. I loved working large. By that time, when I did do paintings, they tended to be larger paintings. And there was just something—it kind of fit in with my notions of art for the people and art that was accessible and all of that. I just really, really got a kick out of it.

MASON:

That's interesting, what you're saying about wanting to do murals, which is a very public statement. Sometimes you can make a private statement within a public form, but when you compare your work with your husband's work—which you probably don't want to do—but in a way, his work is public, but still

it's using private symbols, and it's kind of—what am I looking for? It's just interesting to compare the way you both interpret what work is public and what's private.

CONWILL:

Yeah, and interesting now that he really almost exclusively does collaborative public art works, which is a real change for him. Because around this time where—eventually I stopped making art on a regular basis and really took another direction. It was John Outterbridge who really kind of led me to that: going to Hollyhock House and working there, which eventually led me out of being a practicing artist, Houston moved more into this very private art, private symbols. But also there was a public side to it. And though I had to a great extent stopped doing my own work or was petering out—I mean I had, stopped completely in the mid to late seventies—I began to do performances with him based on his work. So unlike our earlier collaborations, where my work and his work were both there in things that we did, at Samella Lewis's place, the Gallery, in the Crenshaw District, and at Space Gallery—I guess near Santa Monica? I forget where it is. I don't know if it still exists. But performances that were based on his works. He was doing these pieces which he called petrigraphs, which were these rhoplex and latex pieces, like the piece you see here [indicating], that were in earth colors and greens and browns and were full of symbols of certain recurring images—the lizard or the alligator, the snake, the beetle or the roach—and looked in many ways like maps and looked in many ways like narratives. What he really began to do—and I think it was still a collaboration of sorts, though the basis was his work—was building off the paintings, creating a different kind of narrative. For instance, he did a painting that was based on a family in Louisville. And though from the petrigraph you couldn't tell, there was no literal—well, actually there was a literal human figure, but there were more kind of figures: an X marked here or a mark for water somewhere else or something that had the human figure looking like it was in a precarious circumstance. It really told the story of a family, where the son in the family had been killed and where the oldest daughter in the family had taken over and the mother had died. The oldest daughter had taken over as a kind of mother figure for everyone. So that was translated into this performance piece where he wrote this kind of poem that talked about that. I at that time—I think that was the one that was done at the

Gallery on Pico Boulevard, Samella Lewis's organization—did a silent dance that I choreographed. I'm not a choreographer, but I made up this dance, and it had a knife in it. I remember that. As I often did then, and Houston himself did later, my face was painted, and I was in some kind of costume. It incorporated music as well. I guess toward the end of the time—we were in the late seventies—at the Space Gallery, there was another performance where Houston had composed a song, actually, and worked with a flautist who was also an artist, Michael Pestel, and with I believe a drummer as well. Actually we created this piece where we used a combination of movement, live music, [and] recorded music. It was my recorded voice singing the song that Houston wrote and that the other artist composed the music to. It was playing while I did a dance, and then at the very end we played recorded music, and there was a ceremony. In the ceremony we had continued—still to this day Houston and his collaborators use a libation as a beginning or ending or some part of their ceremony, which for us is a touchstone because in our marriage, which was an African wedding, a principal part of that was a libation to the ancestors, in which we called the names of kind of mythic figures and heroic figures of black life but also our own relatives—I mean literally my grandfather, his grandfather, his father, and other people. So there was a libation in almost all of those performances. There was also a moment toward the end where we wanted to bring people into it. And we had had as part of the—this was called "Ju Ju" something. There's an article on this somewhere. I guess it was in *Artweek* magazine. We had figs used somehow in the performance, and at the end we passed the figs around. We passed the basket with figs around to everyone in the place. Though there were surely kinds of intimations of religious ceremonies, including Catholic rituals of bread and wine—there was often wine in them, as well, and maybe a chalice. It was a personal mythology and iconography that was woven into that. I've skipped around a lot of different periods here. I hope I haven't confused this. I'm still talking relatively now, though, about the period from the mid-seventies to about 1980, the time when I was really doing less artwork. By, I guess, '76 I had gone to work at the Frank Lloyd Wright Hollyhock House. I was still exhibiting—in that exhibit you have. I was at the Hollyhock House when I was in that exhibition, but I was really beginning to pull back on that somewhat because John Outterbridge had told me—and, you know, anything John told me I believed—"It's a fantastic job. You get to live in this wonderful Frank

Lloyd Wright house. You get to help the mayor entertain guests from around the world. It's great." So I'm saying, "Fine. If John thinks it's great, it's great." John was at Watts Towers [Arts Center]. I don't know how long he'd been there, but I figured he was the only person who worked for the city whom I could really trust. I knew John would know. Well, it was quite different from what I thought. It was wonderful, but it was also horrible. I mean, we had no privacy. We lived in the servants' quarters of this wonderful house, which had recently been renovated. But we lived in the middle of the public park [Barnsdall Park], so we had visitors all year round. Any time of the day or night people knocked on the door. Wright's house liked to incorporate the inside and the outside, so most of the windows or doors were large enough for a human being to come through, and literally people would. If we would have a window open to let air in and somebody was coming by and they couldn't—the front doors were very imposing because they were concrete. They had little slits of glass in them. Then the rest of the house was just full of glass, and you could see inside. And if you jumped the basic fence around it and got onto the immediate property, you could come into the inner courtyard or you could walk around. You could see directly into the house. So looking up to see people peering in at you was not an uncommon thing. Again, if the door was open, someone would climb in what was really a window, but it was as big as a door. For years afterwards I had nightmares of people just rushing into the house through every window and door and my just not being able to get them to leave or to push them back.

MASON:

So the house was part of the whole Barnsdall Park?

CONWILL:

Yes, it's part of the whole complex.

MASON:

So you did programming for the exhibitions they have? They have exhibitions, performances, many things there.

CONWILL:

Well, now, each entity was separate. The [Los Angeles] Municipal Art Gallery was its own place, the Junior Art Center, and then there was another workshop space. The house and the workshop space were part of the original property. The whole park was owned by Aline Barnsdall. It was her property, and she was an heiress whose fortune eventually became the Mobil Oil [Corporation] fortune, I understand. But anyway, she was a very provocative, controversial woman who was very radical and her own person. Had a whole pack of dogs up there and allegedly used to sick them on the authorities when they would come to try to bother her about bureaucratic details. Of course, it's on top of a hill, so that you enter from Hollywood Boulevard, but then when you come up you're in this whole wonderful, expansive park space. The Hollyhock House had just recently been renovated after years of neglect. It had been given eventually to the city, but the city of L.A. had not taken care of it. So through the years people had just carted off the furniture, some of the original architectural details, the hollyhock motif, which was the motif of the house. It was the first Los Angeles residence to be built by Wright, so it had this kind of cachet about it. By the time we moved in it had been renovated. It was open to the public one day a week, which was very frustrating to people. Of course, they would inevitably come any day but that day. It was open, I think, Thursdays. So they would come every other day of the week or any other time of day or night. One of the things I did was try to impose some kind of structure on the operations there. I tried to encourage my bosses at the city to let it be open at another time, at least, and we eventually opened every fourth Sunday, I think, or something like that. And [we tried to] increase the use by outside groups, so we had a fairly active facilities usage program. And "related" organizations were allowed to use it—architectural groups but also groups that were not terribly related. I mean, a number of things happened there, but usually fairly straightforward meetings where we knew that the people would be well behaved and wouldn't fall into the fountain or take over the—the furniture was not even at then—the dining room furniture was reproductions of Wright's original chairs with the hollyhock motif and table, but there was no original furniture left. The leaded glass had basically been replaced. One surely got the sense of the house in some rooms, but most of the rooms had no furniture at all. The living room had furniture that had been put in many years later. The pool in the living room had been changed. But I gave tours. I coordinated the tours of the volunteer group, Las Angelitas del

Pueblo, Little Angels of the Pueblo. It was this group of women, many of them wonderful, some not so. But I gave tours on a regular basis on the days that we were open. We did sometimes give special tours on days that we were not open. That was, I think, Tuesdays, and some other day we gave tours to scheduled groups. So the house could be active as much as five days a week. But setting up the guidelines, trying to divide up responsibility because the house was under the auspices of several different city departments—owned by one department, managed by the other, on the grounds of another—I really got my first look at kind of negotiating things with different people. I had to work in an informal network to get things done. Like if I knew a maintenance guy was up there, I would kind of sweet-talk him to come over to the Hollyhock House then instead of waiting till later. A lot of wonderful events were held by the mayor. I mean, it wasn't the only place he entertained, but a sister city of L.A. then was Nagoya, Japan. There's more than one sister city, I'm sure, but the Japanese sister city. So the mayor of the city came, and there was an exchange of gifts. There were a lot of things that happened there. There was an annual festival in the park, the Garden Theater Festival, I believe it was called, which was really when it was the hardest time to live there because people were up in the park till all hours. People would jump over the fence. And people couldn't tell that they weren't alone, so they'd change their clothes and be right on the grounds of the house. Or they'd be making out on the grounds. So it was really a very difficult place to navigate. But for me what it really did was pinpoint my desire to look into another aspect of the arts. And it was while I was there that—actually, I met a woman who had been a fellow at the NEA, and she was talking about arts management and telling me that I should try to be a fellow at the NEA. And I looked into that program. But my mind was spinning with ideas of something else, something to kind of be more formally trained for than the kinds of things that I was doing at the Hollyhock House. I saw an article about the [Arts Management] Program at UCLA and inquired about that.

MASON:

I just have another question about Hollyhock House. How did you prepare to work there in the first place? Did you just go to the USC library?

CONWILL:

I didn't prepare. I walked in the door. I went to the interview. There are many jobs that I haven't gotten, and there are many times when this hasn't happened, but for whatever reason, the guy who was then the head of the department, Ken Ross, liked me a lot. So this was a civil service job, but he really wanted me to have it. Then he met me, and though I don't think he interviewed Houston, he surely met him, because Houston would be living at the house as well. He liked me. He thought that I was the person who should be there. I had to be interviewed by other people, and, as I said, it was civil service, so I had to be ranked. I think I was originally ranked number two out of five or something. I eventually was ranked number one, and I think it was largely because of his—he was the head of the department, and I think it was his workings. I surely knew who Frank Lloyd Wright was at the time, but I didn't know very much about the house. Oh, I got a lot of information first from Ken Ross, and then I read on my own. There wasn't really a library at Hollyhock House, but I had my own books, and I read up on them. Also, I eventually became very friendly with a Wright scholar, Kathryn—gosh! What's Kathryn's last name? I can't recall it. [Smith] L.A. had and has a very strong interest in architecture. So with the Wright houses there and the [Rudolf M.] Schindler and the [Richard J.] Neutra houses there, I eventually knew a number of the architectural historians and others interested. I met Lloyd Wright, his son, who was still living then. We didn't get along at first at all, but we eventually got along very well. I admired him and I liked him. And [I met] his grandson, Eric Wright, who was just wonderful, and his family. I got to hear a lot of stories—apocryphal stories, made-up stories, stories that I tended to believe. Architects came through all the time, and, as I said, architectural historians came through all the time and people from around the country and around the world, so it was really an education being there. I also read up on my own, and the docents there developed a kind of syllabus. Before I left, the docent who was head of the group, who was very formal and a wonderful person, became a very close friend, Jackie Molinaro. She brought in Kathryn, whose name I can't remember. She was a bit estranged from the city, because—Kathryn Smith I'm pretty sure it is. I don't think they really wanted her around as much. I don't know. You know, I was young; these were politics. I didn't know all of them. I didn't care to know. They all told me to beware of her. She called me up one day and came over. I thought she was fine. We were very friendly. And eventually, particularly with the help of this docent,

Jackie Molinaro, we were open more often. We had more events. We had more interesting events. We had more architectural events. And by the time I left, which was two and a half years later, I really felt soaked in Frank Lloyd Wright. I had an enduring respect for his work. I had met some key people. I met his wife [Olgivanna Milanoff Wright], his last wife, and their daughter [Iovanna Wright]. I mean, it was a tremendous experience on that level. But I had been thinking about doing something else, and, as I said, I read this article about UCLA and—

MASON:

I never asked you when you changed your name. And the other question is just a general question. What did you think about the arts in Southern California, the whole assemblage movement?

CONWILL:

Okay. I changed my name in 1969. Again, you'll recall when I told you that my older brother [Kwasi Holman] was my idol. He changed his name. So I changed my name, and my younger brother [Kwame Holman] changed his name. Of the three of us, my younger brother's name, actually—I think it was serendipitous; I don't think we knew this—turns out to be an accurate name because Kwame means man-child born on I think Saturday or Sunday. Whatever day it is, that's the day he was actually born. I don't think we knew that at all. I think it was more in deference to Kwame Nkrumah and people like that. My name was actually suggested to me by a friend of my brother's and a guy whom I was dating at the time. So I thought, "Yeah." Of course, it's the name of the city [Kinshasa, Zaire] except I spell it differently, with an "h." By the time I came to Howard [University], though I hadn't legally changed my name, that's the way I was known. I signed my name that way. Then it was actually when I came to California, where things were just so much easier to do, that I changed my name legally.

MASON:

I don't remember if you told me what your original name was.

CONWILL:

It was Karen. One of the things that we did, because my mother had named us—at least the family story was that my mother had chosen the names of the children. All our names started with a "K." So one of the reasons—and that's a very important reason—that we chose the names we did is that they all had to start with "K." Because we wanted our mother to not disown us. This was big to us.

MASON:

And what did you think about the L.A. aesthetic, art aesthetic, not the lifestyle?

CONWILL:

I was very taken by it. I mean, I actually had some pictures of me which I think I took out. Actually, maybe there are some over there, I didn't mention this, but when I was at Howard, during my first year, for reasons of my own—people thought that they were religious reasons, but they weren't; I was not a Muslim—I took to wearing long dresses and skirts. I made all of my clothes, and I wore geles all the time. My head was hardly ever uncovered. Houston joked with me that he thought I was bald and that my legs were just atrocious, because I wore skirts down to my ankles. This was my own way of expressing myself, I guess. I mean, literally the year before I was wearing whatever everybody else was wearing, which was very short skirts, and I had a huge Afro. And underneath this gele, I still had this huge Afro, but it was just always pulled back. No one could see it because I wore this. By the time I came to California I had stopped covering my hair, but I was still wearing these very long dresses. And for a number of years I still wore them. I still made all my clothes. You may wonder how this gets to your question, but my own kind of sensibility of how I dressed—you know, I braided my hair by then, I put like beads in it and feathers and stuff like that—to me was very much kind of the artistic—kind of the way I dressed was not terribly dissimilar to some of the works of artists. I mean, people like Alonzo [Davis] or Nathaniel ["Sonny"] Bustion or Stanley Wilson worked with materials that were very—like Stanley was a ceramicist. Sonny Bustion worked in a number of very natural materials, fiber and all of that. Feathers decorated his work. This kind of aesthetic that dealt with natural materials in some way—Bustion also used a lot of masks in his work—harkened to an African aesthetic. The body art that people like Ben

[Benjamin] Jones in the East had done but that a number of them did, where the black body became a part of the work, and where someone like David Hammons did the body prints, all of that aesthetic was very appealing to me intellectually but also very much emotionally. So that kind of meeting Alonzo and all these people who were just dressed in these wonderful ways and were very individual—and compared to the East, where people were maybe wearing these kind of conservative, mild suits and were very much more staid—they had incorporated this aesthetic, but it was a very different expression. In California, in the art and in the lifestyle, it was more exuberant. The art of people like Noah Purifoy and John Outterbridge, of using the found object and throwaway objects, Betye Saar's work, all of that appealed to me greatly. It still does, but it appealed to me then as a younger person, as a younger artist, in a very visceral way. I was very, very taken by it. I thought that I had really found my milieu. The other thing that I think now—I may only be saying it, but I think it's true—is that D.C. in that period of my year at [Mount] Holyoke [College] and the time of D.C. was very much a period of black people relating to black people only, and it was a very kind of separatist experience. What was great about California was that it brought me back to kind of my background in terms of seeing the world more broadly. Having still a very strong connection to black people, to my own sense as a black person, but seeing a wider variety of people—the first time I'd really known any Latino people at all, having a number of friends who are artists and others who were Chicanos, Asian friends, and white friends, having white friends again after this kind of hiatus—it was really wonderful. It was the artistic community that kind of reintroduced me, kind of let me reclaim a part of myself, as well as express an exciting part of myself. So it was very inviting. I know all of that wasn't literally the art, but I saw them as interwoven. I mean, when I saw Betye Saar come to an opening, she was her artwork. She wasn't literally *Black Girl's Window* or something, but she was her artwork. Alonzo was a great dresser. I mean, he always dressed in these great hats, and the earring, and—you know, men wore beads. It was very much a sensibility that appealed to me, and it was the closeness, too. Anyone, if you were an artist, if someone else was an artist, there was an immediate bond. Kind of unlike what you would think of in the East, where you have to kind of pay your dues. I mean, we were brand-new. We were accepted into this circle of people. LaMonte Westmoreland, Bustion, all these people, we were accepted into this circle. "You're an artist.

Great. Let me see your work." That kind of openness. So it was very, very positive.

1.4. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE SEPTEMBER 3, 1992

MASON:

You were talking about making your decision to leave Hollyhock House and enter into a graduate Arts Management Program at UCLA.

CONWILL:

Yes.

MASON:

Can you talk about that decision?

CONWILL:

Yes. Well, I'd seen an article, which I may have mentioned, in the *L.A.* [*Los Angeles*] *Times*. It talked about this program that somehow magically combined people's interest in art disciplines with management principles and training. The retiring head of the department, Hy [Hyman R.] Faine was quoted in the article, and I called him up and made an appointment to see him. That talk with him was really pivotal, because I was very impressed with him. He was a very generous and gracious and gentle kind of person. It didn't really sink in that he was leaving the program, but he was very deeply dedicated to the arts and to the whole principle of arts management. So I went through all the steps. I took the test; it was called the GMAT [Graduate Management Admission Test], which was a kind of torture for me. I hadn't taken a standardized test in a long time. And I was going to be not an old person but surely not a person straight out of undergraduate. I was, I guess, around twenty-seven. Some people were like twenty-two, twenty-one, who would be my classmates. One of the things I had to do was take calculus over the summer. It made me think that perhaps this was a huge mistake and I should just go back into art. But I did take it, and what I actually ended up doing was finishing it up when I got to UCLA because it was more than I had bargained for. But they had a wonderful place at UCLA in the Graduate School of Management. The learning center I think they called it; you could take a lot

of courses out of that. I ended up taking another course there eventually, accounting, because they had graduate students, Ph.D. students, who were like brilliant—all this econometrics and all this stuff. They were fabulous. And that's how I eventually did it. But I came in and really found it both wonderful and terrible. I mean, it was wonderful because I was with this other group of arts management students in our required arts management curriculum. Then I was with other graduate students in the business school in courses like accounting and finance, statistics, and economics. Surely it wasn't terrible because the people were terrible. Many of the people were wonderful, and I have been in touch with people who weren't even in arts management since then. But it was business school, and I was really not prepared for it. I think intellectually, on one level, I found it not as challenging as some of my academic career and undergraduate had been. But because it was technically and kind of conceptually such a different way of looking at the world, it was very different. A number of my colleagues had backgrounds in engineering and technical fields, sciences. I remember I was thought of in many of my study groups as this kind of liberal arts nerd who insisted on things like proper sentence structure and verb agreement. They would say, "The bottom line is the numbers." Crunching numbers was one of the things we did a lot. Surely these were people who were brilliant in their own right and knew all the things that one should know in those different fields like economics, but I also thought that any report we turned in should be literate. I found that that was not thought of as the most important circumstance. But it was very good, actually. I met some wonderful people, people I am still very close to. One kind of person I think of, like me, as a kind of renegade or someone not totally enamored of this is a woman named Evan Kleiman, who owns several restaurants in Los Angeles now—the Angeli restaurants in Santa Monica and Marina del Rey and other places. We had dubbed ourselves least likely to succeed because we immediately bonded on just being completely anti-establishment, anti-everything. We found it ironic we were in business school when we barely believed in capitalism, much less business. But we had a lot of wonderful times together. That's when we met. Then I was involved in the Black Graduate Students of Business. I think mostly they saw me as the art person. I designed the logo and whatever, but I was also involved in some of the plans. So I met a lot of the black graduate students. And people like Ken [Kenneth] Matthews, whom I have been in touch with over the years, were

just great friends and just really nice people. Really, one of the most important components of the arts management portion of the business school was the internship. That's really what is responsible for where I am today because I, after looking at a number of possibilities, chose to have an internship in New York City. My husband [Houston Conwill] and I had been thinking about moving back East, and he really wanted to be in New York. I was very, very skeptical about New York, but one of our agreements was that I would try it out by doing my internship—which is in the second year of graduate school—at some arts institution in New York City. The way the business school was set up was that if you were in the regular program you had some kind of other requirement of job experience and projects. But in the Arts Management Program there was a six-month internship in an arts organization. I ended up being at the Museum of the American Indian here in New York City, and it was a wonderful experience. I didn't like New York at all when I came, but I did like the museum a lot.

MASON:

You didn't like the pace of New York?

CONWILL:

I didn't like the pace of New York. I mean, it's funny. I'm just so fickle. When I came to Los Angeles I thought people weren't friendly enough, and when I came to New York I really thought people weren't friendly enough. I was by then, I think, a real Angeleno. I was very much this very at-ease kind of person, and I was very friendly and not so formal. I thought people in New York dressed too conservatively. I thought they were overall too conservative and stiff. People dressed up for the most casual of events.

MASON:

So it didn't matter to you that the Schomburg [Center for Research in Black Culture] is here?

CONWILL:

No. No. At that point it was just like, what are these people? Don't they know? And where's the sunshine? Of course, I came in the summer and stayed till the winter, so I was in New York at some of the most terrible times to be in New

York, It was like burning hot. But even before the winter I had gotten more into the pace. Also, in New York one felt that it was a big accomplishment to tackle the subway system or—everything was important. Within the museum itself, particularly, I worked under George Eager, who was an alum of the UCLA Arts Management Program. Looking back, I realize how really generous he was with his time and how much responsibility he gave me, because I was an intern, and I did a lot of things. I did from soup to nuts. I did everything from take the deposits to the bank to run meetings. I had a project that was a requirement of UCLA, and I chose an investigation of the museum's plans to move out of their building, which is a process that is not over yet in 1992. They originally wanted to take over the U.S. customs house down near South Ferry in Manhattan. That summer they were having their second show down there. They had a huge show called *The Ancestors*. George appointed me assistant exhibit coordinator because, he said, "If you go around telling everyone you're an intern no one will respect you. They won't listen to you, and you won't be able to call the people I want you to call. I want you to call shippers and curators and lenders, and they won't listen to you if you do that. Also, I want you to do a lot of work, and I want to be able to depend on that." So I did. It's interesting. I found out later that some people had dubbed me George's hatchet man—I didn't realize that—because they felt that George sent me out to—when he was mad at someone, he said, "Okay, Kinshasa, go tell the preparator that that wall is crooked" or "Go tell the curator that I want to see him." But that was only part of what I did. I also got involved with every aspect of the museum and of that exhibition. Because I was an intern, and because it was really a very nice group of people—in a difficult period because they were in transition—I was kind of a mother confessor, too. Because I was interviewing them as part of my project for UCLA, people opened up to me, and they told me sometimes more than I wanted to know about their thoughts, about management and programmatic issues and all that. So I interviewed everyone from the director, Roland Force, to George himself, to the registrar, to all the curators, to the design people—and there was a pretty large staff there—to the security officers, the shop manager, [and] the finance people. So I really got a very detailed look at this organization. I met people like Elizabeth Biem, who's now the development director at the Americas Society, whom I still know years later. It was really a wonderful chance to get steeped in museum work. Frankly, until that time, I was really in no way sure

that I wanted to be in a museum. I had originally wanted an internship in an art service organization, because I still saw myself a lot as an artist, and I saw myself as more of a grassroots person. Museums seemed to me just much too aloof and standoffish. Even though the museum had some audience problems and was surely not known in New York as the most responsive to their immediate audience, because their real location was at 155th Street and Broadway—one of the criticisms of the museum by funders was that they didn't relate to their immediate neighborhood. They were always talking—

MASON:

I don't know of the neighborhood.

CONWILL:

The neighborhood is basically Spanish Harlem. It is a bit of a misnomer. Spanish Harlem is usually thought more of—if it's east. But it is a largely Latino area—not only Puerto Rican but Dominican and other Latino people. It is a working-class neighborhood. Permanent exhibitions at the Museum of the American Indian tended to stay up, as they do in many natural history, science-type museums, for a long, long time, get kind of dusty. Schoolchildren came in tours, but there wasn't as much outreach as some people thought there should be. It was a huge collection. They had a gigantic storage house in the Bronx, which I got to see, with just magnificent depth and breadth of a collection there. But because the permanent exhibitions didn't change much, and because at their 155th Street branch they didn't have very much exhibition space for temporary exhibitions, they really showed pretty much the same objects over and over again. It was in the shows down at the customs house that they really highlighted the, kind of, prime objects. So this show *The Ancestors* included, in the rotunda of the customs house, this huge tepee—which was magnificent—baskets of every shape and size, other costumes and textiles, pottery, gold, and exquisitely installed. Very, very different from the uptown space. One would question the issue of whether it was so accessible. It was way down in lower Manhattan. And though obviously the Wall Street district was down there, it surely was not a place with families and a very diverse community. Battery Park City and those kinds of developments were a long way off. But it did, particularly on the weekends, get a lot of people coming from all over. It was crowded. Without explicitly

knowing it, I really got everything. I got information on audience development, on museum shops, on fundraising, on all of that. That for me, along with the people I met and the experiences I had, was really what I took away from UCLA. I agonized over courses, but a friend of mine, who was actually my roommate in New York when I was here for my internship, said "In a very short amount of time we will not remember a single course in detail in terms of the test on December 3 drove me crazy. It will really be the larger experience." I tried to keep that in mind as I toiled over my finance exam and other things, but it was true. When I try to pinpoint what I got out of UCLA, they're more ephemeral. Not ephemeral, but conceptual kinds of things, but very important things. I got a greatly increased sense of confidence. I figured if I could pass calculus and statistics, anything was possible. I got, I think, some very solid information on management, on human behavior, I mean, a lot of the information on how people tend to react in business situations.

MASON:

That was useful.

CONWILL:

It was.

MASON:

That's what people complain about.

CONWILL:

No, no. You see, I happen to be fascinated by people and what they do and why they do it. And we had teachers who were out of the ordinary—in the regular program, not just arts management—who, in terms of discussing the issue of decision making, showed the film *Twelve Angry Men*. We analyzed that film, which is this wonderful Henry Fonda film where he's the only one who wants to acquit this guy who was up for murder. If you haven't seen it, I won't tell you what happens, but it's a whole thing about decision making, and it's wonderful because you see issues of preconceived notions, prejudice, bigotry, group think, you know, what happens. Because the initial idea of the group is he's guilty. "Oh, yeah, he's guilty." Everyone buys into it, and they just reinforce each other. But you also see how one individual with a strong

conviction makes a difference. I love that kind of stuff. So that to me was interesting. It was the numbers stuff I didn't like. I'm like, "If I do become someone at a museum, somebody else is going to do this, anyway. I don't care." But I found it's been good to know. It's been good that for every accounting, finance person I've had that I know how to read a balance sheet, and I know how to read an income statement, and I know fairly basically what some of the things are in accounting, so I can't be snowed. I don't have to be an expert in it, but I can't be snowed by it. You know, some of the trips we took to meet CEOs [Chief Executive Officers] of companies were interesting, even if the lesson coming out was that I never want to be like that person as long as I live. [laughter] It was interesting. It got more interesting the further I got away from it. The further I got away from tests and homework and stuff like that, the more it became something that I internalized, rejecting the things I didn't want but internalizing the things that I did want.

MASON:

I guess we could just talk about the circumstances that led you to come to the Studio Museum [in Harlem].

CONWILL:

Aha. I was finishing up graduate school. At UCLA, if you were in the regular program there were a number of circumstances that were set up to encourage people to hire you. There were interviews which were set up on campus for people to recruit graduates. Major firms, the "big eight" accounting firms—which was then I think ten, the "big ten" I think is what it used to be—anyway, the big ones would come up, management consulting firms would come up, and other corporations would come up. No one came up to see arts management people. The arts management people and the nonprofit management people were kind of on their own. The arts management office tried as much as it could, but it was a small office with not a lot of resources. What they did do was they posted jobs that they heard about. The secretary in arts management then, who was a guy named Bill—I don't remember his last name—called me up or left me a note in my box saying, "There's something that I think you'd like to see." He had pulled an ad for the Studio Museum in Harlem. I said, "Take it down from the board immediately. Don't show anyone else this. Let me hoard it and keep it on my own here. Forget democracy. Let

me keep this." I looked at a number of jobs, but I basically applied for two. One was the Studio Museum—that's the one I wanted—and the other was the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation. That was a kind of resurgence of—I'd done it in undergraduate, and I did it again in graduate school—my thinking, "Is it really valid and okay to make a living doing something in the arts? Or should you do something more practical, more helpful to other human beings or whatever?" So while I'd earlier thought I should major in English to be a teacher or to do what my parents did or whatever, at this point I thought, "Now, really, the arts? Should I really go into that as—? And particularly management?" I mean, it was hard enough to imagine being an artist, but at least I had been an artist. But to imagine running an arts organization—so all the great ideas I had and great confidence began to wane, because it was at the moment when I was thinking, "I've got to get a job. We're moving to New York. It's cold out there in New York in more ways than one." My husband had gotten a studio at PS [Public School] 1 here, which is a competitive studio program for national and international artists, though I'm thinking he eventually got a teaching job as well. It was confirmed we were going, so I had to bite the bullet and find a job. So the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation was my kind of way of hedging my bets and saying, "Just in case this wasn't a good idea, let me look at this." So I interviewed within the same day or two, if not the same day, for these two jobs. I had sent in my resume, and I was given interviews for the two of them. I had an interview with the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation. I had about six people—it seemed like a hundred people—interview me and ask me incredibly tough questions. I left completely dejected, sure they would never want to see me again. I interviewed with Mary [Schmidt] Campbell, who was then the director of the Studio Museum. She was very lovely, very nice, and completely noncommittal. I asked her how long the process would be, and she said, oh, she was looking at a number of people. So I dragged myself back to L.A. thinking, "Forget it. Who needs New York? I don't know, maybe I'll have a cup and sit on the street and let my husband get money." I got a call not long after I got back from the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation saying, "Why did you leave so quickly?" Because I had bolted out of the office practically after the interview was over. I was so sure that these people hated me. Then they said, "We wanted our Director to interview you. We really think you're fabulous." And I said, "Excuse me?"

MASON:

This is for consultant?

CONWILL:

This was to be a kind of program officer. They go into neighborhoods and work with local communities and local leaders and grassroots organizations and literally—physically and kind of economically and structurally—rebuild neighborhoods. They had model projects around the country. It was something that I kind of believe in emotionally and philosophically, something that I was also, I think, pretty ill-prepared to deal with except that I had this great zeal. I was stunned that I came up with answers to their questions. You know, they said things like, "If you need to go into a neighborhood to start a project, what's the first thing you would do?" And I thought, "Panic?" I mean, I have no idea. But out of my real conviction that these things were important was where I drew these answers from, not out of some experience. I thought they would surely think I was a dilettante or a fool. But they didn't. They called me back. I said, "Well, I'm not coming back to New York. I'm a poor little artist, you know. This is it." They arranged for a phone interview with me. The interview was great. The director and I hit it off very well on the phone. The person who had interviewed me and set up the whole thing was someone under the director. I forget what her title was, but she had been very encouraging. I think it was after it was over, shortly after, that they offered me the job. They said they were starting with a retreat. They told me the dates. I agreed to take the job. I called Mary Campbell back to tell her that I had taken this job, out of courtesy, thinking that I had no chance. When I left the message, she wasn't available. I got a call back shortly afterwards from Mary herself, saying that she would like to make a counter offer, at which point I almost fainted dead away. [laughter] I said, "I beg your pardon?" I said, "Well, could I think about it?" I hung up the phone and screamed—I have since told Mary this story—I screamed ecstatically to my husband and thought, "Is five minutes long enough to have thought about this?" So I called back and made the arrangements. I called back the person—this very lovely woman, whose name I'm blanking on probably because I don't want to remember it because I think she would like to kill me still—but I called her back, and I said, "About that job you offered me: I'm not going to be able to take it." And she said something profane. But when I told her what I was doing, she was very lovely.

She said, "That's great. That's better for you. It's more responsibility. I know your background is the arts." She said, "Congratulations." We had lunch afterwards in New York, so at least that worked. So that's what got me here. I came as the Deputy Director in 1980. The museum was involved in a major renovation of the space that we now occupy. So we were still at 2033 Fifth Avenue in a rented loft space with a small staff and a budget of I think half a million [dollars] or less. About fifteen staff members.

MASON:

When you came on, did you feel like you were going to carry forward the museum's mission? Or were they changing and expanding? Or did you feel like you wanted to bring some of your own ideas to the museum as deputy director?

CONWILL:

I had some general notions. Mary had given me ten questions to answer, at which I thought, "God! I'm having tests again. I thought I was out of graduate school." You know, "Why do you want the job? Why do you think you're good for it?" There were several. I have that somewhere still, but I vaguely remember saying things about how I wanted to put my skills to use to deal with the things that I had learned at UCLA. My background as an artist, I thought, made me sympathetic to the needs of artists and the arts, and I knew that the museum had a very close connection to artists. I had read the materials from the museum, so I knew that the museum was really embarking on a new era with this permanent space.

MASON:

So they were expanding?

CONWILL:

Well, there was this physical move from a rented loft space of ten thousand square feet to a sixty-thousand-square-foot building. There were long-term plans to build a sculpture garden—which was really a dream—plans to try to stabilize the tenant rolls, because they were nonprofit tenants in the building. Basically a major physical renovation. As the deputy director, one of my main jobs was going to be to work as a liaison on the capital projects as well as to

be—if the director was the chief executive officer, the chief administrative officer. I vaguely remember talking about things like being a member of a team and this being an exciting moment and wanting to be part of it. And I meant that. I had no idea what it really meant. I didn't know what I'd run into, and I really got, and I think Mary and even some of the board members did too—some on-the-job training. It was pretty incredible the kind of processes we went through in terms of financial management. We had gotten an advancement grant from the National Endowment for the Arts [NEA]. We were doing a four-year plan, and we had to do charts and time lines and budgets and all that. So I did literally, pretty much, right away have to put in place some of the things that I learned at UCLA. But also I had to do it in a real circumstance, not in a kind of classroom circumstance, so there was that difference.

MASON:

You weren't writing grants or anything like that?

CONWILL:

I wasn't writing grants, but in the way we worked then, and even up until the time I became director, I was involved in development. We had a director of development very definitely. But I would often accompany the director to calls, particularly for major funding opportunities like the Ford Foundation. I was particularly involved with those funders who had to do with the renovation, which included Ford and also the public agencies of the city that had been a past route for the money from an urban development action grant we'd gotten from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Because we were a very small staff then, many of us did many things. At a certain point you might be called on to do something that was a little out of your job description. I also worked very closely with Mary in building the scenario for the future staffing and expanding all of the departments: curatorial, education, the finance office. We went from having kind of one of each to having real departments. We had a director of development and actually a membership person, I think. We had a controller and then after that a very junior kind of clerk. We had two curators, but one had basically the full-time job of an external collection that we were contracted to take care of. And we had a curator of education. But we didn't have as much depth in terms of

numbers or professionalism of staff in the departments. Being part of the planning of that structure was part of what I did, as well.

MASON:

I was just wondering. I noticed on the current list of people on the board of trustees there are a number of artists whose names come up in these positions. I wonder, are the practicing artists like Ernest Crichlow and Melvin Edwards really active on the board? Or not really?

CONWILL:

Well, there are two different entities of—the curatorial council, which is really not active at this point, is a body of artists, including Ernest Crichlow and Roy DeCarava, and others, that was called upon from time to time in the earlier years of the museum, when we didn't have as large and as strong a curatorial department. They were called upon to make recommendations for artists, make recommendations for shows. Some of them consulted with us and advised us on our artists-in-residence program, which is our oldest program that brings three artists a year into the studios here. Melvin Edwards is actually on the Board of Trustees, so he's an active, regular board member, one of the thirty-one board members. But the longer list of people you see on the curatorial council is really now more of an honorary group of artists.

MASON:

I was just wondering if that's unusual for a museum to have so many artists who provide their services as consultants to museums. I know I don't think that would happen at the Los Angeles County Museum [of Art] [LACMA].

CONWILL:

Yes. It is fairly unusual, particularly for museums that are in any way traditional museums. It's less unusual for artist spaces. Like here in New York places like Artists Space, the Alternative Museum, and newer kinds of alternative spaces like the New Museum of Contemporary Art either have artists on their board or have fairly active artists' advisory boards. But again, some of those are literally artist-run spaces or they are alternative spaces. But for places like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, or most museums in this country, it is very unusual.

MASON:

Was that a change that happened when the museum moved? Or had it always been that way that artists would be active in developing programs or things like that for the museum?

CONWILL:

Well, I think a couple of things. One, it was a relative level of activity. Surely artists didn't have a desk at the museum and sit alongside of staff members and come up with programs. But say if we had an issue about an artist's estate, and it was a prickly one and we might want other artists to give their input, we would call a meeting of the Curatorial Council. Maybe everyone couldn't come, but the people who could come would be asked, "What do you think? How do you think we should handle it? What do you think are some of the issues involved?" Again, that was more because at the time we didn't have as large a staff to really kind of work out some of those things and because then and now we've had a very close relationships with artists. Artists have been involved from the earliest days. I mean, in addition to Melvin Edwards, William T. Williams is an artist who was integral in the forming of our artists-in-residence program. He and Mel and Sam Gilliam and a number of others were early artists who exhibited at the museum. So a number of artists have exhibited a very deep interest in the museum's operations and have been generous in terms of donating gifts of artwork, those artists that I've just named and others. It's interesting, because I think many African-American artists take a proprietary interest in the Studio Museum. If we get a great review, an artist might drop me a line or give a call or say something next time they see me. Or if they feel the review has been unfair to us, they might say something encouraging like, "Don't listen to that idiot" or whatever. So there's always been a real close connection. In our exhibition schedule, we always make sure that we devote a significant part of that to living artists and to one-person shows of living artists. So we're in a very fluid, ongoing dialogue with artists here at the museum, which I think is very important. Having been an artist myself, a practicing artist, I knew some artists from—artists like Betye Saar and Maren Hassinger and Kerry Marshall are artists that I've known for fifteen or twenty years. David Hammons. I knew them when I was an artist, and I've known them since I've been the director of the museum. So I think in

addition to the museum's institutional commitment to artists, I have also personally had very close relationships with artists over the years.

MASON:

Are the curators pretty much autonomous? Or does the board sort of have veto power over the decisions of the curators to either acquire things or about the shows? Who proposes and develops shows for the museum?

CONWILL:

The shows really come out of the curatorial department, come out of external people submitting proposals to us—the board, particularly for exhibitions, really has very little hand in it, doesn't ask to, and really doesn't do that. Except on the fundraising side of it, they really don't. Because they are the legal governing body that is responsible for the assets of the museum and the museum—the physical assets and also for the collection itself—they do have ultimate say on issues of acquisitions, and they would have it on the de-accessioning of works of art. They ultimately have the say in terms of us lending works of art since they have purview over that. But they very much take the professionals' advice, meaning the professional staff's advice, on that. Again, our ideas really generate from the curators themselves and from traveling exhibitions that are offered us. As director, I have also pursued certain exhibitions. The exhibition for December of this year, December of '92, *Wifredo Lam and His Contemporaries: [1938-1952]* is an exhibition that I pursued. I knew it was an exhibition that had curators but didn't have an institutional home. I approached the curators involved and said that I'd like to bring the exhibition to the museum that I'd like to raise the money for it, that I'd like to do it. So I see one of my roles as identifying key exhibition projects and then facilitating them in occurring. I also review and respond to ideas that come from the curatorial department and to outside ideas, because I'm less interested and less involved in the nitty-gritty of putting up an exhibition, or surely of choosing individual works, and even in a group show in choosing individual artists. But I'm very interested and involved in the whole picture. You know, if our exhibition schedule is for a year, two years, five years, what does it look like? What does it say to our public? How does it fit into our mission? That's been a real clarifying thing for me as I look at proposals that come through and as I look at priorities for any period of time. So that if we

get a proposal for a certain kind of art that's not in our mission, or it's in our mission but it's not a priority for the next five years, then I know that we want to say to the people suggesting it, "Come back and see us in five years. But right now our schedule is concentration on exhibitions that do X, Y, Z." So that's really my role. Then the curators, whether they're in-house or guest curators, really choose the work, install the work, [and] write the essays. I usually write an introduction to our major catalogs. I look at the shows, again from—sometimes, in terms of having experienced budget cuts, when we were staffed at the lower level, I have to work closer than I would like to. But I don't install exhibitions here, and I don't curate them, but I do get involved in the overall look. Like I don't want to see the catalog at each little step and all of that, but I want to see the comp[osite] on it that shows how the layout is. I want to make sure that it's got the components in it that we've agreed on. I'll read all the essays, but I don't really edit them, and I surely don't censor them. But I feel that I'm responsible ultimately for the message that the museum gives out, whether it's in an exhibition or a program or a press release or whatever. So I don't write the press releases, I don't mount the shows, but I have to be responsible. I have to be the kind of bottom line on—"Okay, I've signed off on it, and then the chips fall where they may." Then I think it's my role to step in and make sure that I can back up my staff, so if a curator is jumped oh by an artist or by the press I can say, "Well, listen, I backed this person. I know the process, da da da da da." I think that's my role, as well.

MASON:

Can you think of any recent controversial shows?

CONWILL:

Well, I don't know "controversial," but we've run into different kinds of things. When we did, for instance, *The Decade Show: I Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s!* in 1990, that was a collaborative with the New Museum of Contemporary Art and with the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art. I'm personally close to Marcia Tucker, who's the director of the New Museum, and I'm close as well to Nilda Peraza, who was director of the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art. Institutionally, we have some friendships and collegial relationships across the board and staff and all that. But what I wasn't really prepared for and I think a number of us weren't prepared for was how

in some ways culturally—and I don't mean so much racially and ethnically but culturally—as a museum, as opposed to an alternative space in SoHo (because both of them were alternative museums in SoHo, which is very much the art section here in New York) our conception of audience, our conception of mission was different and was sometimes at odds.

MASON:

How would you articulate the mission of the Studio Museum and its relationship to the community or immediate neighborhood?

CONWILL:

Well, our mission literally is to preserve, interpret, document, and exhibit the art and artifacts of black America and the African diaspora. We do that through our permanent collection, through our exhibitions and programs, through our artists-in-residence program. We see our audience as our immediate community and then circles that widen beyond that. So after Harlem it's New York City, [New York] State, the country, the world. But we do see ourselves as being a community-based organization that has a broad reach. We're not a community organization in the sense that we may have been, say, ten or fifteen years ago. We're not a neighborhood organization. We have artists of national and international stature. We have programs that are broad reaching, so we move beyond that. Some things are on paper and written and known, and other things are intuitive and visceral. Some of the things we ran into in terms of our collaboration was about things where—for instance, while there's something surely appropriate and almost expected in terms of a museum in downtown New York to be provocative and to be challenging of their audiences and to kind of raise certain issues, our challenge is different. One of our challenges is to just exist, to exist in a community where the disinvestment in the community economically and socially by the rest of the city and the country has been so incredible that our mere existence, not to mention our thriving, is put at risk. We have to be, and are willing to be and we must be, aware of the needs of our community, that we are in a community that is greatly challenged by a multitude of problems, one of the biggest ones being the indifference of their fellow citizens. Without coddling or speaking down to our audience, we think it's very important to be respectful of them. I got into a discussion about some of the programs in *The*

Decade Show, and I said, "You know, I don't mind if you challenge people, and I don't mind even if you shake people up, but I think you've got to respect people." I felt that some of the programs by some of the performance artists didn't respect our audience. You know, there's an edge to some performance art, and some of it's not very good. I think [that] just because you can take off your clothes or shout profanities doesn't mean that you're creating art. Also, contexts mean everything. If I do something in the context of my home or the context of a small group, or if I do something on 125th Street or in Times Square, it's different. Any artist should and must know that, that the context is everything—like scale and color and size and sound and all that.

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CONWILL:

We ran into things where certain works of art, certain artists who—for instance, there was an artist who had this kind of thing he does which was really addressed to a middle-class white audience and is designed to kind of shock them out of their complacency. Well, he did basically the same performance up here. It didn't make any sense, first of all, up here; it just was kind of dumb. It would be like if I'm Bill [William J.] Clinton and I'm running for office against George [H. W.] Bush, and I said, "You're with the party of the rich, and you're indifferent to the needs of poor people." But I wouldn't come up to Harlem and say to Charlie [Charles B.] Rangel, the congressman from Harlem, "You're with the party of the rich, and you're indifferent to poor people." So it was the wrong audience. I've said that in a number of contexts, and people have said, "What do you mean the wrong audience?" In the context of the great controversy swirling around freedom of expression, anything you say these days is construed as being censorious or whatever. But I think that's ludicrous. I think as museums, as public institutions, the extent to which we fail to appreciate where our audiences are coming from is the extent to which we will fail and the extent to which we are failing. One of the problems is, yes, the far right, but the other problem is us. The problem is that as a group we are looked at as elitist enclaves and that we are looked at as places that talk down to their audiences. When something like a controversy over the works of Robert Mapplethorpe comes up, we basically tell people, "You stupid Philistines, don't you know this is art?" We completely ignore the

fact that some people are offended by this. You can defend someone's right to show something and to express something and also respect someone's right to be offended by it. We chose the rights during this controversy that we would uphold. We upheld Robert Mapplethorpe's right to create the work, but we didn't uphold people's right to be offended by it, and we lumped together all of the people who were against it. So we had the right-wing fanatic, divisive bigots like Senator [Jesse] Helms or Reverend [Donald E.] Wildmon, and then we had people like Nancy [Landon] Kassebaum from Kansas saying, "I'm trying to be a friend of the NEA, but my constituents' letters are running ten to one against this, so give me some language, give me something." We tended to give these kind of trite, "Art is good for everybody, freedom of expression, blah, blah, blah," but you've got to put some meat on that. You've got to say to the working-class person who's struggling to make it and sees that an artist gets what to them is a huge fellowship to then produce something they find completely offensive in a deeper way why that makes sense, but you also have to have been telling them that—that's the other thing. We have, I think, a kind of pact in a very positive way with our audience which says, "We'll challenge you, we'll show you things you don't want to see, but we'll always show you things that are excellent, and we'll always listen to you. We'll not disrespect you." That's our pact. This collaboration threatened to break that pact. It really shook that pact, because I was getting puzzled looks, distraught responses from staff and members of the museum who said, "What's happening here? These downtown people come up; you guys just do anything." You know, "What are these people doing? Why are they saying this?" Because, again, the context changed, but the artist didn't change and didn't see. There are artists like David Hammons, whom I really respect because he knows the difference in context. When he had a piece in a show that traveled, when it came to the museum he changed the piece. He put it in because in the venue it had been in before the audience was complacent, middle-class, white America. In Harlem that was not the message, and he didn't want it to just be a glib, smart-alecky statement because we already knew it. It had no irony anymore for us because we got it. We got it the minute he did it. We knew it. He didn't have to translate it. Other people were guessing what he meant. We got it. We knew it. He didn't want any kind of one-note samba up here; he wanted something that said something different. So that kind of ability to respect your audience and to respect yourself and to challenge yourself—I'm not so much

enamored of people who want to go out and shock and amaze and be angry and yell and scream. Because I think if anyone should be angry it should be people in communities like Harlem. But that's not where you're getting the most virulent kind of responses. I mean, we're hearing basically from the most privileged arenas in society that they're being marginalized. Excuse me. You know, I'm sorry. If you look at the funding of a place like the Studio Museum or any institution of color in this country, we have consistently been put in the bargain basement of funding. If you look at critical attention, all of that across the board—so those kinds of issues, those kinds of tough issues, are things that I think, we, in the cultural community, have to face, as well. I think it gets complex and complicated when you're at a place like the museum, because, again, you have to enter people's lives where they are. If they're a scholar, if they're a writer, if they're an artist, if they're a truck driver, if they're a schoolteacher, if they're a single parent, you've got to enter where they are and you've got to accommodate the diversity of the ways that they learn and they accept and they understand. If you don't, if you say there's this kind of blanket way that it all has to be done, then you're not serving anybody. And that idea of service is also, I think, embodied in what we try to do here at the museum. We see ourselves as serving an audience. We're not here just to make ourselves feel good; we're here to serve somebody else.

MASON:

Okay. Well, I did have some other questions to ask.

CONWILL:

But I made you forget them by talking so much?

MASON:

No. It's just getting late, and I don't want to hold you up. I guess we could just end here if you don't have anything else to add. You've just talked about funding, and I want to ask you if things have changed since Mary Schmidt Campbell became the New York City Cultural Commissioner.

CONWILL:

Now she's the dean of Tisch School of the Arts [of New York University], so she's no longer the Commissioner.

MASON:

Oh, I see. Okay. I didn't know that. Well, the questions are like that, but we probably wouldn't have time to get into that.

CONWILL:

Yeah. Maybe I could say just a couple of things, just kind of capsulize, because I think it may be interesting for someone to know if everything I say is completely false later. Right now for the museum—and I think for arts organizations in the city of New York and in the country—it is a very pivotal moment. It's a moment where, just like in this country, things can go a lot of different ways. I mean, it's a moment where the kind of best and the worst is possible, where kind of the worst in people has come up, as it often does in an economic crunch. I mean, just the nastiest, most bigoted kind of horrible things have come up. That crunch in the economic circumstance in the art world has meant that institutions have fallen by the wayside. Institutions have been deeply damaged by cuts. This museum, the Studio Museum, lost about a third of our staff. We lost half a million dollars in funding over the past two years, and we're in the process of building back up. We have a long-range plan that says how we are going to do that. As we celebrate our twenty-fifth anniversary in '93, we're looking at an economic and cultural and social landscape that's very different than it was twenty-five years ago. In some ways, as contentious as the sixties were and as repressive as they were in some circumstances in response to this kind of outpouring of protests and questioning of authority—because so much is at stake now and so many cataclysmic changes have taken place in terms of shifts in world power and kind of environmental issues—both of the physical environment and the economic and cultural environment—and the ethnic mix of this country, this is a moment of such incredible promise and such incredible danger that for any institution or any individual it's going to be a real challenge not only to survive but to survive and thrive with some kind of dignity. I think, as we said in the sixties, "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem" is even truer in the nineties. Because if cultural institutions are not responsive as well to the influx of huge numbers of new immigrants from Asia and Africa and Latin America, are not open to the fact that most families now have working mothers—there are many, many female heads of household. There are many young people without adequate education. I mean, if we don't see that the

audience of today and the future is not the audience of twenty-five years ago because the world is different, then we're not going to move forward. So it's very tough. There's a lot more competition for the little money around. There are major kind[s] of thematic discussions about whether there should be a National Endowment for the Arts. If so, what should the NEA fund? Should they just forget the small institutions and just go back to the big orchestras and ballets? Or should they go the other way and just do grassroots organizations and multicultural organizations? Which is a kind of setup because the response to that has been, "Ah, the amateurizing of America." I mean, if I see another article that says any funding towards multicultural groups and smaller groups and rural groups means you're talking about amateur hour and you're not talking about the great works of the Western world—

MASON:

You're lowering your standards.

CONWILL:

Exactly. And the issue of excellence and quality comes in. So it's going to be a very, very interesting time. I would just say as kind of a way to remark, for me, on kind of where I've been and the experiences I've had, I as an individual lived on a shoestring. With plenty of cushion. I mean, I wasn't without the kind of safety net that many people are without. But literally, as a kind of family unit of myself and my husband, I lived—and lived happily because I lived in a very different environment—an artist's life of kind of very marginal living and potlucks and things of that nature. In my institutional life, I've worked in institutions that have not had huge funding. I've worked in this institution for twelve years and seen incredible volatility of funding and a kind of cycle of interest and disinterest in the arts in general and in arts of African Americans in particular. I must say I do feel much better prepared to move into a very difficult situation than I would be had I not had that variety of experience and had I not seen all these different things that I've seen. I'm not easily panicked or frightened anymore. I'm disheartened and depressed by people being unkind and cruel and bigoted and horrible, but I'm not easily turned around. A funder today said to me and my deputy director, "You guys don't stop, do you?" And I think that's right. I mean, we don't. I really think that in order to

do what we need to do, we can't stop. We've got to keep going. And my background in all of its different permutations has really primed me to not give up and to keep moving forward.

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