



AFRICAN AMERICAN AVANT-GARDES, 1965–1990

Modern Art in Los Angeles
Conversation

January 16, 2008
Factsheet

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This conversation reunited four African American artists—**Maren Hassinger**, **Ulysses Jenkins**, **Barbara McCullough**, and **Senga Nengudi**—who worked together in the 1970s and 1980s in Los Angeles. The artists' collaborative activities included impromptu performances and participation in organized collectives such as David Hammons's Studio Z and Ulysses Jenkins's Othervisions Studio.

As part of Contemporary Programs and Research's ongoing oral history series Modern Art in Los Angeles, the "African American Avant-Gardes, 1965–1990" program sought to revise and augment the historical record by exploring the underexamined contributions made by African American artists to Los Angeles's vibrant postwar art scene.

The discussion centered on the importance of community relationships and collaboration. At a time when the majority culture had little interest in African American artists' work, the support and validation of other artists of color was crucial, as were the contributions of a select group of critics and exhibition organizers who championed their practices. The role of improvisation and ritual in the work of the artists, the impact of the Watts Rebellion, the importance of the women's movement, and the expanded collaborative field of audience participation were also central to the discussion.

The conversation was moderated by **Kellie Jones**, associate professor of art history and archaeology at Columbia University, and **Dr. Judith Wilson**, independent scholar.

* To view video documentation of the entire conversation, please contact the Research Library at the Getty Research Institute at (310) 440-7390.

ARTIST BIOS

Maren Hassinger (b. Los Angeles; MFA, University of California, Los Angeles, 1973) is an artist and graduate director of the Rinehart School of Sculpture, Maryland Institute College of Art. Hassinger has received awards from the Anonymous Was a Woman Foundation and the International Association of Art Critics. Her recent solos shows include *The River*, School 33 Art Center (Baltimore, 2005); *Rainforest*, David Allen Gallery (Brooklyn, 2004); *Diaries*, Julio Art Gallery, Loyola College in Maryland, (Baltimore, 2004); and *My Hand, This Leaf*, David Allen Gallery (Brooklyn, 2001). Her work has been included in numerous group shows such as *Cinema Remixed and Reloaded: Black Women Artists and the Moving Image since 1970*, Spelman College Museum of Fine Art (Atlanta, 2007–2008) and Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (2009); *Crossing the Line: African American Artists in the Jacqueline Bradley and Clarence Otis, Jr. Collection*, Cornell Fine Arts Museum, Rollins College (Winter Park, Florida, 2007); and *Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art since 1970*, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (2005). Hassinger lives in Baltimore.

Hassinger began her artistic practice in the 1970s by producing sculptures from industrial materials such as wire rope, steel, and concrete. By the 1980s, she had started to use natural, ephemeral matter, including branches and leaves, modeling her work after natural phenomena such as hedges and trees. Performance has played an important role in Hassinger's work since the beginning of her professional career, reflecting her interest in dance and her past experiences as a dance student at Bennington College. Hassinger states that over the years her work has evolved from "exploring our relationship to nature to exploring our relationship to one another."

Ulysses Jenkins (b. Los Angeles; MFA, Otis College of Art, 1979) is a video/performance artist and associate professor of studio art at the University of California, Irvine. Jenkins was the recipient of the California Arts Council's Multicultural Entry Grant as artistic director of Othervisions Studio, an interdisciplinary media arts production group. He has received a National Endowment for the Arts Individual Artist Fellowship three times and was awarded the Black Filmmaker's Hall of Fame first place award in the Experimental Video Category in 1990 and 1992. His work has been shown in numerous group shows, including *California Video*, the J. Paul Getty Museum (Los Angeles, 2008); *Les soirées nomades, Nuits noires*, Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain (Paris, 2006); and *African American Artists in Los Angeles, A Survey Exhibition: Fade 1990–2003*, Luckman Gallery, California State University, Los Angeles (2004). Jenkins lives in Los Angeles.

Jenkins utilizes the genre of storytelling, as exemplified by the African griot and bardic tradition in his work, to explore the relationship between myth-making and the African American experience. His early performance works were often produced in collaboration with others, invited audience participation, and were envisioned as socio-political

commentaries and ritual actions. Since the 1980s, Jenkins has been exploring how traditional stories and myths can be expressed through video imagery. With his conceptual art band, *Othervisions*, he explores the relationship between spoken word and lyrical content. By combining his soundscapes with video images, Jenkin's investigates how images and sound can be blended together to create new allegories of the contemporary American cultural landscape.

Barbara McCullough (b. New Orleans; MFA, University of California, Los Angeles, 1984) is an artist and filmmaker. Her experimental video and film projects have been screened in universities, galleries, museums, and festivals within the United States and abroad, including *Cinema Remixed and Reloaded: Black Women Artists and the Moving Image since 1970*, Spelman College Museum of Fine Art (Atlanta, 2007–2008) and Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (2009); *Los Angeles School Festival: Exploration of African American Artistic Creation*, University of California, Irvine (2003); *Parallels and Intersections: Art/Women/California, 1950–2000*, San Jose Museum of Art (2002); *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (1998); *The Los Angeles Rebellion*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1992); and *Blackworks*, Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame (Oakland, 1991). McCullough lives in Los Angeles.

McCullough was initially interested in dance and later in photography as a way of capturing the simplicity and uniqueness of everyday life in the older neighborhoods of Los Angeles. However, after completing an MFA in film and television production, she progressed to exploring the continuity and immediacy of the moving image and to examining the creative processes of artists and musicians. Her experimental documentary *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space* (1980), for example, investigates the use of ritual and focuses on conversations with artists such as David Hammons, Betye Saar, and Senga Nengudi.

Senga Nengudi (b. Chicago; MFA, California State University, Los Angeles, 1971) is an artist and lecturer in the Department of Visual and Performing Arts, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. She was winner of a 2005–2006 Anonymous Was a Woman award and a 2005–2006 Louis Tiffany Foundation Biennial Competition award. Nengudi's recent solo shows include *Warp Trance!* Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (Philadelphia, 2007); *Asp-Rx*, Thomas Erben Gallery (New York, 2005); *Watch!* Wooten Studio/Gallery (Colorado Springs, 2002); and *Masking It*, Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center (2001). Her work has been included in numerous group shows such as *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2007); *Strange Powers*, Creative Time (New York, 2006); *Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art since 1970*, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (2005); and the 54th Carnegie International, Carnegie Museum of Art (Pittsburgh, 2004). Nengudi lives in Colorado Springs.

Since the 1970s, Nengudi has been working in the interstitial space between performance and installation. Nengudi often constructs interior or urban installations from discarded and found materials, such as masking tape, gravel, dirt, newspapers, powdered tempera, seedpods, stripped pantyhose, and photos, which she then activates through movement—reflecting her background in dance. Works such as *Freeway Fets* (1978), a ritual performance in collaboration with David Hammons and Maren Hassinger that took place under the Los Angeles freeway, demonstrate Nengudi's interest in the transformative power of movement.

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*Three video works by Maren Hassinger are available in the special collections of the Research Library at the Getty Research Institute.

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Images, from top to bottom:

Maren Hassinger, Still from *Daily Mask*, 2004.
Image courtesy the artist

Barbara McCullough, Still from *Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space*, 1980.
Photo: Roderick Kwaku Young. Image courtesy the artist

Ulysses Jenkins, Still from *Bequest*, ca. 2005.
Image courtesy the artist

Senga Nengudi, *Freeway Fets*, 1978.
Photo: Roderick Young. Image courtesy the artist