



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Transcript of interview with John Martin

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Transcript

Preface

Tape-recorded Interview with John Martin at the Artist's Home in McComb, Mississippi

March 1984

Willem Volkersz, Interviewer

Editor's Note:

This transcript is from a series of recordings made by Willem Volkersz over a number of years. They are not formal interviews, but rather records of conversations, often taped during photo-taking tours of the artist's studios or home collections.

The naive/visionary artists in these interviews have unique verbal mannerisms, many of which are difficult or impossible to transcribe accurately into written form. Thus, for grasping certain nuances of speech, researchers will find it advantageous to listen to the original tapes.

Our intent in transcribing these interviews was nonetheless to translate as accurately as possible the spoken word into a comprehensible written form, making changes to clarify but not to interpret. Thus the speaker's grammar is unedited. For example, "them" for "those," "themselves," and "gotta" were all transcribed as heard. On the other hand, certain changes were made for clarity: "'cause," was transcribed as "because," "'fore" as "before," "'yo" as "your," etc.

Other editorial notations are as follows: Bracketed words are of two types. Those with "[—Ed.]" or "[—WV]" are inserted by the transcriber, editor, or Volkersz. Other bracketed words indicate uncertainty: Two or more words or phrases indicate possible alternatives; "[unintelligible]" and "____" indicate words that are garbled or incomprehensible on the tape, the former being a much longer phrase than the latter; "[noise]" is self-explanatory.

The original format for this document is Microsoft Word 365 version 1908. Some formatting has been lost in web presentation.

Interview

JM: John Martin

WV: Willem Volkersz

AW: Allan Winkler

[Tape 1, side A; Volkersz' No. M3-1] [23-minute tape sides]

[Volkersz was accompanied by Allan Winkler—Ed.]

JM: [Demonstrating a unique bicycle he has made—WV] . . . and [it fits] uniquely . . . folds back. Everything is out of the rider's way. There's nothing in the rider's way as much as they're on the bike. The bike is equipped with the heat, air conditioned. Just anything that you want. And so the weather can't stop you from working. One of America's best weather instruments. You got the digital clock. Push a button, binoculars; you know how to hold them in your hand.

WV: Yes.

JM: Just, now step in front. I'll show you some of the, explain some of the features. Everything is functional. Have a CB. I mean—beg your pardon—a speedometer. It have one of the world's best CB's. You won't find this CB in America no more. I halfway sketched it. Midland people have had a long time getting it for me. And you

can pick up police headquarters in Oakland, north San Francisco. It have a long-distance output, if you want to reach that far. And also it have a radio. [turns radio on to demonstrate—Ed.] And it have a tape recorder. And this is the tape rejecter box here.

WV: Uh huh.

JM: If you're riding down the road or down the streets on a tour, maybe the tape you want to hear is down in the bottom of this box—it only holds three—you woulda had to take your hands off'n the handlebars, digging down in there, opening that box up. Probably you'd drop the whole business, and still you wouldn't get the one you want. But instead of all that trouble, watch the box—don't watch my hand—I'm not going to take my hand off'n the handlebars, and my tape that I want will come up.

WV: Hah! (laughs) That's beautiful. How did you figure that out? Look at that! You're a mechanical genius.

JM: And have a digital clock. You don't have to worry about the time.

WV: (chuckles)

JM: And it have a chocolate bar. That bar, Baby Ruth, Oh Henry; ever what you're eating, you don't have to keep your hand occupied. Just lay it in there and take a bite. And also it have a smoking lounge. [demonstrating—Ed.]

WV: (chuckles)

JM: A cigarette lighter. Push-button ashtrays—dumped from the handlebars. Your cigarettes, you don't have to keep them in your pocket. And it has a snack bar. A lunch counter, if you want to call it. You put your drink in there, put your hamburgler [sic], sandwich, or 'tato chips in there. You just ride and keeps in there. You know how to keep. . . . See, you don't have to keep you hands occupied holding nothing, you know.

WV: Right.

JM: And also it have a silverware drawer; if you should stop at rest area, you got some pork and beans made on your trip, and if you eat sardines, you don't have to get you hands all daubed up in the can getting your beans out. And it have a compass table, with angles and directions that you always are traveling in. It have a coat hanger; you don't have to hang your clothes up, lay them on the ground or nothing. That's where you hang your coat. It have a spotlight. Riding down through a town at night, you want to get somebody's—the batteries is all out of everything—and you want to get somebody's number, you can get it. You don't have to get the police get a residence number at night. And headlight with a dimmer. Have signal lights front and back. And also, the back has the office. Step around to the front.

WV: [to someone new entering:] Howdy.

Male voice (someone in JM's studio): [unintelligible]

JM: You want to stop on a. . . . It's _____ ride up. Where you been, or what you seed, or what you done. Okay. I got an adding machine. I'm going to pull out my desk.

WV: (chuckling)

JM: I'm going to get my scratchpad. Do your writing. And then, when you get through—that's a shelf back in there—and when you get through, it just uniquely goes back, out of your way. It's not in your way. And it have a [utility] box. Or either a whatnot box. Change, money, your pocketknife—something that you're going to be reaching for every five minutes—you just lay it up in there. Your toothpick and chewing gum, you get that from the handlebars. And that kind of vibrates off'n there, but I'll put it back in just a moment.

Female voice: Leroy!

JM: He stepped outside, Miss. Barnes.

Miss Barnes: Telephone for Mr. Martin.

JM: For me?

Miss Barnes: Uh huh.

JM: Okay. Tell them I'm busy right now.

Miss Barnes: It's John _____.

JM: Okay. Okay, you get your toothpicks and chewing gum from the handlebars. Excuse me just a minute.

[Interruption in taping]

JM: That was a friend of mine. Me and him's in a deal. It's some, you know, it's some business _____.

WV: Okay. Sure, that's fine. Yeah.

JM: And also it [the bicycle—Ed.] have a bell, have a 'lectric horn, and it have a bugle. [demonstrates—Ed.]

WV: (laughs)

JM: Now for those shades and eyeglasses, you don't have to be reaching your hand in your pocket, getting a napkin, cleaning them. This is a shade holster. Everytime you reach for them, they're sparkling clean. It's treated with chemical, you know, to clean them.

WV: Right.

JM: Now, let me see. I don't know whether I'm going to miss something.

AW: What's this thing again?

JM: That's the weather instrument, that a ration and a rain [unintelligible phrase] up in wind up to sixty miles an hour.

WV: Oh, I see.

JM: And it'll tell which way your rain and your wind _____ _____. And also it have air conditioner. Stop at a rest area, turn it on, cool off. Heat—it has heat. These are heatpads that have [fuel]-stick inside. You light that fuel-stick—with a match—and close it up, and put it back. It won't penetrate away in smoke, just penetrate away in a _____ of heat. I guess you have saw those—those. . . . What?

AW: Handwarmers?

JM: Handwarmers, that's what you call them.

WV: Um hmm.

JM: People use those for hunting, you know, in the arctic countries. You know what I mean.

WV: Right.

JM: Use those.

WV: Right. So you've got one on each side here.

JM: One on each side. Is all you got to do, just drop those knuckles down on there.

WV: Right, that's great! That's great.

JM: And also it have a food basket. Food basket here.

WV: Right.

JM: You put your pork and beans, your sardines, your crackers, your cookies—just ever what you want to stock up with, you know, to go out on your tour with. And it have a crow-foot stand.

WV: (chuckling)

JM: It won't give in soft soil and turn over, you know. It have a crow- foot stand. And these push-button binoculars—excuse me—you can put them in any angle or any position that you wants to.

WV: Hah! That's great.

JM: And just keep a riding. Stretch them out just anyway—any way you want to. And just keep a-riding. You want to look way across to some place, you know, just you don't have to hold them in your hand. Of course, a lot of times these things, vibration, have to take a screwdriver, [keep it], you know, kind of touch it up a little.

WV: Right, right.

JM: There's a lot of works and gadgets about this bike. And also it have a turn, a luggage compartment. Put your bedroll or your belongings and your clothes _____, see. If you haven't got anything, just fold it back out of the way. Now, we'll go in here.

[Interruption in taping]

JM: It [still talking about the bicycle—WV] has your hot coffee. It has your cold water. It has your other beverages, ever what you wanta carry along with you.

WV: Um hmm.

JM: It has a drinking cup machine.

WV: (laughs)

JM: Cups out. It has a library. Your favorite books and magazines and literature—that's where you keep it. And some people got to have DiGels and Roloids all day long; you know, they just live off of those things, and aspirin. Well, it has a medicine cabinet. You just got to have those things. And it has a pump.

WV: Right.

JM: It has a touring bag. If it's open it'll hold a change of clothes pretty well for any size person. Now we're going down here. This is a small toolbox—built on a lunch-kit lid. That's the food-storage compartment to this box. But this toolbox is built on the lid. That's in order to save space.

WV: Good idea, yeah.

JM: And it has his camera here. And it has his first-aid unit here. The camera is ready for pictures right now. And I believe I told you this is your hot coffee. Now if you had to, were going to stop at a rest area. You was tired and wore out. Been riding three or four hours. You say, "I'm going to lunch up a little bit." You get your food ready, you get your drinks poured up, you got to hold them in your hand and waste half of it. But you don't have that to do. Just set your drink there, you fix your food, spread it out there. You just stand there and eat like you was at a picnic table.

WV: Terrific.

JM: And then after you finish eating, it fits [uniquely], folds away. It's not in nobody's way. It have a bumper guard. Now everything on this bike, I made it. I designed it. It didn't come off of no TV and no commercial or nothing.

AW: Even this part here?

JM: Yessir. No blueprint or no nothing. Even the grill in the front. Stoop over and look at behind. All this handcrafted, right here, without a sketch or a pattern or anything.

WV: Beautiful. How did you decide to begin to make this bicycle?

JM: Well, I bought this bike to ride.

WV: Um hmm. How long ago was that?

JM: That was three years ago. And I said, "Well, instead of riding a big Olds and using a big automobile to ride around from the neighbor's house, you know, them little local trips, I'm going to buy me a bike, just something to [sound like: bindog] around on." I bought the bike and brought it here and the riding left me. It just left me like that. And the Lord give it to me what to do with it.

WV: Ohh. Do you ride it very much?

JM: It's never been rode.

WV: Is it going to be?

JM: Well, when the final Lord gets it. What you think that bike is worth?

WV: Oh boy.

JM: [Just tole you this morning] you ain't buying something like your neighbor or like you seen somewheres.

WV: No.

JM: You know this is a rare thing. If you see as many cars as it is in the world, you say, "You the onliest man in the world that owns [an] automobile." You know, that'd be a rare thing. Because everybody else own them, but you wouldn't have [only] what the other fellow got.

WV: Well, you're going to need this bike, aren't you?

JM: Well, nosir. I would be glad to expose [probably means dispose—Ed.] of it if I could.

WV: Well, it's a . . . It belongs in a museum, I think.

JM: That's right.

WV: Because it's a very, it's the most beautiful bicycle I have ever seen in my life. And people should see this, you know.

JM: Yessir.

WV: And to see your mechanical ability and your wonderful skill and your inventiveness. It shouldn't be sold; it should go to a museum or something like that, you know. Would you donate something like that to a museum if it could be on display?

JM: Well, I really don't know. I've got quite a little, quite a bit kinda, you know, tied up in it.

AW: The museum should buy it from you.

WV: Uh huh.

JM: That's right. Now, Miss Patty [Patti Carr Black, Director, State Historical Museum, Jackson, Mississippi—WV], she bought one of my guitars.

WV: She showed it to us.

JM: Yes. And so _____. And I have another one here.

WV: Oh, look at that!

JM: Toothpicks. [plucks string—Ed.]

WV: How did you decide to start working out of toothpicks?

JM: Well, this, just given to me.

WV: The Lord showed you the way?

JM: The Lord give it to me. No pattern, nothing to go by. The neck is toothpicks, reinforced steel rod in the neck. You can run your hand under there; you might [be able to] feel that.

WV: Yeah, I saw the one that Patti had, yesterday.

JM: That's reinforced steel rod. And also brass bushings are around the keys. There's no give in any of this. This is durability; it's nothing delicate, you know what I mean.

WV: Gee. Um hmm.

[Interruption in taping, after which the recording level is very low and conversation almost unintelligible for a while—Ed.]

JM: No ins and outs _____. [playing guitar—Ed.] No _____, _____ you got _____.

WV: How long does it take you to build something like this?

JM: Well, it was about three years working on that guitar—both of the guitars. And also the bike. Just a little now and a little then.

WV: Yeah, sure.

JM: Sometime it'll be two or three months I wouldn't touch it.

WV: Uh huh.

JM: When it come to craft work, if you are not, don't have the. . . . If you don't have your mind fixed on it—you know what I mean. . . .

WV: Right.

JM: . . . and wanting to do it, it's best to let it alone until you do have a mind to do it.

WV: Oh, absolutely. Otherwise it won't come out right.

JM: ____ to do it. You'll be working much on that ____ as you will anything else, you know.

WV: [unintelligible]

JM: ____ ____, be all right.

[Interruption in taping; sound quality is greatly improved—Ed.]

JM: Now, this is probably [my] favorite. It's a toothpick violin.

WV: Ahh.

JM: That a chinrest is removable.

WV: Gee.

JM: The neck is toothpicks. And also the bow in toothpicks. Of course this ____ ____ down ____.

WV: Ohh. Now do you play the fiddle at all?

JM: Nosir.

WV: Why did you decide to build something like this?

JM: Well, a friend of mine, after she saw the guitars, she said, "Mr. Martin, I imagine you could build a violin."

WV: Ahh.

JM: I said, "I'm going to give it a try." Now I wasn't more than about two months working on the violin. I just went. . . . See, the thing had grafted in me. I wanted to do it. And it didn't stop till it was finished.

WV: Gee! That's absolutely beautiful.

JM: Thank you.

WV: You have amazing skill—amazing skill. Now how are they put together? With Elmer's glue?

JM: Nosir. A glue that I made. Elmer is good. Weldwood is good.

WV: Right.

JM: But I made one that's better than all two of them put together.

WV: Really!

JM: The glue that I made, most all other glues it grafts from the surface of the wood. [JM sometimes pronounces "it" as "hit," which, for clarity, was transcribed as "it."—Trans.]

WV: Right.

JM: The glue that I made, it penetrates into the wood.

WV: Ahh.

JM: There's no coming loose. You don't have to worry about that.

WV: What are some of the ingredients of your glue?

JM: What are some of the ingredients?

WV: Yeah. What's in it?

JM: Well, I just wouldn't want to tell. _____, you know.

WV: Okay.

JM: I [stole] the recipe. But it's simple stuff that I use.

WV: That's great. Well, it seems very strong, too. Very strong.

JM: It's strong; it's strong. That glue is iron itself, almost. And water won't make it become flexible or _____ soft.

WV: Well, I'd like to photograph these if I could, outside maybe.

JM: You can. You can if you want to.

WV: That'd be wonderful.

JM: If you wants to, yes.

[Interruption in taping]

JM: And this one I made. . . . And I'm not saying "I'm going to make it." So now if I don't make it, don't say, "Well, that fellow told me a lie."

WV: Right.

JM: I said, "I wants to make one more" [bicycle—WV]. It's going to take a little money to make it. For this a rare thing I'm stepping into. And the next one will fly—without wings, without a propeller, without a jet engine, without a tail, without a airbag, or without a balloon. The gravity. It going to operate but with a force of gravity. The same thing that's holding you down, that's what it's going to be controlled by. Just getting it figured out. And if I get this gravity to work, if I get it to work, this gravity can be placed in jets, small planes. If you have engine failure, it'd be impossible for you to fall. The onliest way you'd fall, you had to release your gravity. This gravity you have all depend. Now on that bike, it'll be somewhere around about 50,000 pounds pressure there, holding me up in the air. I'll be safer up there than you would be standing here, because you might stumble here, but in the air it'd be impossible for you to come down—until you release your gravity. You released it at fifty miles an hour, to down to one inch a hour, if you wanted it. That's how you, you know. . . . It's just like a airbag—you know what I mean? It's just like an innter tube.

WV: Right, uh huh.

JM: The bigger hole you got into, the faster go down; the littler hole you got, you can't see it going down. But that gravity's gonna work. And you ain't going to see nothing that's pulling it. No noise, no nothing. There's no motor. There would be about four valves up there by the handlebars. And there'd quite a few high-pressure lines. There'd be a tank here. One over there about the size of a gallon jug. And one on that side, and one on that side. That's all you'll see.

WV: And what are you going to use that bike for?

JM: Bike. Well, to fly, to exercise. You know what I mean, just. . . . It'll be safe. Of course though they might not let me do too much going up in the air in it.

WV: (chuckles)

JM: But they would after they find it out though. Ain't going to be no falling.

WV: That's wonderful. How long will it take you to build that?

JM: Well, it all depends. It'll be a very slow process. That's if I. . . . You know, if I, provided if I get started on this. It's going to be very slow. Going to take some skill, mechanical tools, and. . . .

WV: Um hmm.

JM: Oh, it's going to be a very delicate process.

WV: Is this bike finished, here?

JM: It's completed.

WV: It's completed. So. . . .

JM: Now, there was one thing that I wanted to put on this bike, but I didn't have the room. I was going to put a coolerator. Right in here. Not a frigerator, not a deep-freeze—a coolerator. I coulda bought the motor, but everything else I'd a had to make it, which I coulda made it. But I didn't have the room for it.

WV: Um hmm.

JM: And this coolerator would have made six cubes of ice, kept one pound of food cold, like lunch or _____, or something like that. A baloney, _____ like that.

WV: Uh huh.

JM: Well, I didn't have room for that, and I decided to put a push-button kick-out chair that was operated from the handlebars. The chair would have worked just like a lady's folding umbrella—the folding umbrellas, you know, they puts in the handbags.

WV: Right.

JM: Push a button and she opens up.

WV: Right.

JM: Well, this chair would have been folded, right in here. And you push—I started [making—Ed.] it—you push your button from the handlebar, the chair would hop out. [demonstrates—Ed.]

WV: (laughs)

JM: And it would be open. Of course, you had to set it up.

WV: Right.

JM: But I didn't have quite the room for it.

WV: Yeah.

JM: But, you know, takes space for some things, you know.

WV: Of course.

AW: Did you plan this out first, what you wanted on the bike?

JM: Nosir. It just came to me. When I'd complete one thing, I'd quit. Other word, the bike was made in the bed. And I got up, I would get up and put it together.

WV: You'd lie awake at night thinking about it?

JM: Lie awake at night. Most things invented is done at night. The midnight oil is burnt at night. Now I had one problem. On this CB, this tape recorder here. Wanted that put on there neat. I studied and studied. I looked. It's good to think. Sometime two or three ideas'll come to you. But you weigh and balance those ideas. One of them is the wrong one, now, you understand. You're thinking of a thing two or three different ways, one of those ways are wrong.

WV: Right.

JM: And so I laid down one night. I said, "Well. I get it figured after a while." I went to sleep around about eleven o'clock. Around about twelve, I woke up—it was like a short nap. I was laying there. This thing was on me: how was I going to put this CB and this tape recorder in there. I wanted to make a neat job. It didn't want it tied in there with haywire—you know what I mean. I wanted it to look like a factory job. And so when I knew anything—about one o'clock, when I found myself, I was in here [in his workshop—Ed.], and I don't know how I got in here.

WV: Hah.

JM: And I was working on it, and I didn't stop until I completed it. Now look at it. Now just look at it!

WV: Just beautiful, just perfect. So where does the battery go to all this?

JM: The batteries, ____ ____

WV: Oh, they all go inside of those machines.

JM: Yes, yes, they go in here. And there's two batteries go here.

WV: Um hmm.

JM: There's two go here—that's for the headlight.

WV: Okay.

JM: The two go here—that's for the spotlight. This one goes here. There's four go here. There's two go here for the signal light.

WV: Right.

JM: Two go back there for the signal light. And let me see where else now. Of course I guess I'm missing some, but anyway. . . .

WV: No, I understand, yes.

JM: That goes, this little digital clock here; it has its. . . .

WV: It's got a little small battery in it.

JM: . . . small metal type looking battery, yes. I think there's about twenty-two or -three batteries, what it takes when everything, you know. . . .

AW: This stuff [metal fringe around edges of containers, etc.—WV] is to make it look nice?

JM: Yessir. All that's decorating.

WV: Yeah.

JM: Same as back behind there and here, you know. That's just the decorating.

AW: And this is decorating.

JM: Is decorating. That's all the decorating, you know.

WV: If somebody were to be interested. . . . I don't think I could afford this, but if somebody were interested in buying this, how much do figure you would want for it. I'm just curious.

JM: Well, would you mind if I would repeat the question back to you? Now, it is your ____, [noise] you don't see ____ in everything. What would ____?

WV: Well, I'm not thinking so much of wanting it personally. . . .

JM: I understand.

WV: . . . but I think that a museum might want it to put it on display, or something like that. And so that's a little different. I mean, because when you're thinking about it for yourself, you think how much money you have, and how much you think. . . .

[Tape 1, side B] [Volkersz' No. M3-2]

WV: Well, I agree.

JM: If that bike was marketed overseas, with them oil ministers, they'd pay a million dollars for this bike, just quick as they'd give a dime for it. Any time they pay a million dollars for a picture to hang on the wall, them

people got the money.

WV: Uh huh. So what kind of figure are you thinking of? Just in case I run into a rich person or a museum director. . . .

AW: I'll be back in a second.

WV: Yeah.

JM: Well, you think it'd be worth. . . . Well, I'm scared to say. My price might sound. . . .

WV: Don't ____ it. Say your price.

JM: Well, \$50,000. Of course, now that's a lot of money for a bicycle.

WV: It sure is. But it's a very special bicycle.

JM: It's very special. That's the thing of it.

WV: Absolutely.

JM: It's very special. It's something that you won't find no place else.

WV: Yeah. Well. . . .

JM: Course a movie star, some of these great athletes, or fellows, or movie stars, probably they'd be the onliest one'd be able to buy it, I know. A working person, he couldn't afford it, you know what I mean.

WV: Yeah, right, right.

JM: He, so he couldn't afford it.

WV: I sure couldn't. Yeah.

JM: Because it's a rare thing. It's really rare. There's nothing else in the world like it. And it's equipped with anything and everything that you need. You ain't got to worry about stopping here and stopping there.

AW: I was thinking. . . .

[Interruption in taping]

JM: . . . ____ it over. Let me put my hand up under there. [mechanical noises caused by removal of bicycle jack—WV] It'll come off it a minute. You'd be surprised to know what that is.

AW: This weather instrument tells the wind speed. . . .

JM: That's right. And I be ____ them there ____ this way.

WV: There it goes.

JM: There it comes. There's a spring here that holds it here. Just ____ hit ____ to get it loose. You're doing something you can't see what you're doing, you just got to feel your way. Okay? Well, I'm going to let you decide what that is.

WV: Hah!

JM: It's very necessary. I designed it myself. It's very necessary.

AW: I can't tell what it is.

WV: I can't either.

JM: Well, that's a jack.

WV: Oh, it's a jack!

JM: A bike jack. And it won't only work on this bike; it'll work on a 20- inch, or a smaller bike, or work on anybody's. But I had to design a jack to change a tire, because you can't lay it down, or you can't turn it upside down.

WV: Right, turn it upside down, yeah.

JM: And the jack holds it on real sideways, backwards, or even forwards. Of course, you have to assemble it together.

AW: Uh huh.

[End of interview]