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Oral history interview with Senga
Nengudi, 2013 July 9-11

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Senga Nengudi on 2013 July 9 and 11. The interview took place in Denver, Colorado, and was conducted by Elissa Auther for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Stoddard-Fleischman Fund for the History of Rocky Mountain Area Artists Oral History Project.

Senga Nengudi and Elissa Auther have reviewed the transcript. The transcript has been heavily edited. Many of their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ELISSA AUTHER: This is Elissa Auther interviewing Senga Nengudi at the University of Colorado, in Colorado Springs, Colorado, on July 9, 2013, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Senga, when did you know you wanted to become an artist?

SENGA NENGUDI: I'm not, to be honest, sure, because I had two things going on: I wanted to dance and I wanted to do art. My earliest remembrance is in elementary school—I don't know if I was in the fourth or fifth grade—but in class, I had done a clay dog. You know how they have assemblies and so on; so I was chosen as the artist to describe my work. There was someone that was doing music and someone that was doing science and so on. So that was my first remembrance of being in front of an audience talking about my work. There was no one in my family that was an artist on either side.

I had an uncle who at an early age gave me a painting set, and the best art he had in his house was—you know those old paintings of dogs with cigars playing cards and drinking beer? Well, that was the extent of the art in their house, my aunt and my uncle. But later on, I reflected on the question of where I got my creative gene and decided that that kind of art gene came from my mother. [She was about presentation. She always set an incredibly inviting, elegant table, and changed everything in the house about every three years, new curtains, as well as reupholstering the couch and chairs. -SN/EA] So her thing about presentation, I think, was something that I see as a line in my work.

ELISSA AUTHER: Did she work outside the home?

SENGA NENGUDI: Oh, yes.

ELISSA AUTHER: Go ahead.

SENGA NENGUDI: My father died when I was three. We lived in Chicago; I was born in Chicago. And she had this desire to move to California, because Chicago was very intense; it's always been intense. As a child, I went to a Catholic school, because the public schools, even back then—[laughs]—were terrible. In Catholic school, we had to go to Mass every morning. And so this whole issue of smelling of the incense, the nuns in their habits just gliding across the sanctuary. Even though I was quite young, with that early exposure, I was taken with the whole sense of ritual. So that really stuck in my mind: the smells, the atmosphere, and so on.

So I think, I don't know, when I was six or seven, we moved out to California, and—

ELISSA AUTHER: To Los Angeles or—

SENGA NENGUDI: Yes. Well, we initially moved to Pasadena, and I remember really clearly that she tried to get me in a Catholic school there, but it was segregated at the time, so I went to a public school. So we went kind of back and forth. We lived in Pasadena for a bit, then we lived in LA, and then moved back to Pasadena, but mostly in LA.

ELISSA AUTHER: So you were probably six. What year was that?

SENGA NENGUDI: Well, I was born in 1943.

ELISSA AUTHER: So somebody will do the math.

SENGA NENGUDI: Yes. [Laughs.] So I was, yeah, six or seven. Went to Lincoln Avenue Elementary School in Pasadena, and I loved Pasadena. It was just wonderful. And it's always been a wonderful part of my life, which I'll tell you later.

So, yeah, this interest, I can't go back any further than that. I just liked the form, working with my hands. I wasn't particular, I don't recall, about doing paintings and so on, but a little bit later—this was when we lived in LA—there's a place in LA called Clifton's Café, and it's a buffet kind of place. And at that time, in LA, to go downtown—you've been to downtown LA.

ELISSA AUTHER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

SENGA NENGUDI: Okay, you know how at that time, you had to wear gloves and the whole thing. And they had really super-duper stores and so on. Well, this one little strip where Clifton's Café was, it was kind of like really—and it's still that way now. There was always someone saying the world was going to end, and they had the boards—those kind of boards—what do they call those boards?

ELISSA AUTHER: Sandwich boards?

SENGA NENGUDI: Sandwich boards. And so in this place—and I don't know if I've told you this story before, but anyway, it'll be on the record at least—in this place, it was like an eater's delight. Of course, as a child, you could have all the dessert and everything you wanted.

So this guy, I think he had to be Christian, the man that owned it, because it was different layers—it was like maybe three stories plus the basement, and there—in corners, there were —

[END OF CD1 TR2.]

ELISSA AUTHER: Okay. New batteries, and we're picking up where we left off about the restaurant on Clifton Avenue.

SENGA NENGUDI: Clifton's Café.

ELISSA AUTHER: Clifton's Café.

SENGA NENGUDI: In corners of various places around, it would be like catacombs, and they didn't go anywhere. There would be a door, like a little wooden door, very mysterious. Everything was very mysterious. So I had to go to the bathroom. So I went downstairs, and there was this giant Jesus. [Laughs.] This Jesus was huge—and you could sit on it. And so I sat on its lap and everything, and I really think that's when I got the bug for sculpture, the ability to do things in three dimensions. They don't allow you to do it, but the real thing is that you should touch sculpture. You should really have this experience with the artwork, not just looking at it, but totally connecting with it.

Visually—if you were blind, you would be able to feel the form and so on. And unfortunately, that doesn't work in a museum situation, but that's what excited me about sculpture and the three-dimensional, and that, I'm sure, is where it really sunk in: This is what I want to do.

ELISSA AUTHER: So how did you pursue your career as an artist as you grew up?

SENGA NENGUDI: Oh, boy. Well, in high school, I took art and dance, and it was kind of a—[laughs]—maybe this is everywhere, but it was kind of split down the middle. There would be people in the class that were really interested in art, and then there would be the athletic jocks that would come in just to get the grade. But we had a really, really good teacher. Some of us from class would go down to Hermosa Beach to this very famous jazz place, the Light House. We couldn't go in because we were too young, but we could listen outside. We fashioned ourselves as junior beatniks.

This issue of jazz was really important—improvisational jazz. Okay, you start with a theme,

and then you take it onto something else. And so that continued through college, this combination of art and dance, and this may not be particularly interesting related to art, but I'm going to tell you about my high school experience.

I went to Dorsey High School. Architecturally, it was a series of one-story buildings laid out like a half a pie split into triangles, and in each triangle there would be a particular grouping of people. There would be the senior triangle—only seniors could go in there—there would be the kind of multicultural triangle—that was everybody. Then there would be the black triangle, and then there would be the white triangle. And so in the black triangle—this is something very unique to the '60s—the guys would even wear suits to class, and they would have attaché cases and all that kind of stuff. And they would line up, and you, as a girl, would have to pass this whole line of guys.

But the cultural thing that would happen is, they would have what they called "woofing" sections, which is playing the dozens. They would create a circle, and no girls could get involved. They would just talk about each other—Yo mama is this; yo mama is that. It would get to a point where they would talk about each other so bad that that would cancel somebody out. And so the circle would get smaller and smaller until there were just like two people that would just, like, go back and forth and do this kind of talking. So it was really quite a unique cultural experience. It speaks to ritual again.

ELISSA AUTHER: So you could listen, but you couldn't participate.

SENGA NENGUDI: Yes.

ELISSA AUTHER: And these triangles—were these actually part of the architecture, or are you saying these were like segregated cliques?

SENGA NENGUDI: No, they were part of the plan—it was, like, grass, and people would go there and eat their lunch and so on and so forth. I don't think it was officially segregated, but when I started, it was mostly a white school, and so by the time I finished it—you know how things change—it had kind of shifted somewhat.

But what's his name—Bob Kardashian—was our class president, and so there was Dorsey High and there was LA High, and I think Simpson went to LA High. So it was really an interesting high school—really interesting.

ELISSA AUTHER: So you're bringing up the example of playing the dozens because it's a performative kind of cultural practice?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yes. And not only that, but as my studies went that way, I found that there was also the same thing happening in Africa, in certain tribes. That's a similar way of doing things. So, as I said, as my world opened and I was able to read about such things, then I could see the connection. And this was particularly important because there were zero, zero, zero history—Black art history. So I could never find myself—I could never see myself in the books; I could never—I love Picasso; he was my hero. I love Picasso because unlike certain people—say, like Frank [Stella] or somebody like that, he always changed things up. And then there was the business-of-art issue—of keeping something the same, just for commercial value.

I really liked Picasso because he always was moving. But that's all I had. I had Picasso, I had Dali, but I had nothing of my own. Even in college it was difficult. I think I mentioned this to you before—I really wanted to learn French, because it seemed like all the books I read—well, that I knew about—were in French, related to African art. Then I had enough French to find out that they weren't very nice—they weren't very nice at all. The pictures were great, because I was being exposed to African art—sculpture—but the text had a really colonial focus that was cruel, basically.

So it was really difficult. So then I was in college; I took both dance and art, and my reason for, honestly, for being a major in art was because I knew if—and that's a big if—I ever got to professional level with dance, it would be limited, and I figured, Well, with art, I could be 90 and still do art.

ELISSA AUTHER: Where did you go to college?

SENGA NENGUDI: First I went to Pasadena City College, and then I went to Cal State LA [now

California State University Los Angeles], which is a state university.

ELISSA AUTHER: And when did you start at Pasadena City College?

SENGA NENGUDI: I started right after high school, so that was 1961. And actually, I could have gone directly to Cal State LA, but the art department was so wonderful at Pasadena City College that I wanted to have that experience.

ELISSA AUTHER: So then you transferred to Cal State LA?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yeah, so then I transferred to Cal State LA, and got—I was very involved in dance, the dance department there. There were only two Black students, of which I was one, and only one female Black student, and that was me.

ELISSA AUTHER: In the dance department?

SENGA NENGUDI: No, in the art department.

ELISSA AUTHER: In the art department, okay.

SENGA NENGUDI: Yeah, in the art department. I majored in sculpture, and that was okay. And then during that time, I was able to start an internship at the Pasadena Art Museum, and that was really, really important. I wish someone would write a book about that place. It is the most amazing place—the history of Pasadena Art Museum is amazing.

ELISSA AUTHER: So how did you make the connection to intern there? What kind of experience were you pursuing?

SENGA NENGUDI: Actually, through the dance department. The Pasadena Art Museum also had a dance department. Through the Cal State dance department, I was connected with Hilda Mullin, who was a dance therapist, and so with her—it was kind of a combination of things, because with her, I got into Pasadena Art Museum, and then the art department. But I was also, at the same time, teaching art classes at the Watts Towers Art Center. There were some artist-teachers that taught at the Pasadena Art Museum that also were teaching at the Watts Towers Art Center.

ELISSA AUTHER: So you became part of an art educational community.

SENGA NENGUDI: Yes, exactly. And it was very, very rich. The original Pasadena Art Museum was a small, little, kind of Asian-themed pagoda kind of building. And they had a very small permanent collection that included four Paul Klee works. I don't know if you're familiar with them. So anyway, that was an experience for me. That was a good experience for me, because the stuff was so tacky. I had seen Paul Klee's work in books, but when I saw the original—and you could see the little tape, and you could see the pencil and so on—I thought, Oh, this is great. These are real people, really were expressing themselves.

ELISSA AUTHER: So you were attracted to the craft of the works?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yeah, sort of the non-craft of the work. [They laugh.]

ELISSA AUTHER: Not the polished side of it.

SENGA NENGUDI: Right, exactly—exactly. This kind of human deal. So we would take the kids into the museum, and we would have them dance the artwork—the paintings and so on. And then people like Jim Dine came through—Oldenburg, too—all these guys that were making their careers—oh, God, what's his name—with the targets?

ELISSA AUTHER: Jasper Johns.

SENGA NENGUDI: Jasper Johns, all of them—Rauschenberg. So we had these happenings, and that, of course, influenced me. I thought, Oh, this is great. I can dance without this issue of body type and all of that kind of stuff. I can do whatever I want to do. I can incorporate anything into my art practice. And so that experience was pivotal for me. It really structured me, the way I go about things. We would take the kids out, and we'd climb into garbage cans and grab stuff for the art class.

So this kind of process and practice, it's still in my work, except now I don't pick up stuff,

because it's too germey. You don't know what you'll pick up these days. But then it was safer.

In the meantime, at the Watts Towers Art Center, that also was something that was highly experimental. The sculptor Noah Purifoy was the director at the time, and he's amazing. Simon Rodia constructed the towers, and they were a huge influence on my thinking and developing practice. We would do art classes there with the kids. But it was very fragile, and so the art classes took place in this little frame house, and we called it "The White House," because it was white. The kids from the neighborhood could come in and have art experiences for free. We did a lot of experimenting there, too. And the Watts Riots came through there, so that was a whole thing that changed the way Black artists dealt with materials and subject matters.

ELISSA AUTHER: So, say more about the Watts Riots of 1965, specifically how you experienced it and how it impacted your work. You were already working with cast-off materials in a process-oriented way, right?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yeah. It was really weird, because I lived on the west side, and Watts, where most of the revolution took place, is kind of south. The west side was more of a middle-class kind of situation, so it was really interesting to take the dog, our family dog, for a walk and to walk by Dorsey High School and to see all these soldiers with guns and all that kind of stuff. It was truly an issue of phoenix rising, because it really galvanized the arts community, and it really became kind of like a family affair. You had a sense of being a part of something. But yes, my process was already moving in that direction.

ELISSA AUTHER: But you noticed that there was dramatic transformation in other African-American artists' work because of that?

SENGA NENGUDI: Oh, yes, definitely.

ELISSA AUTHER: And what did that look like?

SENGA NENGUDI: Well, it went from very classical drawings, the typical kind of drawings and paintings that you would see in any art school, to really reflecting on the culture and trying new materials, and also in terms of writing, that really shifted.

ELISSA AUTHER: You mean artists started writing about their own work?

SENGA NENGUDI: No, there was a writers' workshop.

ELISSA AUTHER: Okay.

SENGA NENGUDI: Yeah, and poets had really started developing a community around the poetry writers' kind of thing. So the mindset became different. It's like, Okay, we no longer want to knock on the door; we want to create something for ourselves. And if we have to support that, we will support it within ourselves.

ELISSA AUTHER: Did you participate in any of the artists' workshops or new initiatives that were established after the Watts Riots?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yes, but right after that I went to Japan to Waseda University. I was there for a year, and when I came back in 1967, all of that which had sort of been seeded during the riots, that had taken on its own momentum.

ELISSA AUTHER: How did the trip to Japan come about?

SENGA NENGUDI: Well, it was a graduate thing. I had already graduated. I had gotten my B.A., and so it was a graduate program. There were three places I could go without language proficiency. One was Taiwan; the other one was—I can't remember where the other one was, but I wanted to have a different experience, and it was a Western European country. I can't remember where it was. I think it was Sweden or something. I wanted to have a non-Western experience. I wanted to see life differently. I knew what Western thought was about, and I really, really, really wanted to experience something different.

And so to be honest, Taiwan, I pictured bombs coming from China and so on. [Laughs.] But beyond that, I've always been especially influenced by books, and I found this book on—what'd it say—Japanese avant-garde art—and it was partially paintings, which was so-so. It just looked like warmed over, honestly, American painting.

And then it was the Gutai group. When I saw that, I said, That's where I want to go. I never saw them when I was there; I searched and searched, could not find them. But that was the reason I chose to go to Japan, and it was truly, truly different. Their mindset was so different.

ELISSA AUTHER: It sounds like you strongly identified with the Gutai aesthetic. Could you say a little bit more about that?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yeah. I loved—and I hate to use the word "simplistic," because that's really not fair, because it's so sophisticated—I loved the simplicity. Do you know of another way I could phrase that? It was so plain, minimal, and elegant.

For instance, they have their little scroll, and then at the bottom, on a little pedestal, they'll have this ceramic bowl that's totally misshapen. But the reason being, they chose not to glorify perfection. They feel as though the most perfect thing is when it's imperfect. And so this issue of being able to have nothing in the room but this bowl, and you're able to meditate on that one object, which is totally beyond how we think. We just want to clutter something up.

It's funny because the traditional Japanese homes I saw were very clean and simple and so on, and the more Western the homes were, the more stuff they had, the more clutter they had. And I loved, again, this issue of ritual. Noh and Kabuki theater and gagaku, which included dance. That was something special to me, too, because in Western society, everything has to be segmented—everything. But there, everything was a part of a total package.

If you look at scroll paintings, they show the whole society. It shows the emperor; it shows the worker; it shows everybody. But in Western art, you have the potato pickers or you have the—no matter what part of society, it's never together. It's either the aristocracy or the poor people, or the this or the that, and at that time—and from what I saw of Japanese culture, historically as well as when I was there, everybody was included. It was a whole picture.

ELISSA AUTHER: Did you study these Japanese art forms before you left on the trip, or was it really just an open process of discovery once you got there?

SENGA NENGUDI: I studied it before I went, but actually, it was an open discovery when I got there as well, because a book is a book, but when you have this experience, as a living thing, then it becomes three dimensional.

ELISSA AUTHER: So you talked about the ritual of Catholic Mass, and then also watching your fellow high school students play the dozens. Were there any other kind of performative actions that intrigued you before you went to Japan? Were you still looking—did you see any others in the United States?

SENGA NENGUDI: Let me think. That's something that might just have to come out—[they laugh]—as we talk, because right now, I can't think of anything right now. The Catholic situation in elementary school—totally ritual, totally ceremonial. So that's one aspect of that. And I did study African art and dance, so that also was part of it. I think I studied that a little bit later, though. I'm trying to think when I studied it. [Inaudible.] It all kinds of melds into one. I guess, like when I was 18 to 20 or something, all of that kind of happened together, because as time went on, certain things were more available.

Films were more available. *Black Orpheus*—I guess that was in the '60s—that was totally significant. Are you familiar with—okay, so that whole thing—then I'm exposed to the diaspora. Oh, that happens in Brazil? Wow, that looks really African. So seeing films like that kind of opened that connection with all of this stuff.

ELISSA AUTHER: Any other cultural experiences or works of art—films, music—that you want to talk about in relation to your work at this point?

SENGA NENGUDI: Right now I'm truly blanking, but *Black Orpheus* was major for me. In the earlier years, like the '60s, that was important to me, and theater was important.

Something else I'd like to mention related to Japan is paper. I'm a real paper person—I love paper. All the ways paper was used in Japan amazed me. My work tends to be ephemeral. I thought, Oh, okay, you can have paper last 200 years or 300 years. Very encouraging! The use of paper ran the gamut from scroll paintings to shrine and theater adornment and props

to fans and lanterns and beyond.

And with the Japanese—there was a group of us that went over, and the people from the East Coast were able to relate to Japanese culture a little bit more easily than we from the West Coast, because they were more accustomed to social formalities and following rules of etiquette. In California, it's up for grabs—anything. Absolutely everything was a ritual in Japan—picking up the phone, you had to do that a certain way. I lived with a Japanese family; they said, "You're not going out of this house until you figure out what you're supposed to do." You always have to take a present; the present has to look like this, et cetera.

ELISSA AUTHER: So there is no distinction between art and everyday?

SENGA NENGUDI: Well, yeah, there is, but I guess you might say life is artful for them, because there was an aesthetic to absolutely everything. And this is traditional; this isn't contemporary society. At that point, in the '60s, it was kind of split down the middle. Now it's probably different, but even the hippest people, they had to yield to some of this stuff.

It even was related to the bathroom. There was a wooden tub, and you washed yourself before you got in the tub, and there was a line—like, the man of the house would go first, and then the daughter—[inaudible]—so even that had its own form. I can't think of anything that didn't have its own form.

And then also with music, instead of music evolving, if someone changed a style of playing the flute, then that would be a new school. It wouldn't be as in Western music, just an evolution. They would keep the integrity of the original—of the one thing—and then make something different out of it, make something new, a new school out of it.

ELISSA AUTHER: So you came back to the U.S. in 1967?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yes.

ELISSA AUTHER: And then went to—did you immediately join an M.F.A. program?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yes.

ELISSA AUTHER: Okay. Say more.

SENGA NENGUDI: That was at the same school [CSULA], and in sculpture. The B.A. was just fine arts, and then I went into a sculpture grad program.

ELISSA AUTHER: And when did you graduate?

SENGA NENGUDI: And then one of my favorite teachers said, "Well, you have to go to New York. New York is boot camp. Gotta do that if you want to be anything." So I said, "Okay." So the minute I graduated, I went to New York.

ELISSA AUTHER: And so what year was that?

SENGA NENGUDI: That was in '71, and that is because I had to—it wasn't a straight line with me staying in school. I had to work for a year to save money. I worked as a social worker for the county at the Pasadena DPSS Office [LA County Department of Public Social Services]. I was in the unit that managed the files of unwed mothers who were minors.

ELISSA AUTHER: So what did your sculptural work look like in—from the late '60s to '71, when you left for New York? What were you doing?

SENGA NENGUDI: Plastics. I was doing water sculptures. I heat-sealed them—I would make forms, and then I would heat-seal them and put water in them. And I guess that was the beginning of my sensual self, because I really wanted—again, thinking of Jesus in the basement—I really wanted to have something that people could feel and that had a sense of body. So with those water sculptures, if you felt them, it was really quite sensual, and it had this sense of body, because it was pliable and that sort of thing. It was just like feeling my arm. And I did that until waterbeds came out—[laughs]—and then I said, Well, I can't do that anymore. Water in plastic has gone commercial. They got waterbeds. But yeah, that's how I started out.

ELISSA AUTHER: And then from there, what did you move to?

SENGA NENGUDI: Well, from there I moved to New York, and I kind of was paralyzed, in a sense, because in LA, even though we had issues with the museums not wanting to show our work and so on and so forth, it still was kind of diverse. But in New York, as you know, everything's in a neighborhood. And particularly then, because that was at the height of Black nationalism and so on. I decided, as with Japan, I wanted to know something different, so I decided, instead of being a downtown artist, I wanted to be an uptown artist.

Now, that conversation. When you go someplace, people always give you names and so on. So slowly I would contact different people. There's a painter by the name of William T. Williams, and so I went down to see him. He had a downtown studio. And he says, "Well, you're going to have to make up your mind"—he's Black—"you're going to have to make up your mind whether you want to be down here or if you want to be with the nationalists."

And so I said, Hmm, I know my work will not go over well—the way I do work—with nationalist kinds of painting and so on. So I didn't show my work at all while I—well, I did once. Romare Bearden had a gallery [Cinque Gallery] where young Black artists could show their work. He was really important, because he was one of the first people to write a comprehensive book on African-American art history.

ELISSA AUTHER: He didn't show exclusively Afro-centric art at this exhibition space?

SENGA NENGUDI: I can't remember, to be honest, what I showed there. No. I can't remember, to be honest. But I did show there.

ELISSA AUTHER: Did you show the water sculptures?

SENGA NENGUDI: No. That would have gone over like a lead balloon.

ELISSA AUTHER: Because it was too abstract?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yeah. There was some abstract stuff going on, but it was mostly in the form of African—say, like fabrics—geometric things and so on and so forth. I really wanted to have the Harlem experience, so I made spirit forms out of flag material.

You saw the piece I hung from the back fire escape of a building in Spanish Harlem, where I was living. I decided, I'll play with that, because in Spanish Harlem at that time, there were so many drug addicts and so much heroin, and when you walked down the street, there would be all these people swaying in the wind—never falling, but they were so drugged out that they would periodically nod off standing up. So that was part of the reason for doing that kind of flag material thing and attaching it in the back of where I lived, because with the wind, it would have this swaying effect, which was similar to the way people were moving on the streets.

ELISSA AUTHER: So you're referring to the large-scale fabric cutouts of the human figure, like *Down (Purple)*?

SENGA NENGUDI: Right. So that was my concession, I guess you might say. [Laughs.] And so really—honestly, I do not feel I exhibited anything of consequence, because I was terrified of being criticized as too conventional.

ELISSA AUTHER: What about your identity as a West Coast artist? Was that viewed as somewhat suspicious or not?

SENGA NENGUDI: Actually, after I had moved back to California, I was in a group exhibit at the Studio Museum of Harlem about California artists [*California Black Artists, 1977*].

ELISSA AUTHER: Let me just back up real quick, because I forgot to ask you what the reception of the water sculptures were in Los Angeles. Did you exhibit them there?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yes, I did. And the reception was quite good, and then my first exhibit, curiously enough, was in Switzerland [*Eight Afro-Americans, 1971*]. It was an exhibit of, I think, eight Black artists. And so, yes, it was received well.

ELISSA AUTHER: Could you talk a little bit about the galleries in Los Angeles at that time?

SENGA NENGUDI: John Manno was an artist and instructor at Cal State Los Angeles. He was from New York and had that New York art thing going on. So he went down to Central Avenue, which is a pretty intense street, and like they do in New York, which hadn't really started in LA, he created a studio right in the heart of that area. The first exhibit of my water sculptures in LA was there [*Three Artists*, Gallery Central, 1970].

The whole thing with museums was terrible. It was really bad, with a lot of picketing by artists on both coasts. They would allow artists of color—and that includes Latino artists and some Asian artists—to exhibit, but only in the basement, or they'd have one room, right as you would come into the museum. That was the Whitney. Typically, the concession was to create a community room or something as a way to appease us, but it never felt like real exhibition space. So it wasn't given the same value as being on the upper floors or something like that. So that was a real, real issue. And the only reason that happened was because of pressure consistently applied by artists.

ELISSA AUTHER: You mean the opening up of the exhibition calendar to a more diverse group of artists.

SENGA NENGUDI: Yes, right—or it was because of political pressure, artists saying, "Enough is enough; come on now," and that sort of thing.

ELISSA AUTHER: And at the same time, you had smaller galleries opening that catered to the African-American arts community.

SENGA NENGUDI: Just barely. There were two main Black galleries in LA. One was Brockman Gallery, which was kind of nice art, and then there was Suzanne Jackson's Gallery 32. It was the first female Black-owned gallery. We had a very famous show there in 1970. It was called *The Sapphire Show*, and it was all Black female artists. [And I think I gave Kellie Jones the brochure or that announcement for *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980*, Hammer Museum, 2011 and traveling. -SG/EA] And then Suzanne had to close the gallery, and she started working for Brockman. And then Brockman, at a certain point, was chosen by the CETA [Comprehensive Employment and Training Act] program—are you familiar with the CETA program?

ELISSA AUTHER: Yes, but could explain it?

SENGA NENGUDI: It was the 1970s' version of the WPA. It was a government program in California that included the employment of artists to produce commissioned works of art for public spaces. So Brockman was given that grant, and I was chosen as one of the artists. That grant funded *Freeway Fets*.

ELISSA AUTHER: So before we get to that, just a couple of other questions. Were you already part of what came to be called Studio Z at this point? Could you tell us about Studio Z?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yeah. Studio Z was a group of us that—how should I put this? We looked differently at art. A lot of art at Brockman was within a certain range of painting and sculpture and so on.

ELISSA AUTHER: You mean more traditional or figurative?

SENGA NENGUDI: More traditional, yeah, within the Black meaning of traditional. [More traditional—I guess if I tried to pinpoint it, I would say we were interested in applying performative interactions to our practices. We wanted to break with the exclusive studio solo relationship between an artist and their work. We were really interested, again, in jazz. [Sun Ra's Arkestra] and the Chicago Art Ensemble, which was a jazz group, both originally out of Chicago, were moving in a direction that captivated us. [I was born in Chicago.] We were interested in this total theater kind of thing.

The Chicago Art Ensemble, besides creating amazing music, incorporated face paint, tribal wear, and dance. And Sun Ra showed us what space travel to alternative galaxies might look like. Both Sun Ra and the Chicago Art Ensemble took their music performances up and beyond, into performance art. So we all kind of were like-minded, in that we wanted to expand beyond Black and white. We wanted to—[laughs]—break the bounds of the studio and go to new frontiers, so to speak. -SN/EA]

So David Hammons had this amazing space—it was an old dance hall from the 1940s on

54th and Slauson. Downstairs, there were studios, and then upstairs was his place. It had the stage; it had everything. It was fabulous. And so the Chicago Art Ensemble came there and played. During this time we loosely developed this group called Studio Z.

ELISSA AUTHER: Who were the members?

SENGA NENGUDI: Well, Greg Edwards, whose older brother is Mel Edwards, because Mel Edwards, I think, had already moved to New York at the time. I would say David, but David is never a part of a group. [Laughs.] So he was loosely affiliated but not officially a member. Maren Hassinger was part of it and Franklin Parker, who was our good buddy. Maren, Parker, and myself did many a collaboration together. There were others—Joe Ray and Roho. These were all people who were interested in everything: art, dance, music, and how they can come together.

A quick aside, I would like to elaborate for a moment on Mel Edwards. I was taken by the power of his work. The same is true of Barbara Chase-Riboud. These were two artists I looked up to highly.

ELISSA AUTHER: Where did you first see Chase-Riboud's work?

SENGA NENGUDI: I saw her work in a book.

ELISSA AUTHER: Okay, back to Studio Z. How did you all collaborate?

SENGA NENGUDI: Well, it took on a lot of different forms. For instance, we might sponsor a music concert, or we might get together and have an exhibit. But within that group, there were other people like myself and Maren Hassinger and Franklin Parker and Houston Conwill that did even further explorations. We would go to different places just to explore. We'd go to a place that had an empty swimming pool, or we went to the Greek Theatre when nothing was going on there.

Just anywhere and everywhere. Each one of us would come up with an idea, and then we would play out that idea, and then we would get a sponsor. For instance, the series of performances titled *Segue* in 1980. The sponsor, I think, was the Los Angeles Printmaking Society. So they would sponsor us, and then each one of us would do a piece, a concept. And we would be in each other's pieces. Say, for instance, I would have the concept, and then they would play it out, or vice versa.

ELISSA AUTHER: Yeah, and we'll talk about those individual performances. One other question before we get back to the first CETA project that you were part of. Let's talk a little bit about names, because Senga Nengudi is an unusual and very beautiful name. Do you want to talk about that?

SENGA NENGUDI: Well, I was born Sue Ellen Irons. After I came back from New York and I was all politicized and everything, I thought, Oh, well, that's not me anymore. I want to be named. So at the time, I was going with this friend of mine—this boyfriend of mine—who was from Zaire—Congo—and so he kind of named me, and I said, Okay. And he named my first child and all that.

So that's how that happened. A lot of people—and this is Black people mostly—they got bent out of shape. They'd say, "Oh, why'd you change your name?" and so on. But there is a tradition in Chinese culture—and the reason I found this out—somebody told me about this poet who lived a long time ago. She's a female poet, and she would write poems with her blood on leaves, because she was married to this really terrible guy and he wouldn't let her do anything. And she would sneak her poems over to a neighbor and so on and so forth.

So in reading about her, I found that as a person becomes more enlightened, they're able to take another name each time, the more enlightened they become. This all sounds so la-di-da, but I love names. I used to want to have children just so I could name them. But the truth is that my body would give out from having them long before I ran out of names. So yeah, I changed my name, and now I can tell when someone calls and I pick up the phone and they say, "Sue?" I go, Uh-oh—this is going way back. [Laughs.] So, yeah. "Sue" sounds bizarre now.

ELISSA AUTHER: What does "Senga Nengudi" mean?

SENGA NENGUDI: "Senga" means "woman of the village that people come to"—smiling woman of the village that people come to for advice—sort of like an auntie. It means "listen" and "hear" in my language, Douala, of Cameroon.

ELISSA AUTHER: And what about "Nengudi"?

SENGA NENGUDI: It has something to do with a woman who comes to power as a traditional healer.

ELISSA AUTHER: When were you married?

SENGA NENGUDI: I was married in 1976 to Elliott Fittz, the most wonderful man in the world.

ELISSA AUTHER: Because sometimes you also include the name "Fittz."

SENGA NENGUDI: Fittz, yes. I include my married name, which is Senga Nengudi-Fittz. But I usually reserve Senga Nengudi for my art activities. So there's a comedian—I think his name was The Professor, and his—you know how comedians have their schtick? Well, he says, "You can call me Johnson, or you can call me Jones, or you can call me"—and so that's how I am. You can call me Senga; you can call me Senga Fittz; you can call me Senga Nengudi-Fittz—I'll answer to all of those.

ELISSA AUTHER: So let's go back now to the first project you did for CETA, which is—let's see—that would be 1977.

SENGA NENGUDI: It was 1978.

ELISSA AUTHER: And the title—*Ceremony for Freeway Fets*.

SENGA NENGUDI: Yes. And actually, the sculpture itself—the installation was called *Freeway Fets*, and I wanted to do a ceremony to consecrate the ground and so on. So all of these elements that were of interest to me that were a part of my process came into play there. It was a collaborative effort in that the Studio Z guys in the orchestra, they played there. And then there was Maren Hassinger and David Hammons, and they worked with me in terms of doing the actual ceremony. I created all of the costumes, and I chose—did I tell you this? I guess it's better to say.

I chose that area because it was under the freeway. It was off of Pico Boulevard, which is truly diverse, in that a lot of—at least at that time—a lot of Native Americans that came off the reservation went there because there was a community there, and also a strong Latino community. And under the freeway, there was a kind of opening between—like a shelf between the freeway itself, and under it, and there was a community of homeless people that lived there, which was clear because of stuff around.

But it had a very African feel, because there were little tiny palm trees—little tiny palm trees, and there was just an energy there that felt good. It felt right. And then the columns—I created the installation around the columns to be one—sort of like grass skirts, and the wind would shift the pantyhose forms—kind of dancing—and then the other columns had a lot of phallic symbols incorporated into them.

At that time, in the Black community, Black men and women were really having a time honoring and respecting each other. There was a lot of mess going on. So I wanted to create a piece where these two energies would come together, for good.

So that's kind of what the performance was about. I was kind of the spirit that was bringing them together. And the thing about that was, when I wore this mask that I created, it was like I had never worn a mask before, and it was like I was—I hate to say "possessed," but I was—I was no longer myself, and this mask, or whatever was going on, allowed me to be freer, to be more expansive with my movements and so on.

So it was a real experience, as I kind of got into it. The best compliment I could have gotten after the performance was over—this guy said to me, "Wow, that was really African, but it was, like, really Kabuki, too." And I said, "Aha"—[they laugh]—because that's what I was looking for in terms of the performance itself, but also the approach I took to the costuming and so on and so forth.

ELISSA AUTHER: So let me just clarify. So the *Freeway Fets* were the sculptural installations

around the pylons for the freeway itself.

SENGA NENGUDI: Right.

ELISSA AUTHER: And then you choreographed the performance and acted as the—how did you describe it—the spirit that attempts to bring together the male-female duality.

SENGA NENGUDI: Right, yeah.

ELISSA AUTHER: Okay. There are a sizable number of photographs of the piece. Who took those photographs?

SENGA NENGUDI: His name is Quaku—Roderick "Quaku" Young. It's really good that he did that, because Barbara McCollough filmed it, but the reel didn't come out—none of the music came out. Nothing came out. And if it hadn't been for him, it would have been a lost thing. Documentation is all there is with performances.

ELISSA AUTHER: Was Barbara McCollough part of Studio Z?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yes, perhaps unofficially.

ELISSA AUTHER: And Quaku was too?

SENGA NENGUDI: Well, they were kind of around, you know what I mean? He was a photographer, and pretty much everyone was an artist in there. And Barbara was a filmmaker, so she was really, really important, because she was the only filmmaker [documenting what we were doing. She went to UCLA and was part of a group of Black filmmakers called the L.A. Rebellion. She was the only one in the group who focused on documentary filmmaking. Her film *Shopping Bag Spirits [and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space]* is a classic. It is a series of interviews with a number of artists, including David Hammons, Betye Saar, myself and others. –SN/EA] So she was really pivotal, and I could call on her pretty much at any time. We didn't live that terribly far apart. I don't know if you've seen *Rapunzel*?

ELISSA AUTHER: I've seen the photograph of that action.

SENGA NENGUDI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] The photograph of *Rapunzel* was taken at a school by Barbara—did I tell you this?

ELISSA AUTHER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] But let's record the story.

SENGA NENGUDI: Okay. Yeah, because that was a school that was in the community forever. It was a Catholic school that looked like a small castle. It was on, I think, Arlington near Pico, and they were tearing it down. I thought, Oh, my God, this can't be. They're tearing down this beautiful school. And actually, years before that, we had done some experimentation in the pool at that school when it was empty.

So I called Barbara and I said, "Oh, come on, Barbara; we have to document this."

I had a headdress—a sculptural piece that I had done—and I went inside the school, literally as they were tearing it down with a bulldozer, the rest of the school behind me. There was only one thing standing, and that was this little kind of tower, mini-tower, and I went in there and did some movement—just to officially do a performance there. And she captured it with photography.

ELISSA AUTHER: So you were using pantyhose in that piece, too, and there are pantyhose in *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*. Are you working on the on the *R.S.V.P.* series at this point as well?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yes, right. Well, again, I was looking for material that kind of reflected the female body. And I looked and I looked and I looked, and I couldn't find anything. And then, finally, I found the pantyhose, and that was right after my first son was born in 1974. Right after that, I went, Wow, because the whole birthing experience—you're expanding and then all of a sudden, after it's over, you're contracting, and your body kind of goes back into shape.

I really wanted to somehow express that experience. When I first started, I tried different

things in it. Then when I came upon sand, I said, Oh, this is it, because sand had weight, and it allowed different forms to take place because of that weight. The other stuff didn't. It was hard or whatever. I tried using resin. I tried using white glue.

ELISSA AUTHER: With the pantyhose?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yes, to make them permanent. And I said, I can't do this. This just doesn't feel right. And so Linda Bryant, the founder and owner of the legendary gallery Just Above Midtown—David Hammons introduced me to her gallery—she was really interested in the type of work we were doing on the West Coast, because she felt on the East Coast, the artists were just a bit too tight. [She wanted to open things up. So I talked to her about it. She said, "Screw it. Go for it; we'll go for it." That's the way she ran the gallery. It was very much about process. -SN/EA]

[END OF CD1 TR3.]

So I just started making them. And they just kind of came out like boom, boom, boom, boom.

ELISSA AUTHER: So the earliest ones were created in 1977?

SENGA NENGUDI: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

SENGA NENGUDI: But they were evolving in 1976.

ELISSA AUTHER: About how many of them were in the first series?

SENGA NENGUDI: Golly, I don't know. I'd say at least 20.

ELISSA AUTHER: Okay, and then what about the title?

SENGA NENGUDI: *Répondez S'il Vous Plait*; I really have this thing about the viewer saying something to me. I want you to respond. I'm inviting you to respond to this work. And if it has any power at all, you will respond to it. So it was an invitation, and I wanted you to respond to it.

For instance, in New York at Linda's gallery, people would come in and then they would look at the work and laugh, and I loved that. [And then they would take a second look, and the laughter would be replaced by more of a questioning tone. -SN/EA] I actually like humor, but I also like the issue of double thinking or the double take.

The audience had never seen anything like that before. So it was really humorous to them, but then they would look at in another way too.

ELISSA AUTHER: Did you ever have a conversation with viewers early on that went beyond the humor of the piece? What else was compelling to viewers?

SENGA NENGUDI: Well, I think they kind of look torturous. So that's why I said, at first they'd laugh, and then they go, "Oh, shoot."

ELISSA AUTHER: Did they recognize the reference to the body?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yeah. Oh, it was kind of undeniable. And what I find really curious is, I was dealing with my own body issues. I was dealing with issues head-on because I was so stressed and so on. So it wasn't just about the body; it was also about tensions, mentally as well as physically—what the body goes through just during life, basically.

But now I'm finding it fascinating that it has, to my mind, still validity, because there's so much—the body issues are becoming more and more extreme for people. And this issue of—what do you call it—cosmetic surgery, on all parts of your body. So this stuff is still real. It's gotten worse as opposed to better, how people feel about their bodies.

ELISSA AUTHER: Let's talk about this, because in the past 10 years these works have had a major revival.

SENGA NENGUDI: Yeah, they have.

ELISSA AUTHER: Right, they've been reinstalled; they've been recreated. You've also continued to add to the series, beginning in 2005 or so?

SENGA NENGUDI: Two thousand three. Well—

ELISSA AUTHER: Two thousand three?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yeah.

ELISSA AUTHER: Okay. So that's beginning of new series?

SENGA NENGUDI: Right.

ELISSA AUTHER: Were you surprised that it was these works that remained so compelling to people?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yeah. Yes. And I think, possibly, because it really came from my gut, so to speak. It was really emotional—it was [coming from my gut; whereas, maybe some other stuff was less personal. I was more -SN/EA] cerebral about other work, or I was just interested in the process. But this was coming from my heart. That's the only thing I can think of.

ELISSA AUTHER: Can you think back to the first invitation you received to remake an *R.S.V.P.* work or to install one that hadn't been seen in a long time?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yes. Thomas Erben, my dealer, I'd say, asked me to remake them. Thomas was introduced to me by Lorraine O'Grady, and he came out to Colorado to see my work. I went on to do a number of shows with him, and then all of a sudden—because Lorraine said, "Oh, you should show the pantyhose pieces again."

ELISSA AUTHER: So she was trying to get you to try to revive them.

SENGA NENGUDI: Right. And I said, "Please. I've done that already. I don't do that; that's not my thing." And so she kept harping at it and harping at it. And finally I said, "Oh, okay." And so that's when Thomas said, "Okay, well, let's do a show."

ELISSA AUTHER: And what year was that?

SENGA NENGUDI: That was 2003. And then after that—

ELISSA AUTHER: —an explosion of interest.

SENGA NENGUDI: Yeah. People have just really gravitated to them.

ELISSA AUTHER: And what is it like to remake them?

SENGA NENGUDI: It's—I finally decided not to do that. There are some pieces—because they're very simply made—there are some pieces that I've been able to remake. But a lot of them, as simple as they were originally to make, I cannot replicate them.

First of all, I'm not in the same place. And secondly, you think of pantyhose as a pantyhose, but no, they have different crotches; they have different elasticity. And so to try and find exactly the same material—plus, a lot of them were created around found objects. How are you going to find a found object from 20 or 30 years ago?

I really feel comfortable with the pantyhose. They are like an extension of myself. Somehow it feels like there are still things to be said with that material.

I've had people come up to me [with deep expressions of thanks for the works -SN/EA]. At the Hammer show, one woman came up to me and she says, "Oh, my God," she says, "thank you." She's just really thankful. She says, "This really expresses how I feel when I have to go into a meeting and wear pantyhose. And people are pulling at me." So she was very, very emotional about it.

When I get comments like that, it makes me feel good: that they're not alone; a woman is

not alone with what's going on with her. She can see what that looks like visually, abstractly. She can see what is going on inside of her, abstractly expressed.

ELISSA AUTHER: She also has a direct experience wearing pantyhose in certain professional situations.

SENGA NENGUDI: Yes, exactly. And that was part of it. That's why I initially used used pantyhose. I got them from the thrift stores. I got them from friends. And of course, I would wash them, but my thing was that, just like an African fetish or something, because it was worn by somebody, their energy was still in it. Their story was still in it. So that's why, normally, I try and use something that's already been used. Sometimes, of course, I have to go with new ones. But that's the reasoning for it originally.

ELISSA AUTHER: So there's a number of performances that are documented with you and Maren Hassinger interacting with the works.

SENGA NENGUDI: Yes.

ELISSA AUTHER: So tell me a little bit about how those came about.

SENGA NENGUDI: Maren and I met through CETA. I was really in awe of her work, because a friend of mine and I went to see her—she had a really big show at Arco [Center for Visual Arts, LA, 1976]. And no Black person, especially a Black woman, had ever showed there. I think she showed at LA County, too, LACMA. But anyway, I thought, Wow, here's a person, a contemporary of mine.

And so we found that we had dance in common. She's a much better mover than I because she went to Bennington and was a dance major, but we had a common way of looking at things. [That was also true with Frank Parker and David and Houston Conwill. We were explorers, ever investigating and finding new ways to use commonplace materials that we could use in ways that would charge our works with energy and layered meaning. -SN/EA]

With the initial show of the *R.S.V.P.* sculptures, which was at Pearl C. Wood's gallery in 1977—that's where that performance took place—I asked her to interact with me in this sculpture. And all of the classic pieces are of her, of course, because it's a cleaner image. But both of us manipulated the piece. During that time when I was involved in a show, I always liked to do a performance to initiate the show, to start it off. And so with some of my sculptures, I looked at them as artifacts. That was what was left after the performance.

[END OF CD1 TR4.]

ELISSA AUTHER: This is Elissa Auther speaking with Senga Nengudi in Denver, Colorado, on July 11, 2013. We're starting with some [follow-up from the first part of the interview. Let's begin again with artistic influences now that you've had time to think about it. -SN/EA]

SENGA NENGUDI: All of the artists I lean towards in any field just have this kind of odd edge to them. When I was studying modern dance, people like Isadora Duncan and Ted Shawn, these were the pioneers of modern dance that were of interest to me. Actually, when I was in New York about a year or so ago, there was that show at MoMA, *Inventing Abstraction*, early people like Kandinsky and so on. Are you familiar with that exhibit?

ELISSA AUTHER: Yes.

SENGA NENGUDI: They included in that show the films of early modern dancers, and I just loved it.

ELISSA AUTHER: Yeah, that was a fascinating aspect of that exhibition.

SENGA NENGUDI: It was. And when you think about it historically, for them to be doing that during the 1920s and 1918 and the 1930s and so on, that was really way out from what was going on at the time. So I really like all of that. And of course, on up to Pina Bausch now.

ELISSA AUTHER: Did you see any performances associated with the Judson Dance Group when you were in New York?

SENGA NENGUDI: I did not. I was very familiar with their work and followed it, but I didn't have an opportunity to see it when I lived there. But yeah, very, very, very familiar with their

work.

ELISSA AUTHER: What aspect of their style did you identify with?

SENGA NENGUDI: Judson?

ELISSA AUTHER: Or any of those dancers associated with the group.

SENGA NENGUDI: The issue of improvisation—and even then it was kind of pedestrian movements—they often incorporated that. And as I'm talking to you, I'm talking about white influences, and then the Black influences really had to do more with traditional work, which was African dance, as well as social dance, because social dance is very improvisational within the Black realm. So that was—I love to dance; I love to do all the dances, and just like with jazz, even though it was social dance, there's a departure; you have the basic format and then you depart from that.

So that was very stimulating and exciting. Again, not only the quirky, but this issue of improvisation kind of meanders through everything. I remember—what is it—oh, Ruth Dennis, I think she was 150 years old and she came to our campus, and she had this long red cape on and she said, "Oh, let's go someplace." So all of us followed her like little ducks, and even though she was old, she was so grand, she just floated down the campus. So it was really wild. And let me see—musicians such as Miles Davis, Cecil Taylor. I don't know if you're familiar with Cecil Taylor; he is a very intense jazz pianist.

ELISSA AUTHER: What's intense about him?

SENGA NENGUDI: The way he plays, it's just like [noise], and he goes a mile a minute. I've seen him often, and he just almost leaves the quartet behind or the trio or whoever he's playing with, and they have to really catch up with him all the time and keep up with his energy. Then of course, socially social, regular Motown, R&B, that sort of thing. So even though we were listening to kind of white popular music, still the other music was always there, Billie Holiday and that sort of thing. And let's see—in terms of favorite artists as a young person, I told you, Picasso, Miró, Dali, the basic crew. I really liked Miró. For some reason, I really appreciated their work.

It kind of went from one to another, because even though there were plenty of artists—Black artists—that were working, I did not know of them historically, like the Harlem Renaissance and so on. It wasn't until a while that—because it was never taught in school, I wasn't even conscious of my history or ancestors. And so it went from a European thing, and it flipped over to the people I worked with. They were my heroes, like David Hammons and so on and so forth. They were the ones that were doing things that excited me then. And I loved—if you go back, way back, in terms of performance, I love Dada and all those things, and that's why I liked Dali and so on and Duchamp.

ELISSA AUTHER: Because there was a kind of playfulness to the work or spontaneity?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yeah, there was. And kind of thumbing their nose at the establishment. That was really important. And let me think along those lines—yeah, I was really sorry that it took that long to find out about my own history.

ELISSA AUTHER: So when did you first discover that there was something like the Harlem Renaissance?

SENGA NENGUDI: I'm ashamed to say it wasn't until I got to New York.

ELISSA AUTHER: So, in the '70s?

SENGA NENGUDI: In the '70s, in the beginning, 1971, I think.

ELISSA AUTHER: And how did you come across these artists?

SENGA NENGUDI: Well, I really don't know. It was just part of the energy of being there. And I think I told you that I was given the ultimatum: Are you going to be a downtown artist or an uptown artist? And clearly, Basquiat was a downtown artist, and that was always a thing. Well, why is he down there; why is he doing all that? Those people are going to kill him, which did happen. There was always this kind of thing about downtown and uptown. So when I started going uptown—you know how when you go to a new city, people give you all

these phone numbers: Oh, you have to call so-and-so.

Well, I finally called one person, Edna Watson, and in one day, I met all the people that became my friends. Because how New York is, you just kind of, Oh, hey, let's go over there; oh, yeah, yeah, well, why don't we go over to so-and-so's house, and why don't we do this? There's just this image—not so much now, I guess, but then, people would just hang out; they would just go from one place to another, and each place that you went was an adventure. So that's kind of how I met everybody. And there was this gallery, Weusi Gallery. It was a collective of artists, mostly male of course, and a few female Black artists, and they were more in the kind of nationalistic thing. So yeah, that's it.

ELISSA AUTHER: So they also introduced you to a history of Black artists.

SENGA NENGUDI: Right, exactly. And because it's New York, there was all this kind of energy around, available information about our history. The Schomburg Center, and just so many places. So then I started, obviously, delving deeper into it and so on and so forth.

I was trying to think of books and it's terrible but I really love nonfiction books. I love history. I love history because, to me, is it like fiction; it has everything that fiction has and it's true. There was one book that—even then, long ago, maybe about 15 or 20 years ago, I read a series of books by Mary Stewart called *The Crystal Cave*. It was about five books in the series, and I never read a book all the way through if it's fiction, but I read that one. And it really was about Merlin, and—are you familiar with that?

ELISSA AUTHER: No.

SENGA NENGUDI: It was about Merlin, and it took his point of view, Merlin's point of view, as opposed to King Arthur. What intrigued me about it was, in this series of books, he was sort of like a healer as well as a magician and so on. And he started when he was really young.

ELISSA AUTHER: Oh, before I forget, one clarification. What was Edna's last name?

SENGA NENGUDI: Watson. Weusi Gallery was located in Harlem.

ELISSA AUTHER: Were all the Black nationalists in Harlem? For them, was downtown hopelessly bougie and white.

SENGA NENGUDI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ELISSA AUTHER: What about someone like—well, he didn't live in New York—I'm just wondering how your experience compares to other abstractionists, like Sam Gilliam.

SENGA NENGUDI: He was considered a downtown artist. And nowadays everything is coming together; everybody's everywhere; and even the styles are—

ELISSA AUTHER: Those divisions are hard to come by nowadays.

SENGA NENGUDI: They really are. Norman Lewis was a painter, and he taught at the Art Students' League. Everybody went there. That was an art school everybody went to, Black, white, or polka dot. Anyway, he taught there for a while. There was Alma Thomas, and there were some abstractionists—and they really had to hold the line of their philosophy and so on because it was so hard during that time. And it was sort of like, I guess, the equivalent of Sammy Davis, Jr. They were accused of copping out, all that kind of stuff.

So—but now things are better.

ELISSA AUTHER: Artists don't care so much anymore? Like, influences are influences, and you do what you want with them?

SENGA NENGUDI: Right, exactly.

ELISSA AUTHER: What other influences do you want to talk about?

SENGA NENGUDI: Well, I'll finish off about *The Crystal Cave* and so on.

ELISSA AUTHER: Okay, you can go ahead.

SENGA NENGUDI: What intrigued me about this book was that Merlin had no control over his magic powers. It would come to him, and that's when he was kind of, do whatever. And the important thing for me was, between times, he prepared himself. He studied herbs; he helped people, like community people, farmers and so on. So he was constantly honing his skills, so when the moment came, he had the skills to follow through on whatever the supposed magic was.

And the other thing was, he said—and these are personal references for how I think—I got the sense that a legend is created; it's not just, Okay, this person is great and so on. This legend is created. When King Arthur was about to be born, [Merlin] went around to the countryside and he would tell people, Oh, such and such—basically like Jesus, I guess you might say. Oh, this is going to happen; this is going to happen; these things are going to happen. And so he conditioned the minds of people so that when the event happened, they were ready to accept it, and they were ready to say, Yes, this is a legend; this is—I know it sounds weird to you, but it was—

ELISSA AUTHER: So you see that as related to your own practice as an artist in some way?

SENGA NENGUDI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ELISSA AUTHER: Can you describe that in more detail?

SENGA NENGUDI: Preparation. Say for instance, this: I'm preparing, I'm preparing, I'm preparing, even though I might not know if something is coming, and then the situation presents itself, and I'm ready. It's sort of like this whole thing of creating a legend is sort of like advertising, like the advertising game. People tell you something, and then you believe it after a while. So basically, it's a lesson in conditioning.

ELISSA AUTHER: Other influences?

SENGA NENGUDI: If you can ask me a question, it might be a little bit easier.

ELISSA AUTHER: Sure. The other thing you said that you wanted to follow up on was the issue of process; you wanted to talk about that more now?

SENGA NENGUDI: Okay. I was just talking about this and preparation; that also has to do with improvisation. You're preparing yourself; you're setting yourself up—you're building a skill set so that you can then leap off from there. So even though it seems like it's kind of disjointed, there's a little connecting of the dots as you go along. So yeah, I'm really committed to improvisation and seeing where that goes.

Oh, another influence is the influence of folk art—not so much an influence, but I like folk art. And what I like about folk art is that in the beginning, before they're discovered, there's no thought about the business of art; there's no thought about the infrastructure of art or anything like that. It's just pure—a need to do something.

And I really like that they honor that they don't care about a museum or something. If it's something that they need to show, then they put it in their front yard. They make it available for anybody that comes by. And it's not the cumbersome thing that you have when you have a career. It's this just joy of creating, and almost like it's an edict from above or something. Folk artists often say, "Oh, well, God said to me if I don't paint, I'm going to die," or something like that. And so that kind of joy and urgency and commitment and focus I find really nice.

ELISSA AUTHER: You also wanted to talk about the fact that you loved libraries as a child.

SENGA NENGUDI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I love books. And I think I mentioned that I really love mythology, and I guess fantasy and all those kinds of things, and I guess anything that kind of had to do with spiritual stuff or other stuff—other than what I was being taught.

ELISSA AUTHER: So the last time we spoke, we talked about the *R.S.V.P.* series in detail, but you're also a prolific performance artist, and that work is less well known.

SENGA NENGUDI: Right.

ELISSA AUTHER: So could I ask you some questions just about individual performances, and then maybe you could say a little bit about each one?

SENGA NENGUDI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ELISSA AUTHER: Okay. So the first one I wanted to talk about was *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*, and that was produced in 1978. You mentioned that it came out of a CETA grant. Is there anything else you want to say about that particular performance?

If not, we can just move onto the next one, because you did talk about it last time.

SENGA NENGUDI: I did, and I think I talked about the collaborative nature of it, which was really important. It was sort of like a tribal kind of thing, in that—not tribal-tribal, but clan tribe people—likeminded thinkers. I think we did talk about that.

ELISSA AUTHER: Okay, so why don't we move on to *Masking It*, from 1978 and 1981: What was that about?

SENGA NENGUDI: I've always been intrigued with materials that are connected to time and place, materials that people basically think, Okay, I can tape something—I can put something together with it; I can use it to prep for painting a wall or something like that. And I like to take those materials and find other uses for them, so that in the same vein, people know that they can expand themselves, that they don't have to be viewed as one thing and kept in that box.

It was the cheapest thing; that's why I used a lot of stuff, like paper tarps that I would get from the paint store. I could utilize them very quickly. They were very large, and they allowed me to do a lot of things in a grand manner, so that's why I used them. They were cheap; they were only like two dollars a piece, and the tape was like 49 cents. So I then wanted to explore elements, say like an African culture and so on. I always loved the costumes and so on. And so in that way, I could do it very quickly.

ELISSA AUTHER: So you'd just tear off pieces of the tape and adhere them to yourself?

SENGA NENGUDI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I kept doing that. Then once my body was covered, then I moved with it in the studio.

ELISSA AUTHER: So there was a dance element?

SENGA NENGUDI: Always. Oh, I should say always a movement element to pretty much everything I did. And I just can't say enough about these photographers, because without that kind of documentation, it just would have been lost.

ELISSA AUTHER: Who photographed *Masking It* in the studio in 1979? There's a wonderful poster of the 1981 performance that shows you in movement.

SENGA NENGUDI: Right. Adam Avila.

ELISSA AUTHER: And how did you know him?

SENGA NENGUDI: I think—I'm not sure if Maren Hassinger introduced me to him or not. But he also worked at the LA County Museum; he was on the staff there.

There was one thing that was happening in LA, I'd say late '70s through the '80s. Even though we were not fully embraced by the white establishment, there was a lot of activity between people of color, Japanese, Mexican-American, and Native American, all that kind of stuff. So we were collaborating on that together. So that's kind of a part of that. And that's a history I don't think that has fully been investigated, even now.

[For instance, I was upset about the show at the Pompidou in 2006 [*Los Angeles 1955-1985: The Birth of an Art Capital*], because it barely included any artists of color. The show was supposed to be a representative survey of the Los Angeles art scene, and I was so mad, I wrote a letter to the curator. Out of that whole exhibition, which was very large, I think they maybe had four Black artists. I think they had David Hammons and John Otterbridge, maybe one other person like Betye Saar. Gronk was in it too. I recall they had one Japanese-American filmmaker. -SN/EA]

ELISSA AUTHER: While we're on the topic of exhibitions, what was your reaction to Pacific Standard Time, the series of shows sponsored by The Getty that sought to create space for untold histories of art and art communities in Los Angeles?

SENGA NENGUDI: I thought it was wonderful and amazing, not only for artists of color, but artists in general. I felt it was an interesting way to really highlight them, because there's always been this issue between East Coast and West Coast, even with jazz, East Coast jazz versus West Coast jazz. And it's only now that the West Coast is getting any kind of validation at all. That used to be just as bad as uptown and downtown with Black artists. Just in general, the arts were really—it was terrible when it came to western—West Coast artists.

ELISSA AUTHER: So you were in, what, four or five of those exhibitions?

SENGA NENGUDI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] It was surprising.

ELISSA AUTHER: Which ones were you in?

SENGA NENGUDI: I was in the one at MOCA [*Pacific Standard Time: Art in LA, 1945-1980*, 2011] and of course, the one at the Hammer [*Now Dig This!*].

ELISSA AUTHER: A fantastic show.

SENGA NENGUDI: Yeah. And there was one performance—one shoot—

ELISSA AUTHER: At LACE [Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions; *Los Angeles Goes Live: Performance Art in Southern California 1970-1983*, 2011].

SENGA NENGUDI: There was LACE, but then there was another one, hmm. So there was about four, which is amazing when you think about it.

ELISSA AUTHER: Well, let's talk about some of these other performances. Could you talk about *Get Up* in 1980?

SENGA NENGUDI: Again, that was a collaborative effort, and the title *Get Up* was like, Oh, she's wearing a really interesting "getup." That was part of a larger performance—*Segue* was the title of the larger performance. Houston Conwill and Maren and Franklin Parker, and another artist by the name of Yolanda Vidado was part of it. They kind of worked out, manifested my concept, which was to create costumes—sculptures really—on each other, and then as you build those sculptures, once they're built, then the artist moves through them and creates a performance.

ELISSA AUTHER: Did you bring together the materials for the costumes?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yes, I did.

ELISSA AUTHER: So that's what you provided?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yes, and the concept for the performance.

ELISSA AUTHER: What was *Art Activity*? There are a series of photographs in your archive that show you in a parklike setting with other people, and they're labeled "Art Activity."

SENGA NENGUDI: Right. With the same people I just mentioned except for Yolanda, we would just go around—I think I mentioned this to you. We would go around to spaces around town, and we just improvised.

ELISSA AUTHER: So these were members of Studio Z?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yeah, but by then we were kind of a quartet beyond Studio Z. We were interested in performative stuff, even more than some of the other members of Studio Z. For instance, Houston, he did a wonderful piece called *Cakewalk* in New York. Even though he was a sculptor and a visual artist, [a lot of his works are in public settings; he did a lot of public artwork. We would just go around and bring some stuff with us, a little bit of stuff with us and then just kind of do what the space might suggest. As I said before, we snuck into the Greek Theatre and worked on that stage. We were out at Griffith Park. That's where we did that little triangle thing you saw. There was like a bed of flowers and we worked around that. -SN/EA]

ELISSA AUTHER: So what exactly were you doing in those images? There's a triangle-shaped flower bed that you've arranged yourselves at each point of the triangle, and you're holding something in your hands.

SENGA NENGUDI: It was pantyhose.

ELISSA AUTHER: Okay, so you're stretching the pantyhose around the perimeter.

SENGA NENGUDI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And we're kind of—it's just pure exploration, just absolute, pure exploration. And from that exploration, then oftentimes that would generate ideas for a more set piece, and you would flesh out ideas for something that we really wanted to create as a form. Yeah, so that's it. It was a form of play, I guess you might say.

ELISSA AUTHER: What about *Flying*, a performance from 1982?

SENGA NENGUDI: Oftentimes we would do performances to signal the opening of an exhibit that we all were in. That was particularly the case then. We did it in front of Barnsdall at night.

ELISSA AUTHER: You did it in front of what?

SENGA NENGUDI: Barnsdall Municipal Gallery [Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, Barnsdall Art Park]. [It was for the opening of April Kingsley's exhibition *Afro-American Abstraction*. -SN/EA]

ELISSA AUTHER: Okay.

SENGA NENGUDI: And that was one of the first places that opened up that had blockbuster shows of artists of color. They had a really famous Latino show there and a Black art show and Asian-American artists. The curator there was named Josine Ianco Starrels who made that happen.

She was our—I don't know what you might call it—our champion or something. She was part-Jewish and part-Catholic, and so during the war she was going to Catholic school, and they kicked her out when they found out she was Jewish. [Her father—she had a real rich history—her father's best friend was Jean Arp, and so she had all that going on. She was really one for justice and the American way, in a sense, and real diversity. -SN/EA]

ELISSA AUTHER: So photographs of *Flying* show a group of artists, yourself included, wearing white outfits, and there's a film that's being projected on your bodies.

SENGA NENGUDI: Right.

ELISSA AUTHER: Who made that film?

SENGA NENGUDI: I've forgotten, but it was Maren's idea to have it projected. I believe it probably had something to do with nature, because her stuff often has to do with nature. And then Ulysses Jenkins, he always does these extravagant things. He's a video artist, and he and Parker were the ones that were lighting this kind of trashcan that had a TV monitor on it.

All of us had a part in creating the concept. And there was one part that I also did where we were holding these slats, and I think I was talking to Nora [Burnett Abrams] about these blinds, these slats. And so that was my part. And I can't remember—it feels like something I would do; I thought, Oh, let's climb the wall. So we were climbing the walls, and then we jumped off the wall onto the ground. It was such fun.

ELISSA AUTHER: Do you remember the name of the exhibition that was taking place?

SENGA NENGUDI: Mm-hmm. [Acknowledgment.] I think it could have been April Kingsley's *Afro-American Abstractions*, but I'll have to doublecheck that.

ELISSA AUTHER: Okay. What about the performance *Blind Dates*?

SENGA NENGUDI: That one came out of a collaboration that Linda Goode Bryant put together for her gallery, Just Above Midtown. Every month or so she would have these collaborations with a visual artist, a dancer, and a musician. My collaboration was with the musician Yasunao Tone, who had studied with John Cage, and Blondel Cummings, who was a wonderful dancer, a well-respected dancer.

ELISSA AUTHER: And so what happened in *Blind Dates*?

SENGA NENGUDI: Oh, okay. So I found costumes for Blondel, and she played off of those. I also did a thing with shoes that then Yasunao did something with—he recited a poem while I put shoes in place. It was like he had a spotlight on him like this, and I took shoes of people in the audience that would give me their shoes and started placing them around him as he read his poetry. And in fact, there was one pair of roller skates, which was great. [So I kind of did the visual thing. It was really funny because I really—aesthetics are very important to me and how things are placed and everything, and Yasunao Tone would say, "No aesthetics; it just happens." So we had this kind of really interesting collaborative process, because we were coming from different points of view, which was the exciting thing. -SN/EA]

ELISSA AUTHER: You placed people's pairs of shoes around him? Was he playing an instrument?

SENGA NENGUDI: No, [he read a poem in Japanese while I placed shoes in a circle around him, including a pair of roller skates that kept rolling. Tone's -SN/EA] contribution was, he had a screen—like an old-fashioned TV set. And it was just black-and-white images alternated with static, and the images would then create the sound. Every time you saw an image, it would go [squeaky noise], like that. So it was really interesting.

ELISSA AUTHER: How does the title *Blind Dates* connect to this performance?

SENGA NENGUDI: Because we didn't know each other. So it was like a blind date.

ELISSA AUTHER: So you're—

SENGA NENGUDI: —getting to know each other.

ELISSA AUTHER: You're interacting together as performers for the first time.

SENGA NENGUDI: Right.

ELISSA AUTHER: Okay. What about *Dance Card* from 1986?

SENGA NENGUDI: Originally, it was called *Nature's Way*, but I changed it to *Dance Card*. Again, it was about celebrating or starting a performance at the opening of an exhibition. Maren had a solo exhibit in Santa Barbara, and we had been working on this piece, and it seemed like a great place to do it.

What Maren created for part of her exhibit was a massive canopy of branches. [She has created amazing canopy installations of all sorts over the years. Maren, Parker, and Ulysses danced under this canopy. -SN/EA] It was sort of a flirtation, like a man thinking he's in control of a relationship when in actuality it's the woman who is pulling the strings. So that's kind of about what that was. So that was Parker and Ulysses Jenkins and Maren. And the dress she's wearing, I had gotten that from my grandmother's best friend.

So the concept of the piece was this kind of like ongoing flirtation, and it's sort of like—in my mind, it was sort of like a—what do you call it—a square dance. No one was calling out stuff, but there was this kind of do-si-do interaction. I'm here; you're there; let's get together. Oh no, this person comes in; well, I really want to get together more with you than he does, and that sort of thing. So it was based on like a square dance kind of deal, in and out and changing partners.

ELISSA AUTHER: So while we're talking about Maren Hassinger, maybe you could say a little bit about your career-long collaboration with her. You've worked together for over 35 years, right?

SENGA NENGUDI: Right.

ELISSA AUTHER: Would you like to talk about that?

SENGA NENGUDI: Well, it started out with *Freeway Fets*, and like I said, we had a really strong common interest in dance and movement. It became a strong friendship in that, as women artists, there are certain things that are unique to us as opposed to male artists, although that might be different now. But back in the day, a male artist could do what he wanted to do. He didn't have to take care of the kids; he didn't have domestic chores. And a lot of female artists had to give up the thought of having children or didn't want children or—so on and so forth.

So we chose—I had my children first, and then after some years, Maren, she had hers. And then right after that, Maren moved to New York. And so we just kind of kept each other in the game, so to speak, because so many people were dropping out. There are plenty of wonderful artists, but life kind of gets in the way, and then they have to put the work aside. So just to keep our energies up, our juices flowing, we would constantly try and work on projects together.

Like I said, I had my two kids, and then I was taking care of my mother for about 12 years. In the meantime, she got divorced, and that was devastating to her. Then she had to take care of her mother.

During my situation with my mother, it was sort of like the sandwich generation. I was taking care of teenagers and my mother at the same time, along with my marriage. And her situation almost mirrored mine. So these were really, really tough times personally and professionally. To keep it going, we would just kind of keep plodding along, and at certain points, even though we were in different cities and so on, there might be a situation where we were both in the same exhibit. So then we were able to then do another performance for that exhibit, along with our regular artwork. So it's been really lovely to have her as a friend.

ELISSA AUTHER: What years are you talking about? When did she leave for New York? Do you remember?

SENGA NENGUDI: Wow—it was before I came to Colorado. I think in the '80s.

ELISSA AUTHER: When did you move to Colorado Springs?

SENGA NENGUDI: I moved to Colorado Springs in the fall of 1989.

ELISSA AUTHER: So your kids were teenagers then. Was your mother in Colorado Springs with you?

SENGA NENGUDI: She had a stroke in 1991, so at that point, that's when she came to live with us. She didn't want to, but her physical state was such that there was no way she could stay in LA, but she loved LA.

ELISSA AUTHER: And how long did she live with you?

SENGA NENGUDI: I'm trying to think. I think it was 10 years, and then it just became physically impossible for me to carry on. So, one of the worst decisions, even to this day, is me having to put her in a nursing home.

ELISSA AUTHER: Where are we time-wise now?

SENGA NENGUDI: Like 2002, 2004.

ELISSA AUTHER: You showed me something a couple of days ago that was a file of papers that you had sent back and forth to each other. Is that another instance of collaboration that you could explain?

SENGA NENGUDI: Absolutely. We finally thought, Oh, well, since we're not in the same space, that shouldn't stop us. And so we said, Okay, just write something down on a pad of paper by your bed, even if it's a line, even if you're dead tired or whatever, just make a line or whatever, and just put the date on it. So it kind of started out that way, and then it got more elaborate. She might present the concept; I might present the concept, on any given month. And then we would go for it.

ELISSA AUTHER: So you'd present concepts to each other and then follow them through?

SENGA NENGUDI: Right. And then after the month was over, then we would send them to each other so we could see what each other was doing. And sometimes it wouldn't even be on paper. It might be dance; it might be each night or some time during the day, "Do five movements," something like that. So just—like I said, just to keep the juices flowing, not concerned with aesthetics, not letting that trip us up and slow us down; it's just the doing. And within that doing, there might be a few gems or something, but it didn't really matter; it just mattered that we were consciously creating something.

ELISSA AUTHER: While we're on the subject of the challenges that face female artists, did

you have any interaction with the Women's Building or the broader feminist arts community in Los Angeles?

SENGA NENGUDI: Well, yeah. Early on, it was kind of weird because it felt like we were—they were bean-counting or something. And it really—

ELISSA AUTHER: Because they were concerned with diversity? Is that what you mean?

SENGA NENGUDI: They were concerned with diversity, but it was also kind of like their agenda. It wasn't—I won't include Maren, because this is just me. I didn't feel like I was on equal footing. It just felt like, Okay, you're here and you can give some comments, but we're kind of the last word. It was kind of like that. And later on, I was on some of the committees they had for a selection of artists and so on and so forth. There was a show called *The Home Show* at the Long Beach Museum, and it was all feminist and tons of performances.

Maren, I think, was the only Black artist included, and I think there was an Asian artist. So what we decided to do, we decided we were going to do this performance, this renegade performance. And so what we did was we donned sheets. We put a sheet over our heads that covered our entire bodies, and we stood at the door of the entrance and we—it was called *Spooks Who Sat By the Door* (1983), and we have no documentation of this—spooks who sat at the door. I don't know if you're familiar with that concept, are you?

ELISSA AUTHER: Mm-hmm [affirmative], sure.

SENGA NENGUDI: Okay, there's a book by that name, but also it refers to when you go into a business, there's a Black person or a person of color at the desk; however, there's no Black people beyond the front desk. It's just to prove that there's some level of diversity. We also had all of these commercial things like Aunt Jemima pancake mix and Uncle Ben's rice, and all these kinds of products that, to that day, were still being used, Black caricatures.

So we stood there and we did our whole thing. I don't think anybody paid attention to us, but they had to come through us. They might not have even understood the reference. But that's what we decided to do. And it was totally unauthorized.

ELISSA AUTHER: So were you in any of the exhibitions related to the Women's Building?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yes, I was in some performances. One performance, I think—I hope my mind is correct in remembering this—Nancy Buchanan was involved with that. I don't know if she curated or if she was in the exhibit—I mean, in the performance. But yeah, she was great. She was a person, one of the few people in the movement, where it felt completely right, equal everything, coming to this equally. And I was in one or two of Suzanne Lacy's performances.

It's a peculiar thing. It was kind of uncomfortable. So yeah, so I was involved with the Women's Building, yes. And it's odd, because I'm often labeled a feminist, but that was a title that was put on me because, really, as I was coming at my stuff, it was as a woman trying to express what it felt like to be me, my experiences, which, of course, in a sense would be feminist, but I'm doing it from a personal level.

ELISSA AUTHER: You didn't see yourself as a political artist, in other words? Is that what you mean?

SENGA NENGUDI: Right.

ELISSA AUTHER: Okay.

SENGA NENGUDI: I didn't see myself pushing forth a particular agenda. I was stating—and I guess still state, really—what it feels like to be an artist who is Black, who is American, who is a mother, who is a daughter, who is a wife. [That's what I was expressing. And to my mind, it's universal. So just in that statement, sometimes just stating who you are—like in my classes I would often say, "Being born Black is a revolutionary act in this country." So yeah, it's political, but it's not like I have a gun. I'm not hating anybody. I'm just telling you who I am and where I see myself in the place of things. -SN/EA]

ELISSA AUTHER: In your mind it was/is a radical act for you to be who you are?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yeah, basically. That's basically what it is. So yeah, I've been through

everything that anybody else has been through, and more. So that should be seen in my art, that whatever—torture or this or that, you should see that. Or somehow feel something that's going on there that maybe you have felt, too, and you couldn't describe it, but this is how it looks in an abstract way. It's not a Black woman with a baby; it's not something like that. To my mind, it's deeper than that because it's this thing that goes on inside your body, and inside your body, you can't recognize difference. It's like cells and all this other kind of stuff. So there's a commonality inside each body.

ELISSA AUTHER: Was the first place you started teaching at the university level at the University of Colorado in Colorado Springs?

SENGA NENGUDI: The first time I started teaching college was at—yeah. Louis Cicotello, the chair of the art department, invited me to teach.

And my real reason for wanting to teach was because there was no class related to Black anything, and not only that, there was nobody on the faculty that was Black, or maybe even Latino, at that time. So I really felt a deep need to share the Black visual experience with students. I thought, These kids are going to college; they're getting an education; and they're going through four years and they have not a clue of what the world is like, and not a clue of anything but what's handed to them on a plate. No clue.

And during those times, oftentimes a student of color—didn't have to be Black—would come and they said, "Oh, we're treated so badly in our classes, and they say terrible things," and this and that and—

ELISSA AUTHER: Their student peers?

SENGA NENGUDI: No, the teachers. The teacher would dismiss them or just make offhand remarks. And most times, which was actually my experience as well, most times they were the first in their family to attend college. So it was a really big deal. And most of the people in my classes had some kind of background—even if they were white, they were married to a Black man or whatever. So there was a real interest in taking the class because of wanting to know more about themselves. I really enjoyed that.

[But before that, I pretty much taught children in museum settings. I taught at the Pasadena Art Museum, as I told you, and in New York, my job there was at the Children's Art Carnival, which was in Harlem. -SN/EA]

Children's Art Carnival was initially created by the Museum of Modern Art so that children uptown could have an art experience. I taught there basically all the time I was there. We would have classes where the students would come in from the public schools, and we'd do things kind of like Imagination Celebration.

I've always enjoyed working with kids because they always take it to the next level. You think, Oh, that's such a beautiful picture, and they'll go, "Eh," and they'll like paint it all black or something and put one red dot on it. And that would knock me out all the time, that they just plow through all the barriers, just like folk art actually, and—they just go to that next level.

ELISSA AUTHER: Should we go back to your performance history? What about the performance *Air Propo*?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yeah—oh! I want to mention something else about art education.

ELISSA AUTHER: Sure.

SENGA NENGUDI: I also developed a new arts program for different elementary schools and other places. There was one thing I was really happy with. There was a place called McLaren Hall in the Los Angeles area, LA County, and it was for abused children. I started an arts program there, and that was really interesting because the day I started, there was a crib right in front, and there was this little baby, I guess maybe about one year old, bandaged entirely, because the parents had burned the child. And the weird thing was, it was all ages and all backgrounds. There were even rich kids there whose parents were just terrible. And they'd all have to go there to—it was like a holding center until they either went back home or had foster care. And as badly as their parents treated them, there's not one kid that did not want to go home. It was really curious.

ELISSA AUTHER: And so you created an art education program for these children?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yeah. And also regular public schools as well, which I continued in the Springs, doing such things, creating artist residencies and so on. So, yeah, it's really dear to me.

ELISSA AUTHER: So should we go back to the performances now?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yes.

ELISSA AUTHER: I think the question was about *Air Propo*.

SENGA NENGUDI: *Air Propo*?

ELISSA AUTHER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

SENGA NENGUDI: *Air Propo*—was that when I had the tape, and I was doing like this [waves arms around]?

ELISSA AUTHER: Well, the documentation of it shows two or three musicians playing trumpet; that's all that I've seen of it.

SENGA NENGUDI: Oh, that was something that was produced by Linda Goode Bryant. She moved her gallery from Midtown Manhattan to Tribeca, and the *Air Propo* performance was a performance for the opening of that space.

I collaborated with the dancer Cheryl Banks and the musician Butch Morris, and unfortunately, my dear Butch passed just this past January. He was amazing. He originated a concept called Conduction, and since he passed, all these wonderful magazines have highlighted him. Conduction is a form of structured improvisation where Morris would [direct a group of musicians with a series of hand and baton gestures, and his ensemble players could read those gestures -SN/EA].

ELISSA AUTHER: What was the installation *Bulimia*?

SENGA NENGUDI: *Bulemia*, with an E, was in 1988.

SENGA NENGUDI: It was [*Double Think Bulemia: Mouth to Mouth: Conversations on Being*, and it came out of a series of conversations interspersed with music that I had with Charles Abramson, Carol Blank, John Outterbridge, Darryl Sevad, Kaylynn Sullivan, Sun Ra, and Cecil Taylor. The final product was sent out over the airwaves.

"Bulemia" was the name of an imaginary utopian state that we created and then theorized in both very funny and serious ways. So on the surface, there's this conversation that seems humorous, but in actuality, it's based in something very real, because it reflects our dreams, the perfect place to live and work as artists.

The installation, which included this soundtrack, was a nearly closed-off room where I just put applied paper, vintage newspaper articles that my mother had collected over the years, probably since my birth. She kept anything that was about historical events that she thought was important. I sprayed out certain things so that certain words popped out that had meaning, certain phrases and so on. -SN/EA]

And then in a flared, skirt-like fashion, I adhered newspapers to the lower portions of the walls of the room. And what was interesting is, paper is really—keeps you really warm. You know how you see homeless people with paper—I didn't realize how certain materials have certain qualities. Paper really keeps you warm. It was so hot in there. And so I utilized the gold, and I just balled up paper and painted the balls gold. So it had a sense of an Egyptian, kind of, tomb situation—I don't know what they call those. The chambers that the mummies are in; it was kind of like a chamber.

ELISSA AUTHER: Okay. Was there specific content that you were looking for in the newspapers, or did you randomly apply it and then highlight words and phrases?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yeah, I was looking for stuff that's positive. So instead of the news articles just destroying you, basically, I chose to pull out that which can build your confidence or build your encouragement or something like that, which is particularly important.

For instance, Linda Goode Bryant, she's shifted to creating these farms, these urban farms that feed people, and she has a saying of, "You have everything you need right where you are," because in the Black community, there's such deprivation, and there's this concept of devastation and so on and so forth. But the truth is that some of the richest land in America is right in the middle of the United States. That's why people are coming in and gentrifying it, because it has the best structure, architecture, and so [on]. So it really is a mindset; it really is a mind shift. So instead of saying, I have nothing, or, I can't do anything, or, Nothing will ever be wonderful, it's just a mind shift.

So that's kind of what I was doing with the paper; instead of it saying, "A Man Kills a Woman and Nothing is Left but a Diamond," I would black that out—not cut it out, but spray it out—and then find the words within that article that were self-affirming or positive.

ELISSA AUTHER: There's a performance that you've been doing since 1999, *Walk a Mile in My Shoes*. Could you say a little bit about that?

SENGA NENGUDI: Well, there's this Japanese folk tale where there was this huge tree in the middle of the village, and everybody was complaining about their issues and so on and so forth. So the wise men of the village said, "Okay, I want everybody to write your problem on a piece of paper, put it on the tree, and then everyone take a different problem. Okay, and then come back in a month, and if you feel as though you want your own problem back, then you can have it." And pretty much in most cases, people realized that even though their situation was difficult, that they were shaped or they were uniquely equipped to handle their own problem.

So it's not until you walk in somebody else's shoes that a) you can see maybe how better off you have it, but b) also see how you can do your thing; you're suited to handle your own problem.

So that's kind of how that started. But I wanted a twist in it; I wanted those that had the shoes, or sent me the shoes or who I sent shoes, to really use them not as you would normally walk, but somehow reassign the shoes to maybe wear them on your head or tie them to your butt and scoot along. Somehow you would have to figure out another way of walking that mile, and you would commit yourself to walking a mile, which is 5,280 feet. So yeah, it would probably take more than a day, but you would measure your steps, and in doing that, you would create your own dance.

ELISSA AUTHER: So how did you reach out to people to participate?

SENGA NENGUDI: Well, I was at the Santa Fe Art Institute for an artist residency. During an artist lecture I did there, I introduced the concept. I sent out the instructions to different people, and then they would send me their shoes. And at Santa Fe Art Institute, it was a small place and it was an even smaller audience, but there was one woman that was in a wheelchair and she really wanted to do it. And I thought, Wow, this is incredible, because she was so excited about being able to participate. She did it in her chair. To those I send out instructions, I request that they send back photo documentation.

ELISSA AUTHER: So that's the first iteration of the performance. And it continues, people continue to participate.

SENGA NENGUDI: Yes, it continues. Right. I have a pair of shoes at home that a fellow sent to me, and yeah, it's great fun. It's great fun.

And then I have the other thing—my personas. I have a persona for writing, which is Lily B. Moor, and they all have a significance.

ELISSA AUTHER: So you used that one specifically for writing?

SENGA NENGUDI: For writing.

ELISSA AUTHER: What are the others?

SENGA NENGUDI: The other one is Propecia Leigh, and that's for photography. And then Harriet Chin is for drawing. And then, of course, myself as myself, or my sculpture.

The way the personas started was that I went to a little store and I was looking at cards,

greeting cards, and I saw this little African greeting card, and I went, Oh, this is great. I think it was like a little African painting. And I flipped it over and it had a photo of a white artist, and I said, I am too through with this. And then I thought to myself, Well, why should I feel this way? And then I started really thinking about certain things, how people, when they approach a piece of artwork and they see a name, if it's Latino, a Black artist, or an Asian artist, all of a sudden it's supposed to look like something specific. Well, that's not Black enough, or That's not Latin enough. Why? Why would you say that?

So again, there's this conditioning that happens. Now, if there's no name attached to it, then it's fine, but sometimes you even look at it and you go, Oh, I bet that was an Asian artist who did that. So I started playing with that, and then I started thinking about—okay, so then I started thinking, Wow, I want to play with this, because as Black people, sometimes we're called out of our name a lot, negatively. So I thought, Hmm—it's like Br'er Rabbit in the briar patch. It's that kind of mentality. It's like, Okay, I'm going to trick you. You think you're doing me; I'm going to do you. And so that's how that came about. That's ongoing too. Sometimes I do it more than others. Sometimes I'm into photography more than other things. But yes, those personas are in place.

ELISSA AUTHER: So it sounds like they have a performative element?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yes.

ELISSA AUTHER: Or they're conceptual tools for questioning our concept of racial authenticity?

SENGA NENGUDI: Exactly, exactly. All of that. So when you see a painting by Harriet Chin—and I might decide to do a Black woman feeding a baby—they go, Wait a minute; that doesn't work; something is wrong. So it's just playful. I really like the humor.

ELISSA AUTHER: How did your installation *Warp Trance* (2007) and the video *The Threader* (2008) come about?

SENGA NENGUDI: [*Warp Trance* evolved out of a residency at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia. I was quite honored to be awarded that residency, and I had all the technical support I needed, which is hard to come by. After some initial research into what other artists had done there, I decided to work with the concept of deconstructing fabric and the textile-making process, as opposed to constructing a textile.

My research involved on-site visits to different mills in the area that were still producing fabric and carpet. It was fascinating research, but like so many other cities, Philadelphia only has a few mills remaining. I loved the machines and processes, especially the sculptural structure of the machines and the physical rhythm of their repetitive motions. The sounds the machines made also had an interesting pattern. Those aspects of the mills resonated with me because of my interest in dance and music.

The machines had their own choreography—they would bounce up and down, for instance, and there was a rhythmic sound pattern that went along with that. There's also an element of color, a riot of color really. Overall, I was reminded of a festival-like atmosphere of dance and music. Of course, the people working there were like, "You wouldn't think that after standing here all day," but, in the end, I think I helped them see their work from a different perspective, or with a new appreciation.

In addition to shooting footage of the machines at work, I also collected old jacquards that I sewed together to use as projection screens, because I wanted to add something sculptural and three-dimensional to the piece. Their addition brings the piece off the flat screen and creates two realities. There is the video projected on the screens, which is spirited and fast-moving, and as the video footage seeps through the open patterns of the jacquards, another, more muted, otherworld-like atmosphere is projected onto the back walls. The installation is structured so that participants may walk and dance in front of and then behind the screens, to have both experiences.

The title *Warp* is related to the weaving process, and *Trance* comes from my experience of feeling like I was in a trance, as in mesmerized, while standing before the loom machines as they performed their daily tasks. I wanted to create a piece for others to be so enthralled, to be taken with the color, rhythm, and sense of ritual like I was when I was touring the mills. As usual, I wanted people to interact with this piece. I wanted them to be taken with the

color and rhythm of it and use the installation space as a place to move and dance in concert with the piece.

Work on *Warp Trance* started in 2005, and the piece was finished in 2007.

The Threader also came out of this project. This was footage that came out of the filming in the Scalamandré mill. I have a side interest in men at work and the rhythms and patterns they develop as part of physical labor. I was fascinated with the dance-like patterns of moves mill-worker Amir Baig maintained to assure the skillful accuracy of his task, which was making cords and tassels. He told me that some of his tassels were acquired by the White House. –SN/EA]

ELISSA AUTHER: Let's talk about your use of sand outside of the *R.S.V.P.* sculptures.

SENGA NENGUDI: I honestly cannot remember when I started making the sand installations. I think it was—it was probably in the mid-'90s or maybe even earlier than that. Because after my exploration with African culture and Japanese culture, I just started expanding, because I really wanted to see across-the-world similarities in ceremony and so on and so forth. So my next exploration was Indian art, as in East Indian. I was really interested in Rangoli designs in rice and sand, and the use of sand in ceremony.

And this whole issue of women creating these Rangoli paintings in front of their home—they don't do it so much in the city anymore, but they definitely do it in the village. It's sort of like a welcoming prayer or something; when somebody walks into your house, this kind of is a cleansing, like we might have a mat and we're cleaning our feet. They're very elaborate, and they do a new one every single day.

ELISSA AUTHER: And they're floral patterns, right?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yeah, basically. And by the end of the day, of course, people have been going in and out, and so it's messed up. So they start anew. So that was really intriguing to me.

And then I started thinking about Native American artists, sand painters, and how that is also a cleansing. They create these amazing designs, although usually you look at them in souvenir shops and they're considered kind of trite. But really, there's a serious meaning behind it. The person that is ill, physically or mentally, is put in the middle of this sand painting, and it acts as a cleanser. It cleanses them of this whatever malady they have. And once it's finished, then just like when you go to the doctor and you have a shot and they break the—

ELISSA AUTHER: The vial?

SENGA NENGUDI: Yeah, but—the syringe, and then they put it in a little red box, because it's toxic then. It's the same with that. Then they sweep up the sand and get rid of it. Same with Tibetan sand paintings. All of this has to do with a cleansing and a healing. So I thought, Oh, wow, this is really great.

I started playing around with that, and as a daily practice, I would make miniature sand paintings, like, say, the size of a plate. I would just create whatever was inside, and somehow there was some level of calm that came to me by doing this. Also the issue of the sands of time—that we come and go, but the sand is still there, and it kind of covers over everything. It gets rid of civilization; it gets rid of all this stuff, and it's just there. So all of these elements were very attractive to me and still are. And so that's why I do my own form of sand painting.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]