

## Conversations with Melvin Edwards

### Extended Version

Since the spring of 2013, I've talked extensively with Melvin Edwards about his life and work. A talk with Edwards moves—much like his art—with energy, force, and not infrequent bursts of humor, through a series of topics connected by associations fired from the artist's quick-moving and wide-ranging mind. A seemingly straightforward question can prompt a spiraling string of anecdotes and observations spanning mundane commonplaces of everyday life, esoteric aesthetic concepts, and personal, familial and political history.

Edwards makes sculpture through a process-oriented approach. Ordinarily, he works without sketches, although he is an inveterate and devoted maker of drawings. He begins with the spark of an idea, then continues associatively, based on what he sees, handles, remembers. The journey itself lends definition and meaning to the resulting composition, which became a good lesson to recall in conversation, whenever we ended up far from the subject we thought was our destination.

Edwards and I had our conversations in various places—his studios, his apartment, his New York gallery, and the Nasher's conference room. We also talked as we drove through Los Angeles neighborhoods, and as we sat together in restaurants and coffee shops. In sorting through our many digressions, mutual interruptions, and asides, to select the excerpts that follow, I've attempted to choose exchanges that provide heretofore unavailable information, especially about the first decade or so of Edwards' career, and that reveal something of the artist's concerns and, more elusively, his turn of mind. I too have worked associatively, as well as editorially, bringing together stretches of dialogue from our conversations over these last months. Edwards reviewed the results, and made changes in a few places to provide factual clarity. What follows thus results both from our actual conversations and our shared effort to document them. A shorter version of these conversations has been published in *Melvin Edwards: Five Decades*, the catalogue accompanying the [Nasher Sculpture Center's survey of his work](#), on view at the museum January 31—May 10, 2015.

—Catherine Craft

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**Catherine Craft:** You started as a painter, and had even been in a couple of group shows in Los Angeles, before taking up welding and turning to sculpture. Why did you become a sculptor?

**Melvin Edwards:** I used to say, when people would ask me why I was a sculptor, that sculpture is closer to football (Fig. 2). I would say it's physicality; there's some sense of that. When I first started trying to find more experimental or unusual forms to make sculpture but was still thinking in a combination of the figure and abstraction, I would use physical positions related to football. That way, you could have complex forms that weren't reclining nude poses, or Rodin's *Thinker*.

**CC:** So it sounds like from early on you had an ongoing interest in finding ways to bring the body or something physical into your work.

**ME:** I would say the dynamics more than the body itself.

**CC:** It's fascinating to me that football played such an important role during your education as an artist—your high school in Houston, Phillis Wheatley, was state football champion while you were playing for them. You studied art in college, but one of the things that drew you to the University of Southern California, where you ultimately got your degree, was the possibility of playing football there. That seems like an unusual mix of experiences for a young artist.



Figure 1. Melvin Edwards with *Column of Memory*, Deni Malick Gueye Farm near Diannaidio, Senegal, about 2005. Photograph by Bakary Ali Mbaye, courtesy the artist.



Figure 2. Melvin Edwards (no. 44) playing for the Phillis Wheatley High School football team at the annual Thanksgiving Day game against Jack Yates High School, Houston, Texas, 1954. Photograph by the artist's father, Melvin Eugene Edwards, Sr., courtesy the artist.

**ME:** As a young artist, yes—but that’s the other thing in that period, that as a young person, at first I was much more advanced in the aesthetics and dynamics of sports thinking. The stereotype idea of a jock didn’t really become a stereotype until later. It was there a little because people would say to me, ‘That’s a strange combination,’ but nothing more than that. By the time I was teaching, which was 1965, the attitude was starting to be there. It’s the one that still survives. I often resented it because one thing people who said that didn’t understand is the sophistication inside football and in sports in general.

There are a lot of athletes who don’t do well in football because they can’t comprehend the playbooks, which in professional football are as thick as a telephone book. All you see are these big men, apparently wrestling with each other, but it’s actually so sophisticated, so subtle. For example, a block means you hit somebody and move them out of the way, but sometimes you don’t have to move that person but three inches. Or turn his body a certain way so he can’t go ahead. To defeat someone like that, it’s a matter of inches. Some people are very good with the techniques, and some are very good just with the pure physicality of it. The best ones are usually a combination of both. Some teams have very sophisticated systems, and other teams were simpler. But none of them were absolutely simple because you’ve got eleven times eleven possibilities. And football is divided into offense and defense, and the qualities for each position are very different. All of that’s involved in the strategy. It’s like chess.

**CC:** And, as you pointed out in another conversation, coaches plan and share those plays, those strategies, through drawings.

**ME:** Yes, to plan for football, you made diagrams all the time. And those diagrams deal with space horizontally, but they do it flat, vertically, on a blackboard.

**CC:** So you’re thinking in space, but you’re diagramming it flat.

**ME:** As an athlete, you know that’s how you diagram it, but the way you function in it is horizontally, across the field. It’s the same with choreographers that dance.

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**CC:** What was your sculpture like before the *Lynch Fragments*? April Kingsley refers to a group called the *Liberator* series that preceded them.<sup>1</sup> Was it named for the magazine the *Liberator*?

**ME:** I was getting the magazine right at that time, and there was one [sculpture] that I called *The Liberator*, but there wasn’t a series. Another one was called *Bloodflower Poet* (Fig. 3); I had an interest in poetry and reading all along. *The Liberator*, giving it that title, marks the beginning of my real strong interest in politics. You know, and the politics of race and colonialism and all that.

**CC:** How were those sculptures different from the *Lynch Fragments*?

**ME:** They were freestanding, a group of small sculptures just before the *Lynch Fragments*. I was finding my way.

**CC:** The very first Lynch Fragment was *Some Bright Morning* (Fig. 4), which is a phrase that appears in an account given in Ralph Ginzburg’s *100 Years of Lynchings*.<sup>2</sup>

**ME:** People think the piece came from the incident.

**CC:** It didn’t?

**ME:** No, I was already working on it. Any number of times people have said to me that incident is the inspiration for the *Lynch Fragment* series, and that piece. It was not; it was already underway. And other things were more important—I had information [about lynching] before the Ginzburg book. There was an Afro-American magazine, *Freedomways*.

**CC:** And the *Liberator*?

**ME:** Yes, and the Tuskegee Institute also kept track. Then there was the Stokes incident, which was ‘62....That was just as important to me. That and Emmett Till, but they weren’t the only things on the subject that got my attention.<sup>3</sup>

**CC:** One of the things that moves me about the early *Lynch Fragments* is how small they are—they’re very powerful, and seem to have this enormous force packed into them.



Figure 3. Melvin Edwards, *Bloodflower Poet*, ca. 1962. Welded steel. Private collection. © 2015 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Archival photograph courtesy the artist.

**ME:** The only thing I can say that's really very systematic about how I work is, I tend to work in an area that's about the size of this [dining] table. And even if I'm developing something that's for a larger work, it just seems to be the natural way for me to work with the material.

**CC:** I would guess that at first some of that was also just practical, in terms of having limited studio space. But it also seems to have been a very conscious decision.

**ME:** My notion was, you work smaller, you can do more works, go through more of your ideas. I mean, you're working eight hours a day with a job, you've got a family, you gotta work at a scale that is going to allow you to really do something significant, but at the same time, that you can get your ideas out of yourself.

**CC:** What were those ideas?

**ME:** Configurations for a point of departure. Often they're simple. But then, as you get involved in sculpture, you start to evolve a set of parameters that are intuitive. And working in relief was clearly responding to two things. First, it's the closest to a drawing situation. You're not working on an easel, but as if on a table or school desk. And then: how far can you reach? It's almost like, that's as far as you can think. You know? It's not true, but nevertheless, especially if you're experimenting—that is, working with materials around you—then how you start tells you things about where you're going to go.

**CC:** With the *Lynch Fragments*, do you typically start horizontal?

**ME:** Well, I'm working down on a table. I'm working like I'm cooking, just to put it like that.

**CC:** Do you decide on an orientation as you work on it?

**ME:** Though it's laid down flat, you can turn it this way or that way and look at it in a comprehensive, three-dimensional way. And you don't have to decide what's the front or back in the beginning. Though I think fairly early on, most times, I decide that pretty early. But later on, I found I could start out one way, and it looked very definitely like 'this is the front, that's the top,' and then I'd reverse it or change the angles. And then you've got a totally different set of sculptural dynamics. So, reconfiguring, tilting, reversing, and coming back tomorrow and thinking about it in a totally different way was a part of things. Especially because I was improvising always. You know, I didn't have drawings to go by, didn't want drawings to go by. I only wanted to go by what the work was giving me itself.

**CC:** Your comment on improvising also reminds me that you've said the inspiration for the small scale of the *Lynch Fragments* came, in part, from jazz.<sup>4</sup>

**ME:** The metaphor was: complicated music done in three minutes or so in recordings, or composed for that time limit. Many of those musicians in the jazz world, playing the same piece live, might be playing for five, ten, fifteen minutes. But at the same time, the basic genius of the piece is in that three-minute frame, with possible variations. I'm sometimes hesitant to say jazz and sculpture because the notion that gives to other people is not the way I mean it. There's no actual connection between one color and one sound, if you know what I mean.

**CC:** It seems to me that when you've talked about the relation of jazz to your work, it's in a much more conceptual or structural way.

**ME:** That's true, that's what it meant for me.

**CC:** Was the improvisational nature of jazz important to you, too? That they could take a three-minute piece and play it in different ways?

**ME:** Things could've gone a number of directions in that early period because the ideas led to other ideas pretty quickly. Even the *Lynch Fragments* have that ability, though their loaded collective title tends to make people think more about subjective notions than the dynamic artistic process.

**CC:** Did you ever regret the title for that reason? You stopped making Lynch Fragments in mid-1960s, but you returned to them in the 1970s and still make them today.

**ME:** I never did, but every now and then somebody would say, "Oh, it would've been wiser...."

**CC:** When did you start listening to jazz seriously?

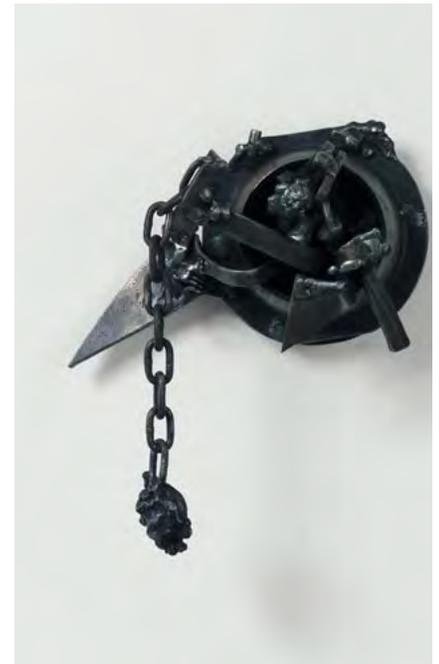


Figure 4. Melvin Edwards, *Some Bright Morning (Lynch Fragment)*, 1963. Welded steel, 14 1/4 x 9 1/4 x 5 in. (36.2 x 23.5 x 12.7 cm). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2015 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph by Jeffrey Sturges.



Figure 5. Melvin Edwards, *Mojo for 1404 (Lynch Fragment)*, 1964. Welded steel, 10 x 6 1/2 x 4 1/2 in. (25.4 x 16.5 x 11.4 cm). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2015 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph by Jeffrey Sturges.

**ME:** It started in 1956. By then I bought my first records, and somewhere I still have them.

**CC:** So were you listening mainly to people like Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins?

**ME:** Yeah, also Thelonious Monk. Almost all of them I enjoyed, but some of them seemed to be doing things that were challenging to other musicians. All I knew was what I could hear, that they handled sound differently. I say sound because I didn't know about notes and chords. To this day I don't. But at the same time it was clear that, say, Thelonious Monk used sound and space very differently. In my head it corresponded to the idea of positive and negative in sculpture—negative space which doesn't exist.

**CC:** A negative space would be like silence in music—there's really no such thing as silence either.

**ME:** Yeah, yeah. Exactly. But silence is significant depending on what comes before and what ends it, what stops being and what comes into being afterwards. And negative space is form or an area of space. That's a way of describing a phenomenon within sculpture in particular.

**CC:** Alongside the *Lynch Fragments*, you started making larger sculptures that explore that idea of so-called negative space. I'm thinking of works like *Chaino* (Fig. 7) which also has a connection with jazz. In *Chaino* there are chains, but there's another meaning to the title.

**ME:** Yes, referring to Chano Pozo, one of the Cuban percussionists who were specifically bringers of African culture as it moved through Cuba and further into the Western world.

**CC:** In *Chaino*, there's an object like a *Lynch Fragment* in the center, held in tension by chains and rods attached to a framework. The framework is torqued, really skewed. It feels like the pressure of containing that welded object is enormous. How did you conceive that?

**ME:** The metaphor that turned into the functional and practical was: if the metaphor for lynching was hanging—and lynchings didn't always involve hanging; most times they didn't—but if the metaphor was hanging, and hanging was an aspect of the idea of suspension, then that led me to start working with suspension as a principle in the work. In other words, every way that I think I've tried to work through the years always made me think of the other point of view of the principle. In other words: suspended what? suspended how?

**CC:** And, with what I know about lynching beyond hanging, those questions still relate to that metaphor: you're being pulled in all directions—

**ME:** It's the old English "drawn and quartered." And in terms of my own history—not that you think of this stuff *all* the time, but you never know when or what your own experience is going to give you in relation to something you're doing that's totally away from it. For example, I said "drawn and quartered," and immediately I remember carrying in quarters of beef into the market, into the store. I can see them, coming out of the truck, and that period of working in a supermarket in Houston—

**CC:** When you were in high school?

**ME:** Yes, in the meat department—so you know, I did everything to a cow but kill it. And when I got a job in '61 or '62 at the Los Angeles County Hospital, and I always thought, because I liked Andreas Vesalius's anatomy illustrations, old medical books, and those kinds of things, "Oh yeah, that's right, I can go to the morgue, and I can, you know—"

**CC:** Have a real lesson—

**ME:**—and then I encountered it, and (*laughing*) that took care of me! I didn't want anything to do with it!

**CC:** Like *Chaino*, *Cotton Hangup* (Fig. 8) is also suspended.

**ME:** With *Cotton Hangup*, there's a very specific, very thick circular hanging spot, and that was there because I worked on it so much. That's part of the function of working on it as well as ultimately becoming one of the possible places it would be attached from.

**CC:** I've seen *Cotton Hangup* with the two chains at the sides hanging slack.

**ME:** Yeah, they're not supposed to be slack. It has the one chain that comes straight from the



Figure 6. Melvin Edwards, *Mamba (Lynch Fragment)*, 1965. Welded steel, 10 1/2 x 9 x 9 3/4 in. (26.7 x 22.9 x 24.8 cm). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2015 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph by Jeffrey Sturges.



Figure 7. Melvin Edwards, *Chaino*, 1964. Welded steel and chains. 62 x 102 x 26 in. (157.5 x 259.1 x 66 cm). Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts; museum purchase. © 2015 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph by Jeffrey Sturges.

ceiling, but it has the other two that are supposed to be pulled tight enough that they're really straight. I understand the psychology, once you've read about my work—it's 'Oh yeah, they're *Lynch Fragments*, you hang them.' Well, even murderously hanging wasn't the only way people were lynched, you know. But I understand, that's the symbolic interpretation of the act. But for me part of what happened in my sculptural-political combination of thinking, was, that this was an opportunity to investigate the principles of suspension.

**CC:** How forgiving is welding, if you're working on something and you want to change your mind?

**ME:** It's your attitude. There's many a piece that was cut in half, cut apart. There have been pieces I've cut up into four pieces, and the four pieces then became parts of four other things. Sometimes the reduced form is significant, or "what would this look like if I cut it in half, split it, double it, open it up"—any number of things.

And there have been pieces that went out, were shown and came back, and—bye-bye (*laughing*)! *The Lifted X* (visible in Fig. 9), it's got fragments from three or four pieces in it. The lower part, which is suspended—really, it's a *Lynch Fragment*. It had been up on the wall. Then I removed it. It got lifted.

**CC:** We understand *The Lifted X* as a work about the death of Malcolm X. But you were already working on the sculpture before he was killed. And as much as the title is about that event, it also refers to something going on inside the sculpture, right?

**ME:** Yeah, if you're looking down into the sculpture, the fragment is sort of caught in the middle of it.

**CC:** So the X is actually at the base of the sculpture, in the lower framework: the bars forming the X push upward. And that's also an aspect of the title?

**ME:** Yeah, it doesn't just go straight across. It's based on a cube, but it's lifted.

**CC:** The X is a conventional form, but then it buckles unexpectedly in space, like the frame for *Chaino*. The regularity, the symmetry, is totally thrown off by this sense of a powerful dynamic force.

**ME:** Exactly. The idea is that you're playing with space, using form. If you make one combination of forms, then it modifies the space. When you do something else, you don't know what it's going to do to the space until you establish the relationship between the two combinations. Also, at the center there is a meat hook, and again, something that could be a personal reference.

**CC:** Right, from your job at the supermarket. *The Lifted X* is one of several works that has welded forms related to *Lynch Fragments* placed in relation to an almost architectural framework. One that was in the 1965 group show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art was called *Moving* (visible in Fig. 9).

**ME:** It's lost. I'd love to have it. *Moving* is from a jazz composition by Miles Davis. But there was another reason: the structure is the same configuration as a hurdle if you were in a track meet—you know, high hurdles and low hurdles—it's that kind of unit. I made it based on that kind of form. And then the rest suspends off of it. There's a cross bar inside there you can't see.

**CC:** Like *August the Squared Fire* (visible in Fig. 9), which was made around the time of the Watts rebellion.

**ME:** Now I would say *August the Squared Fire* was a kind of a spatial structure within which a major form, a major abstract form, is contained, diagrammed within a box so to speak. *August the Squared Fire* is standing up, but I was working on it lying down.

**CC:** You mean tilted onto its side?

**ME:** Yes, that's the way I worked on it. Often horizontal at one point, vertical at another, tilted at another, hanging the work or the pieces that I'm working with from hooks to the ceiling.

**CC:** Since the title of this sculpture refers to the Watts rebellion, it seems like a good time to ask. After the rebellion you took photos (Fig. 10), but did you—

**ME:** —go looking for stuff? No.

**CC:** Or end up with stuff from that neighborhood, that other people gave you?



Figure 8. Melvin Edwards, *Cotton Hangup*, 1966. Welded steel. Central component, 26 x 30 x 20 in. (66 x 76.2 x 50.8 cm). Early version of work, in the artist's 1968 exhibition at the Bardsdall Art Center, Los Angeles. Photograph courtesy the artist.



Figure 9. Five Younger Los Angeles Artists. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1965. Sculptures by Melvin Edwards, left to right: *The Lifted X*, *Moving*, *Chaino*, and *August the Squared Fire*. © 2015 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph courtesy the artist.

**ME:** No, I never did.<sup>5</sup> I knew the Watts Towers (Fig. 11). In that period in the early '60s the Watts Towers came under attack and people wanted it torn down. My first wife worked for the city of Los Angeles at the time that was going on, so I was a little extra aware. What happened is they sent a crane out to pull on the Towers, hoping they would fall down, and instead the crane toppled, so they left them alone.

But I never lived or worked in Watts. My last year in college—everyday going to college, 1959-60—I lived in one of those houses that were condemned for the Santa Monica freeway. You could rent them from the city very cheaply. Me and two other students, \$20 apiece, we had a house and a little backhouse, which I used as my studio. Now that's under the freeway.

**CC:** So you were some distance from Watts.

**ME:** Yes. What I did—the closest thing to a routine I had—was occasionally I would go to the scrap steel yards in east LA. I had never gone to Watts for material. But you didn't need to—you picked up stuff anywhere.

**CC:** What would you get from the scrap steelyards?

**ME:** I had just started to weld, so it wasn't objects like locks and gears, but more circles or triangles cut off of pieces of steel, from construction. Really, geometric steel parts, and I would buy small ones. I was literally in what I felt was a learning phase, and these small pieces of steel were used to learn how to weld better, and also to create forms. And of course, eventually, a piece of chain or two.

**CC:** What was it about welding that attracted you?

**ME:** Once I started to weld steel, I realized much of the world I lived in is welded. I'd be driving behind a truck, and it's got a tailgate, and I realize: oh all of that, that tailgate, that's welded—and it's a beautiful relief sculpture. You can just see it, because you're used to seeing those things in process.

**CC:** Sometimes your sculptures get described in terms of found objects. But the recognizable objects in them—hammers, chisels, chains—are also implements you might use to *make* a sculpture. And then in some sculptures you also have these geometric shapes that anyone might get, for their own practical reasons, from a scrapyards. And eventually you started cutting your own shapes, as you grew more confident.

**ME:** That's right.

**CC:** So, even though "found object" is really important to the tradition of assemblage, it doesn't really seem like quite the right term for the materials used in your work.

**ME:** They're "familiar form" objects, but they're also mainly steel. Whether it's a recognizable object or what looks like scrap, it's all usable, all from a commonly manufactured material. Welding is a fusion, not a gluing, you know. It's all just steel.

**CC:** But the objects you use are often very loaded, like chains or barbed wire and their associations with slavery and detainment. For example, a number of sculptures from the 1970s onward have machetes in them (Figs. 12 and 13). Did you just happen to come up with a bunch of machetes?

**ME:** No, that was a decision. I was spending a lot of time with revolutionary literature, and there was a magazine from Latin America, I think, named *The Machete*. But also, in 1973, in Nigeria, I was going to the architect Demas Nwoko's place, and if you went by the main road, you then had to turn off into this area of farms and gardens. It was wide enough for a cart or vehicle, but most people walked. And I was going from the main road there one day, and this guy came out of the bushes, and he's walking and he's carrying this machete, and I'm saying to myself, "Oh shit! What's he going to do?" Well, this guy walks by and says hi, how you doing? It's really a farm tool—immediately, that became clear, and as if to prove it, a few steps down a girl came out of the bushes, about ten years old, with a bowl on her head and a big machete lying in the bowl. So it made me think. I said to myself, "You know, this is just a tool, but it's also not."

I was aware of a lot of the revolutionary history of Haiti and eventually Cuba as well, of the importance of fighters recruited from the sugar cane fields, who used that, their tool, as their weapon. Plus there were variations in the form that I began to really pay attention to—those that were, say, within the iconography of Benin. Because weapons were important both as weapons



Figure 10. Central Avenue, after the Watts rebellion, Los Angeles, 1965. Photograph by Melvin Edwards.



Figure 11. Watts Towers, built by Simon Rodia between 1921 and 1954. Photograph by Catherine Craft.

and as symbols, just like the Marine Corps' dress sword, that kind of thing. All of those things, you could say, were in my head. And then, when I was working in Zimbabwe, in 1988-89, I went to the hardware store and bought related tools, traditional hoe blades. In Senegal, I bought a machete. For two reasons: for practical purposes, to have a knife, and the other is: it's just another shape of steel that already exists.

**CC:** A familiar form object. And, like these other objects in and around your sculptures, a tool.

**ME:** Often I cut them. There's a knife I still have in Senegal which is about half the length of the blade of the machete. So the short end of it is wide, like a wide-bladed butcher knife and the other part I added to another piece of steel and it's as long as a full machete, but the cutting part is only the tip. It's like any form that I've ever used: there is the initial reason of why I got it, and then I've played with it through the years.

**CC:** What's another example of material you picked up?

**ME:** Before I moved my studio to Plainfield in '76, I found on Houston Street, these fragments of wrought iron dividers, like a picket fence. Some car had hit them and knocked them loose and here they were! So I took several of them into my studio on Second Street, and that's where the two pieces *Conversations with my Father* come from (Fig. 13). And a part of the reason is, Houston Street [pronounced "house-ton"] is where I found them, or you can say, Houston [pronounced "hyoos-ton"] Street, you know, like in Texas. My father came to visit me right in that period, here in New York, and we talked about a lot of things then.

**CC:** When you moved to New York in 1967, you also decided to stop making *Lynch Fragments*.

**ME:** The first convenience of the move from California to New York was, well, you could close the door on the period, just by moving three thousand miles. You can't take it all with you in your station wagon.

**CC:** So you sought out ways to take your work in different directions. When did you first make large outdoor sculpture?

**ME:** I started in the summer of '68.

**CC:** The year after you moved to New York.

**ME:** A project came about in Minneapolis, a summer project to do things for the black community, because by then, cities were aware that there were problems in those communities, and all of a sudden there was city support for doing things.<sup>5</sup> This place was a Baptist church in the black community in Minneapolis. Anyway, they found out about me somehow and offered to bring me out and teach art to kids for a month or so. I said look, anyone can teach kids art. I proposed I come, they get welding equipment and buy steel from the steel yard, and I would work, and young people could be a part of watching me. Maybe I would involve them, but that would depend on safety. So when I got there, we got equipment. They had a large backyard space behind the church. Kids would come to watch; I had extra welding helmets and they'd put them on and they could look. I showed a couple of the older ones a little bit how to weld, but basically, I made about half a dozen pieces which were good size, a size I couldn't do in New York because I had no outdoor space (Fig. 14). They were the first pieces where I really started to emphasize geometric forms as opposed to more organic.

**CC:** Do any of those large sculptures survive?

**ME:** I left all of them there, and now I have no idea. One thing that did happen in the year after I left: Martin Friedman was director of the Walker [Art Center], and it was right next to a park. So they decided to do the first outdoor sculpture show they ever did, which was with the pieces that I left there.

**CC:** And were they also your first sculptures using color?

**ME:** Yeah, they were all painted. I was thinking: okay, this is a chance for me to do something I wanted to do. And it probably was a reflection of meeting George Sugarman in '65, and we had talked about why and how he used color. Steel rusts, and I was interested in color, so I thought, hey—I'd been a painter. Why not?



Figure 12. Melvin Edwards, *Ventana a Isla Negra*, 1973. Welded steel and barbed wire. 44 3/8 x 48 x 20 in. (112.7 x 121.9 x 50.8 cm). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2015 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph by Jeffrey Sturges.

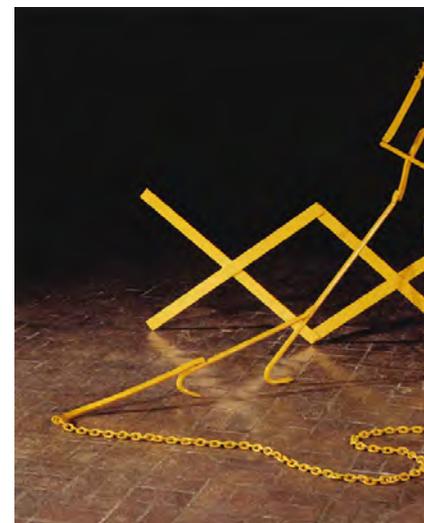


Figure 13. Melvin Edwards, *Conversations with My Father*, 1974. Painted steel and chain, 48 3/4 x 70 1/2 x 46 1/2 in. (123.8 x 179 x 118.1 cm). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2015 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph courtesy the artist.

**CC:** Had you painted any of the sculptures you made in Los Angeles?

**ME:** Many of the early larger steel pieces were sprayed with a black lacquer. That was just a way to have a relatively unified surface.

**CC:** On all these different elements.

**ME:** Yeah, because much of the material used sometimes had fragments of color. And I was more interested in a person seeing the form that I came up with, than the forms that existed before.

**CC:** The geometric steel forms you used in the Minneapolis pieces—where did they come from?

**ME:** From the scrapyard, but they weren't scrappy looking.

**CC:** And you couldn't recognize what they were, like the railroad spikes or jack bases in the Lynch Fragments.

**ME:** No, no, the pieces in Minneapolis weren't related to the earlier work, and I was trying to be sure that they weren't. The piece at Cornell (Fig. 15) was furthering that idea, so the step triangle structure was painted four colors: blue and yellow on one side, which were primary colors, and an off-green and orange on the other, secondaries.

**CC:** Were you settled in New York when you got your first public commission?

**ME:** That was 1969 but I had just moved out of New York and taken a job upstate at the University of Connecticut, and the first commission was the one at Cornell. It was the summer of '69 that I did that, and then the *Double Circles* in Harlem (Fig. 16). At Cornell, the step triangle part was painted, and I used a stainless steel circle—that was the first time I used stainless. The idea was, there would be a refraction of the painted colors in the stainless steel. The form was based on the step pyramid of Saqqara. In other words, it's a step triangle as opposed to a step pyramid.

**CC:** In your mind, you mentally complete the idea of the pyramid.

**ME:** Yes, that was very much a part of it.

**CC:** How did the Cornell commission come about?

**ME:** Tom Leavitt had been the director at the Santa Barbara Museum, and he had moved east, to become director of the museum at Cornell.

**CC:** Tom Leavitt gave you your first solo museum show (Fig. 17). How did that happen?

**ME:** In the summer of '64, [the critic and artist] Arthur Secunda asked me to go to the Santa Barbara Museum to meet the director. I figured Leavitt would pat me on the back and say, "Nice work, kid, keep it up." But after fifteen minutes, he started talking about a one-man show at the museum.

**CC:** That's great.

**ME:** Cornell had gotten a grant from the NEA. They were giving people money that they could match and buy pieces. It wasn't much money, a couple thousand dollars or something like that. He wanted to buy one of the small pieces, but I told him, I'd been doing little models, ideas for some larger things. I said I had this idea and if he could raise a couple more thousand dollars, I could make this piece. I wouldn't make any money, but I could do it. And so he worked it out, found the money. Tom Leavitt was just the nicest, most thoughtful person. Just very good, and I don't mean just for me. I think he had that kind of respect in the museum world.

**CC:** Around the time you made the Cornell piece, you also made one of your first barbed-wire pieces, *Pyramid Up and Down Pyramid*. Does it also refer to the pyramids in Egypt?

**ME:** Sure, but not in an illustrational manner. Then there's *Ana's Corner*.

**CC:** One of the Whitney pieces, and it also seems to be related to this geometric theme.

**ME:** Sure, it's just it's a prism instead—not prison, but prism. Ana is my daughter. Actually it was nostalgia because by then my children were not living with me.

**CC:** *Pyramid Up and Down Pyramid* was the first piece you made from barbed wire, and it was in



Figure 14. Melvin Edwards, *Yellow Diamond*, 1968. Painted welded steel. Dimensions and present location unknown. Made during summer residency at Sabathani Community Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota. © 2015 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph courtesy the artist.



Figure 15. Melvin Edwards, *Homage to My Father and the Spirit*, 1969. Stainless steel and painted steel. Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. Acquired with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Arts, and through the generosity of individual donors. © 2015 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph courtesy of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

the show William T. Williams organized for the Studio Museum in 1969, called *X to the Fourth Power*. And then the next one, *Curtain for William and Peter* (Fig. 18), was first shown a few months later in *5 + 1*, the show Frank Bowling did at Stony Brook?

**ME:** At the time of the Stony Brook show, which was October before my Whitney show in March 1970, in that period from September to January, I was living in William Williams' and Peter Bradley's studio. It really was because William had a little space that Peter was also using; William had another apartment where he and his wife lived. I stayed at that studio for three months or so till I got on my feet and found a place.

**CC:** Right, and they're the William and Peter of the barbed wire curtain piece?

**ME:** Yeah, in other words it's dedicated to my friends.

**CC:** A review of *5 + 1* said that the curtain ran through the middle of the gallery, and it was some forty feet long.

**ME:** Yeah, that is true. The ideas for all of those works were, they would be—we didn't call it that then but—environmentally specific. Now we call it site-specific. But then we thought the environment was basically an interior space, not meaning exterior or site-specific. I had ideas for barbed-wire pieces outdoors, but I decided that was too close to the original use for barbed wire.

**CC:** Didn't you tell me that you started thinking of working with barbed wire when you lived in a big farmhouse in Orange County?<sup>2</sup> Did you use barbed wire that was lying around there?

**ME:** No, I bought it.

**CC:** Is barbed wire used much in upstate New York?

**ME:** Yeah, it's standard. You could find it almost anywhere there's agriculture. It's just that very few people were interested in it in terms of modern art. For me, that was a period of solitude upstate; I was divorcing.

**CC:** When you initially showed the barbed wire works, many people couldn't get around the brutal associations of the material.

**ME:** My understanding was—because I came to sculpture after coming to painting—drawing in space was the talk of Picasso, González, and people who wrote about modern sculpture. In these works, I had isolated two kinds of lines: barbed line, or wires, and a flexible rope or chain. What that allowed me to do was draw differently in space. There were objects that could hang on the wall, like a *Lynch Fragment*, but were barbed wire. I was working out for myself the various possibilities of using this linear material. Then later I used it as a stencil to spray against in drawings (Fig. 19). In other words, all kinds of ways of handling the line in space.

**CC:** But as with other materials you have used, the cultural associations of barbed wire are very powerful.

**ME:** Using barbed wire, you have to be aware that it was a way to keep the cows at home. But then people turned it into concentration camps. Before it happened with Jewish people in World War II, it happened in Namibia.<sup>3</sup> Those contradictions, or contradistinctions are things that have occupied me in visual art. As a way to realize the dynamic in a situation, art or otherwise, they're very important to me. I don't know why, but my instinct and way of looking at and analyzing things have been that way since I was a young adult. It's become a part of my aesthetics.

**CC:** How did your 1970 show at the Whitney happen?

**ME:** A reflection of the politics of the time. The Whitney was trying to figure out how to act like it was normal to have black artists show there, but of course it wasn't, because they hadn't done anything, since one time in 1936 (*laughter*).<sup>4</sup> But 1969, in the fall, they decided to use a small room downstairs for individual artist shows of younger artists, and not just black artists.

**CC:** You mean the gallery in the lobby of the Whitney's Breuer building?

**ME:** Right. It was true that that was where black artists first showed up in any significance. But we weren't the only artists. I remember Stephan Von Huene and Llyn Foulkes, two artists who I happened to know well, showed there, and they were in that same period. Al Loving was the first of the Afro-American artists they showed, and that was in the fall of '69, I would say November.<sup>10</sup> [Curator Robert] Doty came and talked to me, and he actually wanted to show *Lynch Fragments*.



Figure 16. Melvin Edwards with his sculpture *Double Circles*, 1970. Painted steel. Bethune Tower, 650 Malcolm X Boulevard, Harlem, New York. © 2015 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph courtesy the artist.



Figure 17. Melvin Edwards exhibition, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1965. An early version of *Chaino* is visible in the right corner. Photograph by the artist.

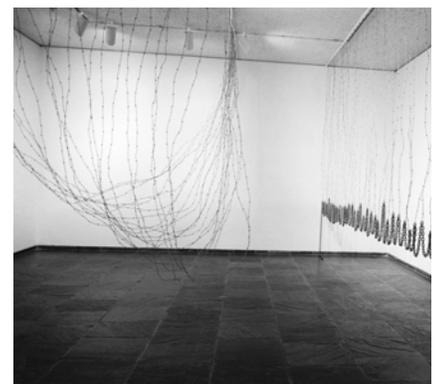


Figure 18. Melvin Edwards, "Look through minds mirror distance and measure time" Jayne Cortez and *Curtain for William and Peter*, in Melvin Edwards: Works, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1970. Archival image, Frances Mulhall Achilles Library, Whitney Museum. © 2015 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

I told him I had been working on other ideas, and I'd really rather show them, and he reluctantly went along with it.

**CC:** You told me you thought he had seen some of your work in California, but had he seen the barbed-wire pieces in *X to the Fourth Power* or *5 + 1*?

**ME:** I don't know what he had seen. I know he was aware of me, and I probably had met him going to openings. But let's see, he must've seen the Studio Museum barbed-wire piece, and the one in Stony Brook. Anyway, we were all around together, but I was the one he asked.

**CC:** Your Whitney show doesn't seem to have gotten much attention.

**ME:** I had just started teaching at the University of Connecticut, the show was up at the Whitney, and then *Time* magazine decided to do this article on Afro-American artists, and so I got called one day to come down to the museum for a photograph.<sup>11</sup> And after that it was like nobody was interested, or, let's just say, no situation came up to show those works again. I just didn't get nearly as much attention and opportunity to show those kinds of pieces as I wanted. But you know, that happens to artists all the time, so there I was.

**CC:** A few months later you were in the Whitney sculpture annual. You showed *Homage to Coco* (Fig. 20), another departure for you. It was named after your grandmother, and it was the first of a group of works called *Rockers*.

**ME:** Yeah, *Coco* was the first one. I think the original idea was so basic—simply to make two planes that rock, cutting a circle in half. The idea of using barbed wire in it came first, in the drawing I made for the piece. I made a drawing for that one because I had it fabricated (Fig. 21), and I had to diagram it for the fabricator. And so they made the frame, I drilled the holes, and I changed my mind, and instead of barbed wire, used chain. And then after I did it, I was even more happy because with the barbed wire, I already knew what I would be getting in terms of form and contrast.

With the chain, I knew what the look would be, but what I didn't know was what the action would be. When I rocked it, because the chain was flexible, it lagged behind in terms of gravity, in terms of movement. The piece moves the chain, because it's flexible and tries to keep the center of gravity. So it affects what would be the normal balance. If there were no chain there, it would just act like the normal pendulum until it got tired of rocking, and it would stop. But the chain, it gets to that position and it goes back. The chain, it comes *after*, after the frame gets over there. So I said, whoa, the chain syncopates the motion of the rocker! And the term "syncopate" felt right because it was like a counterpoint or counter-movement. And I use the word with a sense of sensitivity to syncopation used in relation to African American music, as an emphatic quality. It couldn't be exactly the same, but it was enough to give me the notion, and that really reminded me that if you did different things to the rocker in terms of putting weight here, there—

**CC:** —in different places —

**ME:** —then each piece would rock at a different speed. They didn't have to be chains—they could be any form—just the adjustment of the weight. And then of course there could be all kinds of variations (Fig. 22).

**CC:** Was being included in the Whitney annual related to having a solo show?

**ME:** It probably was Doty and the same group of people that were interested in me. Where the falling out came was when they did the Afro-American show right after that.<sup>12</sup> And because we seemed to have a good relationship, I guess Doty thought I was literate enough to write something for the show. I said I would, but that I needed to know a little bit about what they're going to show. The particular part that I didn't agree with him on was him keeping out Ed Clark's work, not including him when Ed's generation of color field painters had been shown in annuals and other shows. And here's this new show of Afro-American art, and you're going to show its range and qualities, and here's a major artist, in fact the maker of the first shaped canvas painting. And Al Held, George Sugarman, and all of them knew it, because they were all at the Brata Gallery with Ed Clark, and they were in Paris, all of them together. And so I said to Doty, "Well, I don't agree with you. Look, this man has historically important work."

I thought about it; then, when I gave him what I wrote, he didn't like me being critical of museums for not having shown African American artists' work. Not that they didn't occasionally show one or two here or there, but there were no one-man shows at museums. There was no



Figure 19. Melvin Edwards, *B Wire Chino B Wire*, 1970. Spray paint on paper. 24 x 18 in. (61 x 45.7 cm). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2015 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph by Jeffrey Sturges.



Figure 20. *Homage to Coco (Rocker)*, 1970. Painted steel with alternating galvanized and non-galvanized chains, 48 x 96 x 120 in. (121.9 x 243.8 x 304.8 cm). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2015 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph courtesy the artist.

history of that. And he said, "Well, I think the Whitney has a good record," and he was talking about my show and Al's show just the year before, and I said, "Yeah, okay, that's wonderful, and then before that you did something in 1936. Come on, do you want to call that a record?" We disagreed, and so he said, "This thing that you've written, I'm going to publish it, not in the catalogue but separately—" And I said, "Oh no, then I'd rather that I didn't write anything. If you don't like what I wrote, that's fine. That's your prerogative. I also have a prerogative not to be in the exhibition, and so I won't." He said, "Uh, are you kidding?" and he kept trying to schedule a pick-up of my work, but I wouldn't do it. Several of us decided not to, Danny Johnson, myself, William Williams—I can't remember how many people. It wasn't a big deal to us, just we're not going to be in it. I wrote a thing, critical of it; I thought it was anti-curated.

**CC:** Is that the letter published in *Artforum*?<sup>13</sup>

**ME:** Yes, and the statement I wrote to begin with is published in the catalogue for my Studio Museum show of '78.<sup>14</sup> There was no point in trying to argue with Doty, and I had no reason to, because I wasn't trying to join an organization in any camp; I was just really trying to do some work. It was clear then that you had to use your own thinking and your own research and your own evaluation of things. At least I felt that was what was best for me, and it seemed to work. People that I respected, that was what they really did, without broadcasting it. That's just been the way I work. I'll answer any questions usually if somebody asks me, but I'm not a person who creates organizations.

**CC:** There were several group shows of African American art at that time.

**ME:** They started doing these large Afro-American surveys. They did one in Boston, and the man who was the curator came to New York and talked to me and wanted me in, and I asked him who was in it. And I told him, "I think I'm not going to be in this one. I don't think I want to do that." And he asked why, and I said, "You choose to be in some shows and some you don't. Look, if somebody wants to be in the show they can." And he said, "You'd object to being in a black show?" I said, "No, white artists don't object to being in white shows." (*laughter*) You would never call a large exhibition which had no black artists in it a white show, but I would. In other words, I have a real need for saying, if we're going to do things, let's say what they actually are—stand with them or against them or separate from them, whatever. But that was my take on that. Frank Bolling titled his painting for the Boston show *Mel Edwards Decides* (*laughter*).

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**CC:** The *Rocker* called *Good Friends in Chicago* (Fig. 23): did you have that one fabricated also?

**ME:** No, I made that in Chicago. The title refers to the fact that when we went out there to do a show, there was no money to ship stuff out, and I felt that if I was there for a week or so with some relatively specific ideas and a trip to the scrap yard, like in Minneapolis, that I could work out something interesting. And that was what happened. I had help from Emilio Cruz, the curator, who was also an artist and a good friend, and then I worked in Richard Hunt's studio to make it. So the piece was an homage to our friendship, me and Emilio and Richard.<sup>15</sup>

**CC:** It must've been interesting for somebody in 1970 going to see your show at the Whitney with the barbed wire installation and then *Homage to Coco*, a very different kind of work, in the sculpture annual.

**ME:** Yeah, you're right, it was very different—unless you looked at how both played with line and plane concepts.

**CC:** You showed two large works based on Rockers in your 1980 show at 55 Mercer Street. What's the larger one?

**ME:** That's *Memories of Coco*. It barely has just enough space to rock. It's a twisted, off-kilter piece.

**CC:** And the other one, with two rockers side by side (Fig. 24)?

**ME:** It's called *A Conversation with Norman Lewis*. That's based on something he used to say: "You can't hear with your mouth open."

**CC:** One rocker can move, the other is stationary—one's talking and one's listening?



Figure 21. Melvin Edwards, Study for "Homage to Coco, 1970. Watercolor, pencil, and ink on paper. 18 1/8 x 24 1/8 in. (46.1 x 61.3 cm). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2015 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph by Jeffrey Sturges.



Figure 22. Melvin Edwards, Avenue B (Rocker), 1975. Welded steel, 23 3/4 x 30 1/2 x 18 1/4 in. (60.3 x 77.5 x 46.4 cm). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2015 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph by Jeffrey Sturges.

**ME:** Right.

**CC:** One of the sculptures in the Whitney show was called *Look through minds mirror distance and measure time* (Fig. 19).

**ME:** Yeah, and the title came from one of Jayne's poems.

**CC:** You and Jayne [Cortez] had met in Los Angeles, but only got to know each other in New York. A mutual friend, the designer Bob Rogers (Fig. 25), made the connection, right?

**ME:** In LA I saw her at Bob Rogers's [place], but only two or three times in four years. We really weren't talking friends before that—I mean, a little bit. Late summer or fall of '68, I lived on Canal Street about then. And one day Bob Rogers brought her by, and we started reminiscing about LA. We had a nice visit. In February 1969, in New York, I got the call from Bob about Jayne having some poetry, and she was looking for someone to make drawings for them. I said yes, and she sent me the poems. I would say, by some time before May I had given her the drawings (Fig. 26). The book came out in the summer, and she sent it to me. So I saw it: "Oh, she really did use them." And I was happy about that.

**CC:** Had you read any of her writings before?

**ME:** No, I don't know that anything of hers had been published. And Jayne was into performance and theater directing, and some of the poetry I'm pretty sure came out of that.<sup>16</sup> I just gave her the drawings—

**CC:** And she took it from there?

**ME:** Yeah, and that was the idea, because I told her, "It's your book, and I'm happy that I did the drawings for you." And somewhere, probably, there are the ones she didn't use. Because every book that we did things like that, she may have used five, or eight drawings, and then there may have been twenty more. She didn't throw stuff away, but she didn't give them back to me, either. That was our agreement. You know, that she can have them. Later on, she'd laugh and say, "Ooh, I've got a collection!"

**CC:** A collection of works by Melvin Edwards.

**ME:** "Can't tell me what to do!" (*laughter*)

**CC:** And did Jayne know your work? Before Bob Rogers suggested you, I mean.

**ME:** Well, if she had, I didn't know it. But pretty quickly, in New York, once she saw my work, she started responding.

**CC:** What works by you did she see?

**ME:** Well, William had organized *X to the Fourth Power* at the Studio Museum, and there was an opening in June [1969], and Jayne came to it. She came with an African man—he was Yoruba. And the reason I know that, is what he said when he saw one of my pieces. It was the simplest and, you could say, for the time, the most pushing-the-envelope, compared to what I usually did: there were two 100-foot lengths of chain, and they were just scattered on the floor. Otherwise, they had *Pyramid Up and Down Pyramid*, and other ones in the other room. But anyway, they came, and he said, "Oh, do you know, this is very much related to Ogun. And I said, Who? And he said, OK, I'll tell you. And he told a story about a particular Ogun Alagbede—that is, blacksmith. He said the Ogun of this village was very famous, and he told his people, when he dies and they bury him, they should put a chain into his grave with him, and bring part of it above ground. And if there's ever a problem and the community needs assistance, they can rattle the chain, and Ogun will come and help. Well, Ogun is the patron of blacksmithing, *and* the patron of war. He's Mars and Vulcan, in the European sense. And of course, it was there a long time, and the kids know the story and they rattle the chain. Well, he came out, and he killed people in the village, left and right—and then, well, the lesson is, you don't play around with that power. I've since read many things like that story.

**CC:** Was this first time you had heard of Ogun?

**ME:** I don't think it was the first time I had heard the name, but it was the first time I heard a

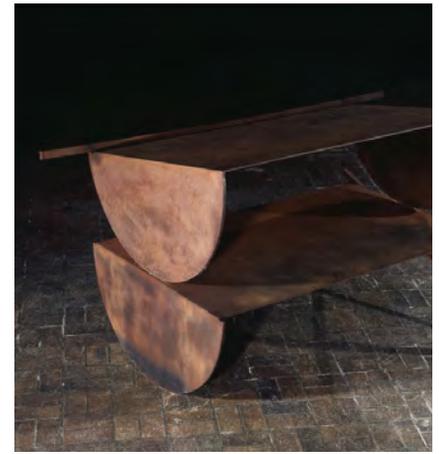


Figure 23. Melvin Edwards, *Good Friends in Chicago*, 1972. Welded steel, 43 x 77 3/4 x 64 1/2 in. (109.2 x 197.5 x 163.8 cm). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2015 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph by Jeffrey Sturges.



Figure 24. *A Conversation with Norman Lewis*, 1970. Welded steel. Two parts: 27 x 42 x 41 in. (68.6 x 106.7 x 104.1 cm) and 31 x 43 x 57 in. (78.7 x 109.2 x 144.8 cm). © 2015 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph by Herbie Wheeler, courtesy the artist.

story.

**CC:** A story that was connected to something you had done.

**ME:** Yeah, it was. And then the second show Jayne saw was in the fall, at Stony Brook.

**CC:** And then the Whitney after that?

**ME:** Yeah, and she visited my studio on the lower east side, and there were a few *Lynch Fragments* there. So she would've seen the work. In her second book *Festivals and Funerals* she responds with a poem dedicated to the *Lynch Fragments*, and even the drawings I did for that book were influenced somewhat by the *Lynch Fragments*. And she's got a poem called "Ogun's Friend," and it's based on visits to my studio.<sup>17</sup> One of my habits is, I make hats to weld in, and "pants legs made into hats" is a line in that poem. You know, "he does this, he does that..." Every now and then I would say, "Oh, you couldn't think of nothing, so you picked on me, huh?" (*laughter*) Not exactly that, but I think we both found connections in things. She could see by the construction of some of the *Lynch Fragments* that there's a logic—"Well, if he made this, this, and this, he could make this, this, and that." I hadn't done it, but she could see it. So she gave me, before I could do it, the list of what I should do. And I think that kind of reciprocal thing happened. Every now and then she would say about our mutual thinking: "Well, I can't tell whether I got it from you, or you got it from me. I really can't." And at a certain point it's true. At the same time, there's no way I could be the poet—the systems are too different. Jayne's work was complex, dynamically and aesthetically, and it really corroborated for me that there was no problem—except for your own abilities—with using anything you wanted to use to develop your work, your ideas. So we just had a lot of—as we used to say—brotherly and sisterly things in common, in relation to creativity, which I really miss. I'll be frank.

**CC:** It sounds like a very special relationship. You married in 1975—

**ME:** And you know, we had really been together then for five years already.

**CC:** Your creative exchange was also important to the work both of you did.

**ME:** We talked about art and exhibitions and—you know, each other's worlds really merged. And, you didn't think anything of it. You didn't think it was anything extra. It just seemed natural.

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<sup>1</sup> April Kingsley, introduction to *Sculpture by Mel Edwards* (Trenton: New Jersey State Museum, 1981), n.p.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph Ginzburg, *100 Years of Lynchings* (New York: Lancer Books, 1962).

<sup>3</sup> For additional information, see Craft, "This Life as a Sculptor," *Melvin Edwards: Five Decades* (Dallas, TX: Nasher Sculpture Center, 2015), 13.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>5</sup> The story about Edwards obtaining material from the "rubble" left by the Watts rebellion was first published in Elsa Honig Fine, *The Afro-American Artist: A Search for Identity* (New York, London: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), 265. Her source was an unnamed friend of the artist.

<sup>6</sup> Edwards' sculptures were created under the artist-in-residence program of the Summer Arts Festival, sponsored by the Mayor's Council on Youth Opportunity; his residency was at the Sabathani Community Center was founded in South Minneapolis by members of the Sabathani Baptist Church. The Walker exhibition took place from August 5 to September 2, 1968. Documentation on these programs are held in the archives of the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

<sup>7</sup> Edwards taught at Orange County Community College between 1967 and 1969; he lived in the farmhouse during the fall of 1968.

<sup>8</sup> Edwards is referring to concentration camps built by the German Imperial Army in Namibia in the early 20th century, where large numbers of Herero men, women, and children died.

<sup>9</sup> When Al Loving's exhibition opened at the Whitney in December 1969, he was in fact the first African American artist to receive a solo exhibition at the museum.



Figure 25. Left to right: Bob Rogers, Ismael Reed, Jayne Cortez, Leon Gontran-Damas, Romare Bearden, Larry Neal. Seated: Nikki Giovanni and Evelyn Neal. New York, 1969. Photograph by Melvin Edwards.



Figure 26. Melvin Edwards, drawing published in Jayne Cortez, *Pissstained Stairs and the Monkey Man's Wares* (New York: Phrase Text, 1969).

<sup>10</sup> For more about the exhibition, see Craft "This Life as a Sculptor," *Melvin Edwards: Five Decades*, 25.

<sup>11</sup> "Art," *Time: Black America 1970* (April 6, 1970): 84.

<sup>12</sup> *Contemporary Black Artists in America* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1971).

<sup>13</sup> "Politics," *Artforum* 9 (May 1971): 12. The letter was signed by Edwards, along with John Dowell, Sam Gilliam, Richard Hunt, Daniel Johnson, Joe Overstreet, and William T. Williams.

<sup>14</sup> Melvin Edwards, "Notes on Black Art (1971)," later published in *Melvin Edwards: Sculptor* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1978): 20-21.

<sup>15</sup> The piece was made for *Edwards Gilliam Williams*, an exhibition curated by Emilio Cruz and shown at the Wabash Transit Gallery, Chicago School of Art, Art Institute of Chicago, 1972.

<sup>16</sup> In Los Angeles, Cortez helped to found the Watts Repertory Theater Group in 1964.

<sup>17</sup> For an excerpt of this poem, see Craft, "This Life as a Sculptor," *Melvin Edwards: Five Decades*, 25.

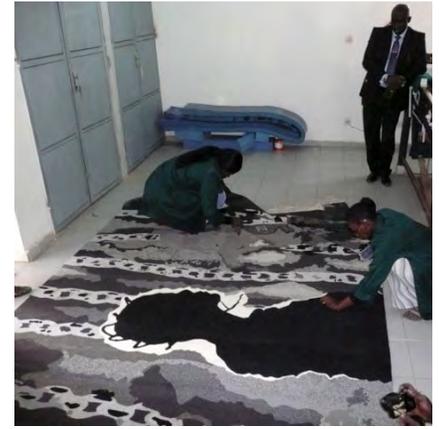


Figure 27. Weavers at work on a tapestry based on a photocollage by Melvin Edwards featuring the silhouette of Jayne Cortez. Manufactures sénégalaises des arts décoratifs, Thiès, Senegal, 2015. At rear: Manufactures Director Sidi Seck ; in foreground, partially obscured : artist Abdoulaye Ndoye. Photograph courtesy the artist.