

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with James Phillips

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Phillips, James Henry, 1945-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with James Phillips,
<b>Dates:</b>	August 5, 2013
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2013
<b>Physical Description:</b>	9 uncompressed MOV digital video files (4:05:11).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Visual artist James Phillips (1945 - ) a member of the Weusi and AfriCobra artist groups, has participated in over seventy art exhibitions around the world. His work is included in several well-known collections. Phillips was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 5, 2013, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2013_210
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Visual artist James Phillips was born in 1945 in Brooklyn, New York. Phillips attended the Fleisher Art Memorial School in Philadelphia in the 1960s. He then went on to study at the Philadelphia College of Art (University of the Arts for Philadelphia) from 1964 to 1965, followed by a brief affiliation with the Lee Cultural Center in 1968. Phillips then attended the Printing Trade School in New York City. From there, he became a member of the Harlem-founded Weusi Artist Collective, a group of young artists who made African iconic imagery and symbols a central part of their work, from 1969 to 1973.

In 1970, Phillips met the founding members of AfriCobra (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists), a group that was committed to incorporating African aesthetics, iconography and positive political imagery into African American art. Phillips also became a member of AfriCobra. From 1973 to 1977, he served as an artist-in-residence at Howard University with duties as a mural consultant. Then, from 1977 to 1979, Phillips was affiliated with C.E.T.A., a nationwide arts initiative of the Carter Administration. After participating in the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Exchange Fellowship in Tokyo, Japan in 1980, he was appointed as a visiting lecturer at the University of California at Berkeley from 1983 to 1984. Phillips went on to teach courses at the Maryland Institute College of Art, and Hampton University. Phillips earned his M.F.A. degree from the Maryland Institute College of Art in 1998. In 2001, Phillips re-joined the faculty of the art department at Howard University as a lecturer, eventually becoming an associate professor of foundation and painting where he oversees all the graduate coursework.

As a painter, Phillips has participated in over seventy group and solo exhibitions in galleries and museums both nationally and internationally. His work is included in several well-known collections, including the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Arts and Artifacts Collection of the New York City Public Library and Hampton University. Phillips' works have also been specially created for public art projects for the city of Baltimore, Howard University, the Department of Parks in New York City, and the transit system for the City of San Francisco. In 1994, he was commissioned by the Philadelphia Airport to create a permanent piece of art for their domestic wing. The Art in Embassies program of the United States Department of State purchased two of Phillips' paintings in 2006 for the American Embassy in Togo, West Africa. Phillips was also honored with the Creative Artists Public Service Award in 1971.

James Phillips was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on August 5, 2013.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with James Phillips was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 5, 2013, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 9 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Visual artist James Phillips (1945 - ) a member of the Weusi and AfriCobra artist groups, has participated in over seventy art exhibitions around the world. His work is included in several well-known collections.

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# Restrictions

## Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

## Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

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## Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

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## Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### Persons:

Phillips, James Henry, 1945-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## **Occupations:**

Visual Artist

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

ArtMakers

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## **Administrative Information**

### **Custodial History**

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

### **Preferred Citation**

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with James Phillips, August 5, 2013. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### **Processing Information**

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following

## Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with James Phillips, Section  
A2013\_210\_001\_001, TRT: 1:29:12 2013/08/05

James Phillips was born in Brooklyn, New York on April 29, 1945. His parents, Jettie Elizabeth Brown and Frank Phillips, separated soon after his birth and he moved to Gretna, Virginia to live with his maternal aunt, Della Louise Brown, and uncle, George Brown. Phillips' mother was born in 1917 in Franklin County, Virginia; the family moved to Gretna, bought a small farm, and grew tobacco as well as their own food. She worked a number of jobs, including substitute teacher, secretary, nurse's aide, and social worker. Phillips has limited knowledge of his father aside from his possible origins in Kentucky and artistic ability. Phillips describes his earliest memory and the sights, sounds, and smells of growing up in Gretna. He remembers listening to musicians such as Charlie Parker, Michael Olatunji, and Hank Williams from a jukebox in a segregated gas station. Phillips attended Northside School, a combined elementary and high school for black children in segregated Gretna.

Video Oral History Interview with James Phillips, Section  
A2013\_210\_001\_002, TRT: 2:29:48 2013/08/05

James Phillips talks about how his parents met during World War II. As a child, Phillips loved to draw. Though Phillips did not receive a formal art education, his geography teacher, A.B. Spellman, Sr., at Northside

School in Gretna, Virginia, taught him to paint and draw in the sixth grade. As a child, Phillips learned to take care of his grandfather and to farm. He describes growing up next door to white sharecroppers, who alternated between kindness and racism. When Phillips was in the eighth grade, his mother, who was settled in Pennsylvania by then, sent for him to move to Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania with her and her sister, Minnie, who was a maid for a well-off family in Philadelphia. In Bryn Mawr, Phillips enrolled in Welsh Valley Middle School. He also worked as a busboy and dishwasher. Phillips describes his experience of racial discrimination in Bryn Mawr.

Video Oral History Interview with James Phillips, Section  
A2013\_210\_001\_003, TRT: 3:28:22 2013/08/05

Phillips describes his experience at Harriton High School in Rosemont, Pennsylvania. He began to attend NAACP meetings, including one with Medgar Evers, who was assassinated soon after in June 1963. Later that year, Phillips attended the March on Washington after becoming friends with musicians and political activists. When Phillips was a teenager, his mother worked nights at Bryn Mawr Hospital and gave him a fair amount of freedom. He describes spending time in Rittenhouse Square and nearby clubs in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, as well as weekend excursions to New York City. In school, Phillips played soccer, but his interest waned after the African American team was cut from a tournament and he began to devote more time to the arts. He talks about the Black Arts Movement, the origins of black art, and meeting HistoryMakers Amiri Baraka and A.B. Spellman. After graduating from high school, Phillips spent a semester at the Philadelphia College of Art before moving to New York City.

Video Oral History Interview with James Phillips, Section  
A2013\_210\_001\_004, TRT: 4:28:12 2013/08/05

James Phillips describes living in New York City in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Initially more interested in music than painting, he met many jazz musicians in New York City clubs, including drummer Norman Connors and saxophonist Pharoah Sanders. In 1966, Phillips returned to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where he was involved with

the Lee Cultural Center. In 1968, he returned to New York City, enrolling in a printing trade school where he learned to produce opaque prints. After finishing school in 1969, he was hired as an assistant production manager at a printing press. Phillips later left the press to paint full-time. While working as a messenger to support his painting, Phillips met members of the Weusi Artists Collective, which he later joined. He describes the group's origins, and its relation to the East Community Center. Phillips also describes the musical atmosphere of New York at that time, the development of his aesthetic, and meeting writer and HistoryMaker A.B. Spellman, Jr.

Video Oral History Interview with James Phillips, Section  
A2013\_210\_001\_005, TRT: 5:30:00 2013/08/05

James Phillips talks about his painting “The Dealer” and increased drug abuse in New York City’s African American community in the 1970s. Prior to this, in 1968, Phillips had a breakthrough in the development of his artistic style after devoting attention to African music, art, and artifacts. He became a member of the Weusi Artists Collective and began to create artwork with them, which led to a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1972. Phillips describes the history of the Studio Museum and the connections he made to other artists in the space. He also met artists like Wadsworth Jarrell as well as HistoryMakers Jeff Donaldson and Napoleon Jones-Henderson, all of whom were members of the artist collective AfriCOBRA, the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists. Phillips describes the origins of Weusi, AfriCOBRA and Archie Shepp’s 1972 album “Attica Blues” He also talks about exhibiting his art in venues like New York City’s Town Hall where he painted a backdrop for a John Coltrane award concert.

Video Oral History Interview with James Phillips, Section  
A2013\_210\_001\_006, TRT: 6:29:50 2013/08/05

James Phillips describes his involvement with AfriCOBRA and the evolution of his painting style. He describes HistoryMaker and AfriCOBRA member Jeff Donaldson’s impact on the group and on Howard University’s art program, of which he was Chair. At the time that he joined AfriCOBRA, Phillips was also an

artist-in-residence at Howard. He describes the atmosphere on campus during the '70s, including the presence of such notable figures as Donald Byrd, Toni Morrison, and Norman Connors. He describes having been asked by Connors to provide cover art for his debut album, as well as the pitfalls of making cover art. From 1977 to 1979, he worked for the CETA Arts Program as a muralist and began to delve into the connections between African American quilting and African textile design. In 1980 he was granted a National Endowment for the Arts Exchange Fellowship to Japan, where he would live for seventeen months and begin to incorporate mandalas into his work.

Video Oral History Interview with James Phillips, Section  
A2013\_210\_001\_007, TRT: 7:28:18 2013/08/05

James Phillips recalls living Japan in 1980 and 1981 on a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship. There, he had two solo exhibitions: one in Tokyo and one in Kyoto. While there he became interested in cosmograms, mandalas specifically, and began to incorporate them into his work. He explains the geometry and symbolism of mandalas and notes a later connection that he made between the Buddhist images and other cosmograms from Congo, Zimbabwe, and Haiti. In 1983, Phillips moved to California, where he worked as a visiting lecturer at the University of California at Berkeley for three years. He remained in California for several years after, working on commissioned murals and as an artist-in-residence, including for the penal system. In the early 1990s, he returned to the East Coast, where he worked on a commission for the airport in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Phillips describes the mural and the logistics of commissioned public art.

Video Oral History Interview with James Phillips, Section  
A2013\_210\_001\_008, TRT: 8:30:32 2013/08/05

James Phillips earned his M.F.A. degree from the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in Baltimore, Maryland in 1998. A program at the college converted Phillips' life experience to college credits, allowing him to enter the school as a graduate student without a bachelor's degree. He was advised to apply to the program by art



historian Dr. Tritobia Benjamin, whose sister, Leslie King-Hammond, worked at MICA. He then taught art at Coppin State University in Baltimore, Maryland and at Suitland High School in District Heights, Maryland before joining the faculty at Howard University in Washington, D.C. in 2001. His career highlights, include the purchase of his work by the Republic of Togo and Howard University as well as the success of his students. Phillips reflects on his art practice, including the incorporation of Nsibidi letters into his work. He talks about the tokenization and underrepresentation of black people in the art world and the enduring work of AfriCOBRA.

Video Oral History Interview with James Phillips, Section  
A2013\_210\_001\_009, TRT: 9:10:57 2013/08/05

James Phillips reflects upon his legacy and describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community. He also talks about his family and how he would like to be remembered. Phillips concludes by narrating his photographs.