

Poetic Energies and Radical Celebrations

Senga Nengudi
and Maren Hassinger

“But in dance, there is only so much time to perform; with art, you can seemingly go on forever.”¹

Senga Nengudi

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Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger have maintained a connection since they participated in the loosely knit art collective Studio Z in the 1970s. Even when they're not working together, they respond to each other through their individual work, sometimes with deliberate gestures and other times with implicit dialogue around subjects to which both artists continually return. Both experiment with ritual and dematerialization, and their artworks eschew explicit invocation of social unrest, politics, and racial tensions—deep-seated themes which were (and continue to be) invoked by many of their African American contemporaries, such as David Hammons and Adrian Piper. In light of the artists' friendship and decades-long collaboration, it seems fitting that both had overdue recent exhibitions at L.A. institutions. Hassinger's signature twisted wire rope sculptures and braided newspaper feature in Art + Practice's galleries, while Nengudi's stretched and distended pantyhose sculptures dominated her just-closed show at the USC Fisher Museum of Art. Both exhibitions also celebrated

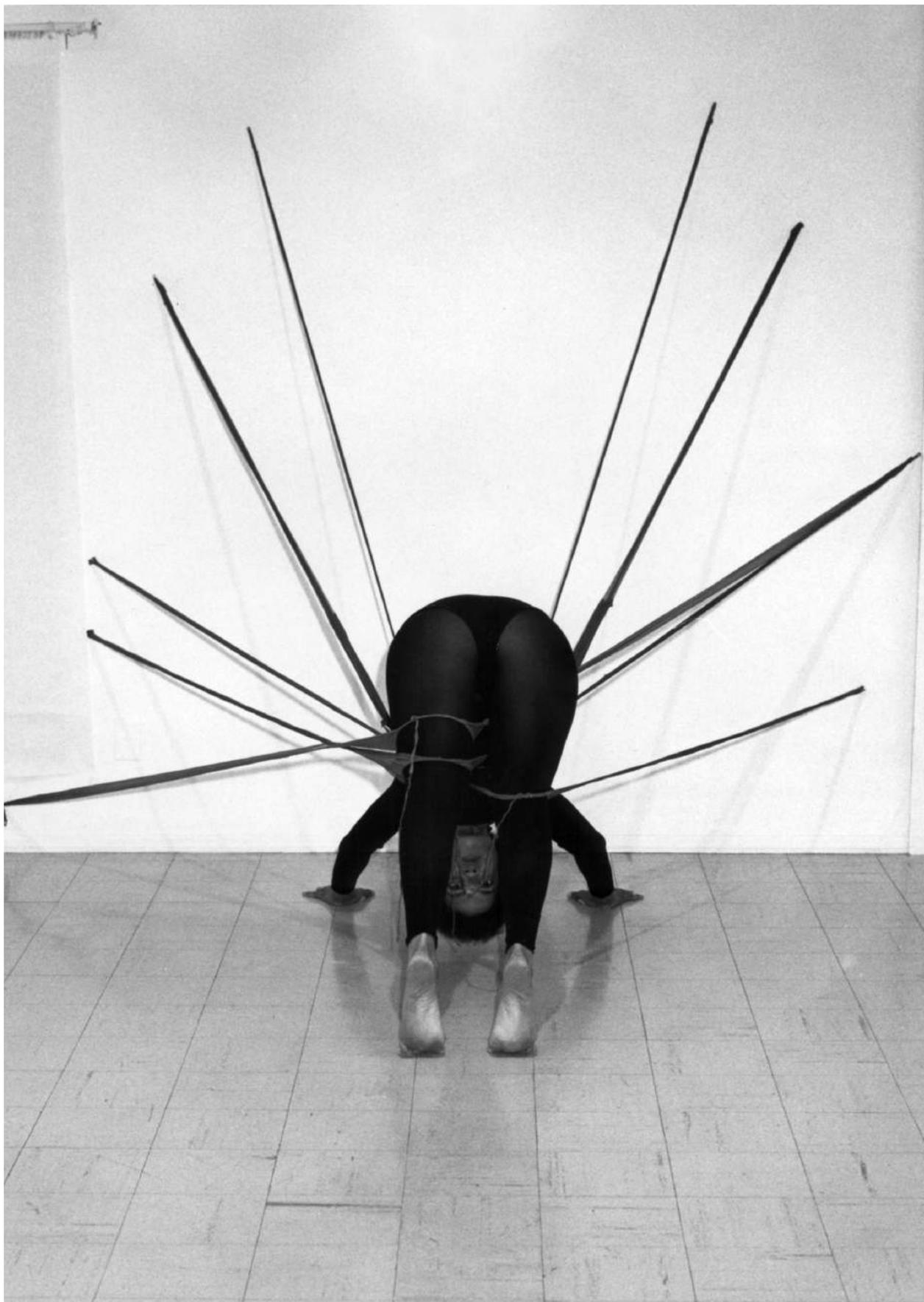
historic work from the two artists' 40-plus-year practices, though it was the lesser known video works in these exhibitions that offered the greatest new insights into the two artist's connective dialogue.

The artists met around 1977 in the Professional Artists Employment Program, a federally-funded workshop organized by Brockman Gallery Productions in Leimert Park. Both were part of a generation of postwar L.A. artists responding to the effects of the Watts Riots and the Women's Movement whose artmaking also relied on community-based participation. Hassinger and Nengudi's mutual background in dance and commitment to feminist exploration of the body in sculpture and performance evinced an early shared ethos. The rotating cast of Studio Z artists performed spontaneous actions in the studio's old dance hall rooms, on the street, and in other alternative spaces. In 1978, Hassinger participated in Nengudi's seminal *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*, a ritualistic public performance and urban installation that took place under a Pico Boulevard freeway overpass. Nengudi's improvisational scheme incorporated music, dance, and ritual costumes made of pantyhose and other found objects. For this work, Hassinger enacted the role of a female spirit. As an ephemeral, poetically energetic performance using elements of assemblage and spontaneity, this piece incorporated both artists' shared aesthetics and themes. The social orientation of their practices and the breadth of their overlapping interests in improvisation and intimacy is demonstrated by the magnitude of their collaborative performances, which include *R.S.V.P.* (1977), *Kiss* (1980), *Flying* (1982), *Duet* (2005), among countless other works.

While Hassinger's video practice started in 1991 and Nengudi's began later in 2006, many of their video works employ footage and photographs from earlier collaborative performances from the 1970s. The video works expose the similarities in

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1. Paige K. Bradley, "500 Words: Senga Nengudi," Artforum.com, April 3, 2014, <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/senga-nengudi-talks-about-her-exhibitions-in-denver-46049>.



Senga Nengudi, *Performance Piece* (1978).
Black and white photographs, framed:
32 ½ x 41 x 1 ¼ inches. Image courtesy of
the artist; Thomas Erben Gallery, New York;
and Lévy Gorvy, New York, London.



Senga Nengudi, *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*, 1978, *Pico Blvd., Los Angeles* (1978) (detail). Collaborators: Maren Hassinger, David Hammons, Kenneth Severin, Roho, Joe Ray, and Franklin Parker. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo: Roderick "Quaku" Young.

Maren Hassinger, *High Noon* (1976). One of four black and white photographs. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo: Adam Avila.

their approach to artmaking and help us understand their relationship to each other, as well as their shared exploration of gesture, representation, and identity. Through video, Hassinger and Nengudi lay bare their intersecting politics and motives, highlighting their eclectic approaches to issues of ancestry, feminism, and memory.

Hassinger has remarked that she uses the camera, quite simply, to “describe (her) surroundings,”² but these filmed accounts manifest more broadly as nuanced and spiritual investigations. *Wind* (2013), which screened in a darkened room at Art + Practice, is a visually striking film that Hassinger created with her daughter, Ava Hassinger, under their collaborative moniker Matriarch. Using spliced together video and blurry Super 8 footage, the film shows mother and daughter wrapped in layers of white cloth, as they dance against an East Hampton shoreline, making wide, gallant, interpretive movements as their costumes flap in the breeze. Later, as the women walk in a procession, their long, draped textiles undulate wildly, the cloth’s vigor offsetting the slowness of their peregrination. Reminiscent of a 19th century petticoat, the layered costumes nod to historical regalia and the sense of fantasy that imbues the Hassingers’ dreamlike performance. Whose history, however, do these ethereal guises claim to invoke? The fabric shrouding the dancers’ faces and bodies also serves as a mask, countering the beauty and joy of their movements.

Hassinger’s short video *Daily Mask* (1997–2004), delves into more charged spaces of cultural identity and representation. Here, she applies black lines and curves to her face, filling in the contours and patterns until her face is completely black. She hones in on the process of application, presenting herself reflected in multiple mirrors as the sound of upbeat, climactic drumming animates the action; the artist is like a warrior slowly preparing for a fight. Once she completely applies her blackface, the artist opens

her eyes and smiles, so that the white of her teeth and eyes appears bright in contrast to the shiny black makeup. This work compellingly alludes to what scholar Darby English terms “black representational space.” He writes, “It is an unfortunate fact that in this country, black artists’ work is endlessly summoned to provide its representativeness (or defend its lack of same) and contracted to show-and-tell on behalf of an abstract and unchanging ‘culture of origin.’”³ While Hassinger references the aesthetics of African sculpture by the patterns she draws on her face, this video is powerful for its rejection of staid, racist signifiers, in favor of a triumphant embrace of the color black. *Daily Mask* reimagines this oft-questionable portrayal as a self-inflicted performative act. The artist manipulates the theatrical potential enabled by video’s narrative structure to expose masking as a process.

Birthright (2005) gives a glimpse into an intimate, biographical inquiry, as we see the artist mining for commonality within her own familial line. A camera follows Hassinger as she meets her aging uncle for the first time to learn about her ancestry. In a matter-of-fact tone, he recounts painful stories of estrangement, incest, and suicide, disclosing details about Hassinger’s Native American, white, and African American roots. In voiceover, Hassinger meditates on the economic legacy of slavery in the United States, considering how the injustices of the past reverberate in the United States’ global position today. Her camera person also zooms in on close-up shots of her hands as she takes notes on her uncle’s memories, committing oral recollection to paper. In other scenes, her hands twist and loop together strips of newspaper, a signature of her performance work exemplified by coiled newspaper sculptures in the exhibition. Here, video serves as a diaristic entry point into her exploration of self and surroundings. Hassinger’s films consider issues of identity in relation to

2. Maren Hassinger, “Reflections on Art as a Verb: Twenty Years Later, in the New Millennium Interview with Maren Hassinger, Senga Nengudi, and Howardena Pindell,” in *Cinema Remixed and Reloaded: Black Women Artists and the Moving*

Image Since 1970, ed. Andrea Barnwell Brownlee and Valerie Cassel Oliver (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 19.

social context, yet, like Nengudi's own videos, these works are always grounded in relation to her figurative and performance-based practice.

Senga Nengudi's initial use of video was as a mode of performance documentation, and the temporality of performance informed her video work at the USC Fisher. *Side by Side* (2006) compiles photographs and footage of performance collaborations with Hassinger from 1977–2005 that both archive and illuminate the magnitude of their collaboration. Nengudi and Hassinger appear in grainy scenes with artist Ulysses Jenkins and other collaborators, executing improvisational, repetitive, and exaggerated movements, or making kissing sounds and reciting monologues about imagined objects. The same poetic energy is palpable as the film cuts to more recent footage of the artists, now older, responding to each other decades after their initial collaboration; they encircle one another in a choreographed duet and stomp on gravel to leave an imprint of their feet.

Movement is central to Nengudi's practice. Video works demonstrate this, more than the stationary nylon pantyhose sculptures for which she is best known. Art historian Kellie Jones notes of Nengudi's sculptures, "They were supposed to be interacted with: caressed, fondled, and stroked by the artist as well as viewers. It was through participatory three-dimensional works that movement and finally performance (re) entered her work as an important creative force."⁴ The shapes and materiality of those sculptures, omnipresent in this exhibition, mimic the female body's stretched and contorted organic form—yet moored to the gallery walls and no longer touchable (save for a closing day performance), they appear static.

Perhaps to contrast this, in the video work *The Threader* (2007), Nengudi shows the moving body actively engaged with sculptural material. Produced from a residency at The Fabric Mills Workshop and

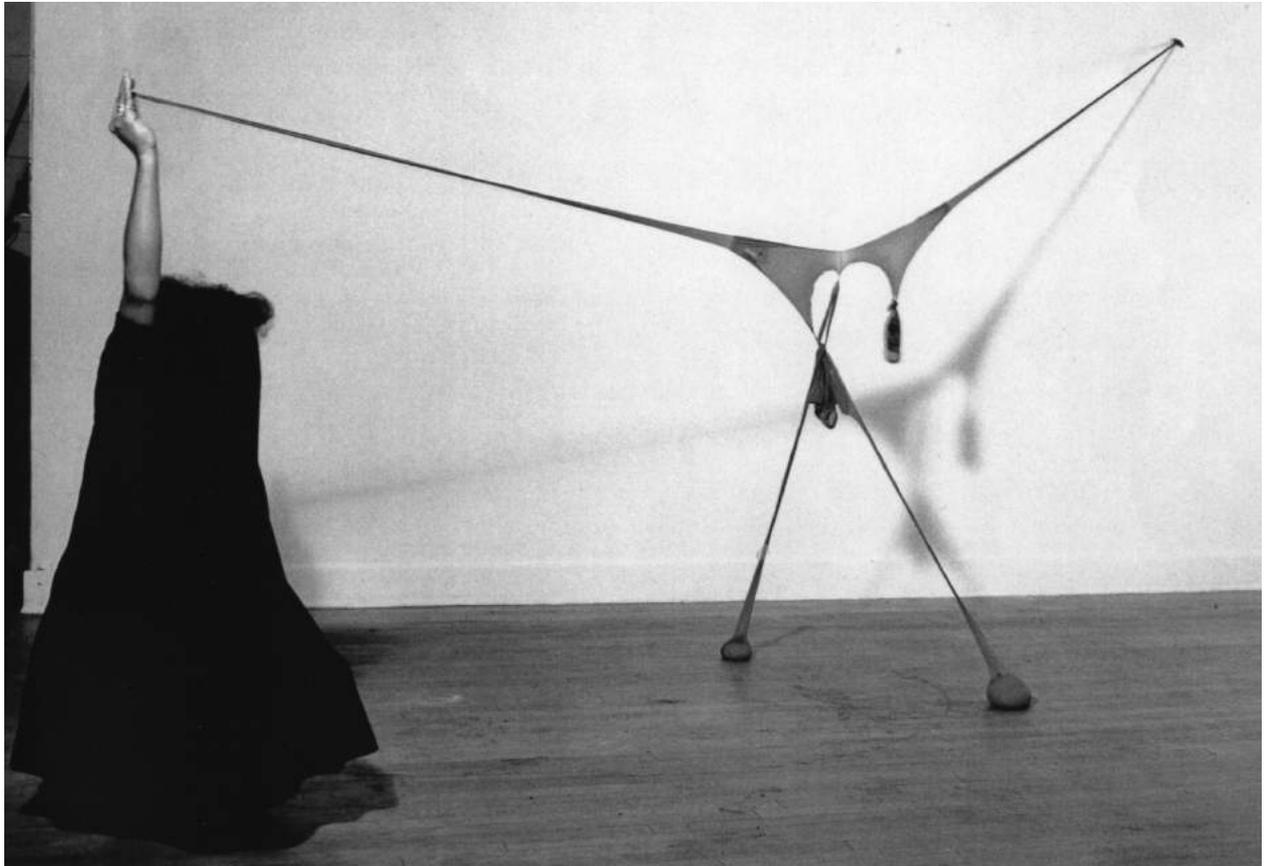
Museum in Philadelphia, this film follows the movements of a worker carefully striding across the factory floor with a collection of threaded spools. His gestures, practiced movements used in his daily work, are as seamless as a choreographed dance. She cuts to close ups of his fingers delicately tying thread to a hook and of the swaying metal machinery. Like much of Hassinger's video, the artistry of this work relies on the medium of the moving image to build narrative by cutting to discrete moments, or exploring the space of the factory itself.

By studying Hassinger and Nengudi's video work in relation to each other, viewers may come to understand these artists' simultaneous appeal to futurism and their spirited insistence on looking forward. Both artists challenge our awareness of how bodies exist in the realm of the social and the historical. This affinity is rooted in an inextricably linked past and shared intellectual kinship. Video enables each artist to explore their relationships to ritualistic practice, choreographed movement, and collaboration, illuminating the varying ways their spirited and inquisitive celebrations continue on. The medium allows a plurality of approaches to representation, providing sites not simply for self-reflection, but for self-remaking. Using a distinct visual vernacular, Nengudi and Hassinger reimagine gendered objects, sacred spaces, and the very construction of selfhood. Renewed attention to their work is timely, though perhaps more palpable is the strength found in their parallel practices. The moving image works in these exhibitions demonstrate the ways in which the two dance to the same metered rhythm, treading the same stage, two figures linked in intense synchronicity.

Simone Krug is a writer, educator, and independent curator based in Los Angeles. Her writing has appeared in *Artforum*, *Art in America*, and *Frieze*, among other publications.

3. Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge: MIT Press 2007), 7.

4. Kellie Jones, *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 62.



Maren Hassinger, *Daily Mask* (1997–2004).
16mm film transferred to video (color, sound),
3:32 minutes. Image courtesy of the artist.
Photo: Joshua White.

Senga Nengudi, *Studio performance with
R.S.V.P.* (1976). Black and white photograph,
framed: 30 ½ x 40 ½ x 1 ¾ inches.
Image courtesy of the artist;
Thomas Erben Gallery, New York; and
Lévy Gorvy, New York, London.