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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
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Bodies in Action:
Senga Nengudi's *R.S.V.P. Répondez S'il Vous Plaît* (1975/2003)

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Art History

by

Victoria Marie Taormina

June 2016

Thesis Committee:
Dr. Liz Kotz, Chairperson
Dr. Jason Weems
Dr. Jayna Brown

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The Thesis of Victoria Marie Taormina is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iv
List of Figures	vii
Introduction	1
Chapter One, Site & Practice: <i>R.S.V.P.</i> in Los Angeles	12
Chapter Two, Activating Space: <i>R.S.V.P.</i> & the Body.....	38
Conclusion	69
Figures	72
Bibliography	97

List of Figures

- 0.1 Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P. I* (1977). From Linda Goode-Bryant and Marcy S. Philips, *Contextures* (New York: Just Above Midtown, 1978). © Just Above Midtown, Inc. 72
- 1.1 Senga Nengudi, *Water Compositions* (1969). From Senga Nengudi and Dominique Lévy (Gallery) edited by Begum Yasar, *Senga Nengudi* (New York: Dominique Levy Gallery, 2015). 73
- 1.2 Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P.* (1977/2003). www.sengasenga.com. (accessed May 15 2015). © Senga Nengudi. 74
- 1.3 Noah Purifoy, *Sir Watts* (1966). From *Junk Art: 66 Signs of Neon* (Los Angeles: 66 Signs of Neon, 1966). 75
- 1.4 Hammons, David. *Injustice Case* (1970). From the University of California, Berkeley Visual Resource Collection, *ARTstor Slide Gallery*. 76
- 1.5 Saar, Betye. *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1969). From the University of California, Irvine Visual Resource Collection, *ARTstor Slide Gallery*. 77
- 1.6 Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P.* (1976). Courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York. 78
- 1.7 Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P.* (1976). From African American Performance Art Archive. 79
- 1.8 Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P.* installation at the Pearl C. Woods Gallery, Los Angeles, photo by Harmon Outlaw (1975). www.sengasenga.com. (accessed May 15 2015). © Senga Nengudi. 80
- 1.9 Exhibition announcement for *Sapphire, You've come a long way, baby.* (1970). Ankrum Gallery Collection. © Archives of American Art. 81
- 2.1 Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P.* Performance with Maren Hassinger at Pearl C. Woods Gallery, Los Angeles, photo by Harmon Outlaw (1977). Courtesy of Redline Gallery. 82
- 2.2 Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P.* Performance with Maren Hassinger at Pearl C. Woods Gallery, Los Angeles, photo by Harmon Outlaw (1977). www.sengasenga.com. (accessed May 15, 2015). © Senga Nengudi. 83

2.3 Senga Nengudi with Maren Hassinger at Pearl C. Woods Gallery, Los Angeles, photo by Harmon Outlaw (1977). www.sengasenga.com. (accessed May 15, 2015). © Senga Nengudi.	84
2.4 Senga Nengudi & Studio Z, <i>Ceremony for Freeway Fets</i> photo by Roderick Kwaku Young (1978). www.sengasenga.com. (accessed May 15, 2015). © Senga Nengudi.	85
2.5 Senga Nengudi & Studio Z, <i>Ceremony for Freeway Fets</i> photo by Roderick Kwaku Young (1978). www.sengasenga.com. (accessed May 15, 2015). © Senga Nengudi.	86
2.6 Senga Nengudi & Studio Z, <i>Ceremony for Freeway Fets</i> photo by Roderick Kwaku Young (1978). www.sengasenga.com. (accessed May 15, 2015). © Senga Nengudi.	87
2.7 Senga Nengudi & Studio Z, <i>Ceremony for Freeway Fets</i> photo by Roderick Kwaku Young (1978). www.sengasenga.com. (accessed May 15, 2015). © Senga Nengudi.	88
2.8 Senga Nengudi & Studio Z, <i>Ceremony for Freeway Fets</i> photo by Roderick Kwaku Young (1978). www.sengasenga.com. (accessed May 15, 2015). © Senga Nengudi.	89
2.9 Senga Nengudi & Studio Z, <i>Ceremony for Freeway Fets</i> photo by Roderick Kwaku Young (1978). www.sengasenga.com. (accessed May 15, 2015). © Senga Nengudi.	90
2.10 Senga Nengudi & Studio Z, <i>Ceremony for Freeway Fets</i> photo by Roderick Kwaku Young (1978). www.sengasenga.com. (accessed May 15, 2015). © Senga Nengudi.	91
2.11 Senga Nengudi & Studio Z, <i>Ceremony for Freeway Fets</i> photo by Roderick Kwaku Young (1978). www.sengasenga.com. (accessed May 15, 2015). © Senga Nengudi.	92
2.12 Senga Nengudi, <i>R.S.V.P.</i> Performance with Maren Hassinger at Pearl C. Woods Gallery, Los Angeles, photo by Harmon Outlaw (1977). www.sengasenga.com. (accessed May 15, 2015). © Senga Nengudi.	93

- 2.13 Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P.* Performance with Maren Hassinger at Pearl C. Woods Gallery, Los Angeles, photo by Harmon Outlaw (1977). www.sengasenga.com. (accessed May 15, 2015). © Senga Nengudi. 94
- 2.14 Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P.* Performance with Maren Hassinger at Pearl C. Woods Gallery, Los Angeles, photo by Harmon Outlaw (1977). www.sengasenga.com. (accessed May 15, 2015). © Senga Nengudi. 95
- 2.15 Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P.* Studio Performance, (1976) International Review of African American Art. 96
- 2.16 Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P.* Performance with Maren Hassinger as part of *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* (2012). 96

Introduction

Los Angeles of the 1960s and '70s poses a unique set of cultural juxtapositions. Elements understood as distinctly Southern Californian—things like constant freeway construction, wide expanses of suburban space, and even Disneyland—inform artistic practices as well as how bodies within this space relate to one another. As a relatively young metropolitan city in continual development, Los Angeles is positioned as an idyllic utopian space of possibility. The utopian possibility of the city is then juxtaposed against the intersections of racism, sexism, and power that weave their way through the physical and abstract construction of this space. This tension complicates the relationship Black artists have with this site, and this dissonance is manifested in the artistic practices of those who live and create in this space.

Curated by Kellie Jones in 2011, *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960—1980* comprised the work of 35 Los Angeles based artists across a variety of mediums. Exhibited at UCLA's Hammer Museum, *Now Dig This!* was one of the first large scale efforts to record the contributions of African American visual artists to the West Coast arts scene of the 1960s. The artists within this Los Angeles arts scene embraced a multimedia hybrid aesthetic and were often informed by the city's relationship with the Civil Rights and Black Liberation politics of the era. Although *Now Dig This!* showcased the early work of celebrated artists like David Hammons and Betye Saar, the majority of the work exhibited, like Senga Nengudi's *R.S.V.P. Répondez S'il Vous Plaît* (1975/2003), was by artists less well known within the Los Angeles Black Arts Movement. Nengudi's *R.S.V.P. Répondez S'il Vous Plaît* is both a sculpture and

performance series made from used nylon stockings, and often performed alongside friend and collaborator Maren Hassinger.¹ Initially *R.S.V.P.* debuted in Los Angeles but was also staged in New York City. It was performed several times on both coasts throughout the second half of the 1970s.

Despite Nengudi's involvement with the thriving community of African American artists in Los Angeles and her frequent collaborations with many of her peers, there was no significant or sustained reception of her *R.S.V.P.* series during the 1970s. Nengudi's close friend and frequent artistic collaborator David Hammons, provides a partial explanation for this lack of critical reception, he attributes it to the abstract aesthetic of much of her work during the 1960s and 70s. Kellie Jones recounts how Hammons, the most famous visual artist to emerge from the Black Arts Movement in Los Angeles, described how the reaction some in the Black community had about Nengudi's work:

As David Hammons recalls, Nengudi was rejected for the most part by the then burgeoning West Coast Black Arts Movement due to her nonrepresentational tendencies. Speaking of the *Water Compositions*, he observed, "she used to put colored water in plastic bags and sit them on pedestals. This was the Sixties. No one would even speak to her because we were all doing political art. She couldn't relate. She wouldn't even show around other Black artists her work was so 'outrageously' abstract. Senga came to New York and still no one would deal with her because she wasn't doing 'Black Art'." ²

Due to the delicate nature of the materials used in the creation of *R.S.V.P.*, the original sculptures do not survive today. Additionally, there is a substantial lack of primary

¹ Nengudi began working with pantyhose in the mid 1970s but did not name the series *R.S.V.P.* until a year or so after her first experiments with the material, subsequently several sources credit the series as beginning in 1975, 1976, and 1977. Senga Nengudi's website, www.sengasenga.com, lists the date as 1975.

² Kellie Jones, "Black West, Thoughts on Art in Los Angeles," in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, ed. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 62.

resources—whether it is criticism, artist interviews, gallery advertisements, etc.—available about the piece’s initial debut. As a result, the circumstances surrounding Nengudi’s initial performances of *R.S.V.P.* remain difficult to reconstruct.

However, at the urging of fellow artist Lorraine O’Grady, and Nengudi’s longtime gallerist Thomas Erben, Nengudi recreated the sculptures in 2002. Since then the series has been included in several groundbreaking exhibitions about African American art including *Now Dig This!* and the 2013 show, *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*, organized by Valerie Cassel Oliver. In addition to the sculptural installations of *R.S.V.P.*, both exhibitions have also re-staged the performances of the work. While some of these re-staged performances from the 2000s featured Nengudi and Hassinger alongside different pairs of young dancers (both male and female), others feature the young dancers as performers of *R.S.V.P.* with neither Nengudi nor Hassinger included among them.

Nengudi’s first installment of *R.S.V.P.* features various pairs of used pantyhose that are filled with sand and then suspended from the walls of the gallery space. These initial sculptures were referred to as “Nylon Mesh Series” and made their debut in Los Angeles at the Pearl C. Woods Gallery around 1975. This was then followed by performances at Linda Goode-Bryant’s Just Above Midtown Gallery in New York City, a space similar to that of the Pearl C. Woods Gallery in its willingness to exhibit more experimental work from African American artists. These stretched, pulled, and filled pantyhose sculptures, which Nengudi originally intended the audience be able to touch, allow the elasticity of the material to present itself in a variety of stages and forms

(Figure 0.1). Furthermore, the highly artificial yet biomorphic quality of the material allows the sculptures to take on a performative element that is then reiterated when Nengudi and Hassinger interact with the material. In accordance with both women's background in dance, the two artists—sometimes on their own and sometimes together—insert themselves within the sculptures and move within the pieces by stretching and pulling the material, mimicking the lyricism of the performer's body and its movements. Much of the movements during the performances were improvisational and largely dependent on whoever was activating the sculptures, they were occasionally staged for photographs as well as an audience.

R.S.V.P. remains understudied because of the limited primary documentation of these initial performances. These performances took place on different coasts by different artists making it difficult to negotiate the specifics of the “who/what/when/where” that are integral to performance studies. One of the ways scholars have attempted to circumvent this lack of information in their discussions of *R.S.V.P.* has been to categorize *R.S.V.P.* within the context of the mainstream feminist performance practice of body art during the 1970s—a categorization Nengudi is quick to dismiss.³ Throughout her career Nengudi has been vocal about her exclusion from the predominately white feminist art community in Los Angeles during the 1970s, a critique widely repeated by other Black female artists of the era like Hassinger, Saar, and Suzanne Jackson. In turn, Nengudi consistently credits the community and friendship of black artists in Los Angeles, specifically black female artists, as her artistic community. Consequently, situating

³ For example, see *The Artists Body* edited by Tracy War, survey by Amelia Jones.

R.S.V.P within the realm of feminist body art erases Nengudi's most critical means of artistic support and collaboration. The artistic support from the African American community that was crucial in *R.S.V.P.*'s development and execution, translates to the contemporary re-staged performances as well. In addition to Hassinger's solo contemporary performances, these restaged contemporary performances of *R.S.V.P* consistently feature dancers of color as well.

These recreated sculptures and performances have renewed scholarly interest in the series and facilitated several contemporary interviews regarding Nengudi's interpretation of her work during the 1970s. Thus it is crucial to note in accordance with the series recreation, the majority of interviews in which Nengudi discusses *R.S.V.P.* at significant length were conducted in the early 2000s. These interviews, although utterly vital to the scholarship of the series, fragment the already limited critical documentation of a series that now expands across several decades. Because of the unstable chronology of the series, the lack of primary materials, and the fact Nengudi's identity as an African American female artist makes her work consistently prone to erasure, *R.S.V.P.* remains severely under examined and its reemergence necessitates a more critical exploration. The series' inclusion in *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960—1980* helps contextualize *R.S.V.P.*'s initial creation while also shedding light on Southern California's own thriving art scene—the contributions of which, most especially in regards to artists of color, remain marginalized from the discourse of modern American art in comparison to what was being produced in post 1945 New York. Through its improvisational collaborative execution that merges object and performance practice,

R.S.V.P. asserts the ability of the Black body, and specifically the Black female body, to restructure its relationship with Los Angeles as site.

Beginning in the 1930s Los Angeles witnessed explosion of Black culture through film, literature, visual art, and music, creating a distinctly Californian contribution to the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In his 2010 study, *Black Arts West*, historian Daniel Widener explains: “In contrast to the housing discrimination, electoral politics, or even police brutality, each of which emerged as a critical issue at a particular historical juncture, a concern with the politics of art consistently stood at the forefront of black politics after 1941.”⁴ For Black visual artists this inseparability of politics and artistic aesthetics solidifies in the wake of the Watts Rebellions of 1965. After a period of heightened civil unrest much of the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles was destroyed during the rebellions, and it is this destruction that becomes a crucial means of artistic development for Black visual artists.

Most notably, artist Noah Purifoy used the rubble from the destruction of the Watts Rebellions to create sculptures that would be a part of his seminal 1966 “66 Signs of Neon” exhibition. Purifoy’s incorporation of found materials for his assemblage style sculptures had a profound impact on a generation of Black visual artists in Los Angeles. The pantyhose for Nengudi’s *R.S.V.P.* sculptures, for example, were likewise gathered from female friends and family—a “found”, everyday material gathered and repurposed within the context of Nengudi’s art. Assemblage practice used found objects, materials embedded with their own lived histories, and repurposed them as sculptural material.

⁴ Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

Assemblage was the dominant model for African American art in Los Angeles, beginning with the work of Purifoy. Purifoy was the director of the Watts Tower Art Center in Los Angeles during the 1960s and the center employed many young African American artists, including Nengudi. Assemblage became a transformative communal strategy for art making in the aftermath of the rebellions and forms one of the core tenets of Los Angeles' Black Arts Movement, and *R.S.V.P.* must be understood as a product of these same circumstances.

The Black Arts Movement sought to increase the visibility of black culture to specifically black audiences. As Kellie Jones explains,

Among its hallmarks were: social and political engagement; a view that art had the ability to encourage change in the world and in the viewer; separatism – a belief in a self-contained “Black aesthetic” walled off from white culture; forms that were populist, that could be easily distributed and understood by audiences (broadside, pamphlets, one-act plays, concerts, representational paintings, posters, etc.) ... There was also the ancestral legacy of Africa that became ever more palpable in the ongoing independence struggles of the period ...⁵

This attempt at formulating a Black aesthetic would come from a variety of creative and historically significant sources. For example, artists explored the power of ritual practice as a means to bring their ancestral African past into their contemporary artistic practice. Barbara McCullough, a filmmaker and collaborator of Nengudi's who filmed several of Nengudi's performances including the seminal *Ceremony for Freeway Fets* in 1978, explains that engaging in ritual practice allowed artists to move from one time and space into another—it connects them to an ancestral African past in which art objects are also

⁵ Jones, “Black West, Thoughts on Art in Los Angeles,” 43.

ritual objects.⁶ Additionally, the flourishing experimental jazz scene in California inspired Black artists to incorporate this same improvisational quality in their work—many saw jazz as the epitome of authentically black cultural expression.⁷ Visual artists stressed collaborative practice, which served a pragmatic strategic component as well as an artistic function against structures of racism and exclusion within Los Angeles. With little support from mainstream institutions collaborative practice was necessary as a method of support and artistic survival; collaborative practice also offered a means to circumvent the Eurocentric canon that valorized individual aesthetic.⁸ This emphasis on improvisational collaborative practice, in addition to the use of found materials, were components Nengudi embraced in her creation of *R.S.V.P.*—components that critical writings about the work have not discussed in relation to one another.

With few primary sources available about *R.S.V.P.* the first concern of this thesis will be with reconstructing a practice; essential to this reconstruction is exploring the relationship between site and practice.⁹ *R.S.V.P.* has been reincluded within this discourse

⁶ “L.A. Rebellion Barbara McCullough on UCLA’s “The View,”” YouTube video, 2:50, an excerpt from UCLA Student Cable Program “The View” c. 1979, posted by “UCLA Film TV Archive,” May 3, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wx0eRt-vOF8>

⁷ See Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles*. Widener discusses contrasts how jazz was well supported by the Black community because it was viewed as an inherent form of Black cultural expression, Widener then difficulty in rallying same support for Black visual artists.

⁸ Ulysses Jenkins, “Modern Art in Los Angeles: African American Avant-Gardes 1965 - 1990” (oral history group interview and moderated public conversation with Maren Hassinger, Ulysses Jenkins, Barbara McCullough, and Senga Nengudi as generated by the Getty Research Institute through its Modern Art in Los Angeles and Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. initiatives, conducted by Kellie Jones and Judith Wilson, January 15-16, 2008).

⁹ It is important to note that in this context the use of the term “reconstruction” in relation to the goal of the first chapter of this thesis does not imply any sort of totality or comprehensiveness of Nengudi’s *R.S.V.P.*, as if such an undertaking was possible. Instead, the “reconstruction” proposed in Chapter One refers to piecing together the broader social historical circumstances of Black visual arts production Los Angeles and placing it in tandem with specific biographical information. This key biographical information—Nengudi’s experiences as an artist, as an African American, as a woman, as a mother, has yet to be

of West Coast African American art—what is *R.S.V.P.*'s relationship to Los Angeles as a site? Grounding the institutional setting of *Now Dig This!* as a starting point for examining the relationship between site and practice is important for a number of reasons. Throughout her life and beginning in the early 1960s Nengudi maintained close personal and professional relationships with many of the other artists featured in *Now Dig This!*, affirming this network as a distinct artistic community. Additionally, it is *R.S.V.P.*'s inclusion in this show that has helped renew interest in Nengudi's work and ushered in criticism and scholarly discussions about *R.S.V.P.* The majority of these discussions have situated, somewhat superficially, the *R.S.V.P.* sculptures within this Los Angeles Black Arts discourse without a necessary analysis of this association in regards to issues of material, form, and the implication of the body in the construction of each.

Chapter One will explore what makes Los Angeles a specific site for the artistic production of Black visual artists. How did the various artistic communities, institutions, and galleries of Los Angeles define *R.S.V.P.*'s relationship with this space? This grounding of site as a key means of exploration allows for an analysis of how the Los Angeles Black Arts community, people like Maren Hassinger, Barbara McCullough, David Hammons, Suzanne Jackson, and Betye Saar, impacted Nengudi's execution of *R.S.V.P.*. Many of these artists collaborated with Nengudi as both friends and colleagues, and it is also their work *R.S.V.P.* will be compared in relation to throughout the 1960s and 1970s. *R.S.V.P.*'s use of material, form, and the construction of the body, point to 1970s Los Angeles as a highly specific site for artistic production, in addition to the experiences

discussed in relation to Los Angeles as a site for artistic production, and how together they are crucial in informing Nengudi's execution of *R.S.V.P.*

for black women artists working within this space, the latter of which has yet to be discussed in regards to Los Angeles.

Chapter Two analyzes how *R.S.V.P.*'s execution as a series of collaborative and improvisational performances emerged as a strategy to combat the racism and exclusion that pervaded Los Angeles. For Nengudi, the friendships formed out of a community of black female artists, especially that of her *R.S.V.P.* collaborator Maren Hassinger, were essential to her creative survival. Shortly after completing her degree in 1969 and at the urging of a professor from her MFA program, Nengudi moved to New York for a brief time. It is in New York that she was astounded by the realization that there were networks of other black female artists. She described the experience as “flabbergasting” because she sincerely thought she was the only one.¹⁰ Thus, the lack of visibility for black female artists was not only represented in the larger structures of the art world but also created a sense of isolation among these women as individual artists. Until meeting and collaborating on projects like *R.S.V.P.*, they themselves were unaware of the possibility of support for one another. The supportive and collaborative nature of personal friendships among Black women artists in Los Angeles is translated into the *R.S.V.P.* sculptures and performances.

Critical writings about the *R.S.V.P.* sculptures consistently mention that their shapes resemble the body; comparing the objects to hanging breasts and testicles. While this analysis is relevant to the work as a sculpture, the context drastically changes when the sculptures are utilized during the performances. As collaborative improvisational

¹⁰ Audio Interview with Senga Nengudi conducted by Judith Wilson, July 1, 1980, Box 11, Folder 27, Judith Wilson papers, Archives of American Art, Washington DC.

performance practice *R.S.V.P.* renders Los Angeles and the performing body as entities that are discursive rather than temporally or geographically fixed. Nengudi and critics have referred to these performances as activations, referring to the agency the performing body gives to the material objects, as well as a sociopolitical concern in which bodies gather to activate sites through a collective presence. How does *R.S.V.P.* as a series of performance practices function as a means of bodies activating sites, and ultimately whose bodies? By using found materials gathered from friends and family, performing *R.S.V.P.* becomes a way for Nengudi to know and define her identity as a Black female artist in Los Angeles. Part performance, part sculpture, and through various recreations over time, ultimately Nengudi's *R.S.V.P.* resists easy categorization within a cohesive practice. But, through focusing on Nengudi's contributions as a Black female artist and her use of collaborative performance practice as a means of activism and visibility, *R.S.V.P.* becomes an important link in the discourse of African American art, and especially art in Los Angeles.

Chapter One

Site & Practice: R.S.V.P. in Los Angeles

Senga Nengudi, originally Sue Ellen Irons, was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1943. After the death of her father in 1949, her mother moved the family to Los Angeles, a city that at the time seemed brimming with economic opportunity. Due to a still segregated school system, Nengudi bounced back and forth between elementary schools in Los Angeles and its nearby suburb, Pasadena. After graduating from Dorsey High School she attended college at Cal State Los Angeles, where she majored in art and was a dance minor. In 1965 she began interning at both the Watts Tower Art Center and the Pasadena Art Museum. As part of her studies she moved to Japan for the year, hoping to learn more about the Gutai collective, and returns to Los Angeles in 1967 to begin her MFA at Cal State LA. Borrowing from the Gutai integration of the action of the body into material objects, Nengudi develops one of her first sculpture series—*Water Compositions* (1969) (Figure 1.1). *Water Compositions* featured massive bags of colored water placed on the floor whose openings were heat-sealed and draped over thick industrial strands of rope. Nengudi credits making *Water Compositions* as her first foray into connecting sculpture with the movement of the body. In a 2013 interview with scholar Elissa Auther, Nengudi explains: “I guess that [*Water Compositions*] was the beginning of my sensual self ... I really wanted to have something that people could feel and that had a sense of the body

... with those water sculptures, if you felt them ... it was really quite sensual ... it had this sense of the body because it was pliable.”¹

In 1971, after finishing her MFA, Nengudi moves to New York City. She explained after after graduating, “one of my favorite teachers said you have to go to New York. New York is bootcamp. Gotta do that if you want to be anything.”² New York proved a formative experience for Nengudi as a young Black artist; it is there in New York where she transitioned from Sue Irons to Senga Nengudi, a name given to her by a friend from Zaire. In regards to her name change she explained, “That was part of the influence of New York, very much this powerful sense of our culture, African culture, and the way I dealt with it was through ritual ... it wasn’t through doing a painting of an African woman or something but the concepts ... it was such a rich field of knowledge and experience that I was gaining.”³ Renaming oneself was a common practice for many within the Black Nationalist movement, and as Kellie Jones points out, traces back to figures like Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass in which renaming is a self-determinative claiming of a new identity.⁴

She returns to the Los Angeles Black arts community as Senga Nengudi in 1974, she began experimenting with the nylon mesh material that would become her first

¹ Transcript of Oral History Interview with Senga Nengudi conducted by Elissa Auther, July 9-11, 2013, Archives of American Art, Washington DC, 11.

² Transcript of Oral History Interview with Senga Nengudi conducted by Elissa Auther, 10.

³ Senga Nengudi, “Modern Art in Los Angeles: African American Avant-Gardes 1965 - 1990” (oral history group interview and moderated public conversation with Maren Hassinger, Ulysses Jenkins, Barbara McCullough, and Senga Nengudi as generated by the Getty Research Institute through its Modern Art in Los Angeles and Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. initiatives, conducted by Kellie Jones and Judith Wilson, January 15-16, 2008).

⁴ Kellie Jones, “Black West, Thoughts on Art in Los Angeles,” in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, ed. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 64.

installments of *R.S.V.P.*. Figure 0.1 is a photograph of the initial sculptures from the 1970s, dated 1977. The photograph features what appears to be roughly 10 pairs of pantyhose that have been filled with sand, tied off, and suspended from the walls and ceiling of the gallery space. The sand-filled material forms weighted bulbous sacs, some rest on the floor while others dangle in midair. The sculptures crisscross over each other forming sharp diagonals that span the length of the room as they continuously repeat across the gallery space. Half the sculptures have been attached to opposing walls rendering them almost entirely horizontal, while others are vertical stretched from floor to ceiling and placed in the far back corner of the room. In succession the sculptures appear almost as a stop motion photograph documenting the anthropomorphic leg like portions as they open and close. With the exception of the different angle of the photograph, a photograph of the contemporary recreation of the sculptures (Figure 1.2) from the early 2000s appears almost identical to this 1977 image.⁵ In this later image, the symmetry of the sculptures is even more pronounced as each of the attenuated leg portions of the sculptures gradually decrease in width as they near the gallery wall.

Aesthetically these *R.S.V.P.* sculptures did not look like majority of work popularized by her peers in Los Angeles or New York during the late 1960s and 70s – a perception Nengudi was well aware of at the time of *R.S.V.P.*'s creation. This dissonance was even more heightened in New York, where some felt like she wasn't making "black art". Yet, despite what some of her contemporaries assumed, Nengudi has been vocal

⁵ This photograph appears on the artists website but gives no information as to the location or exhibition space.

about her allegiance to her identity as a Black artist and creating work that speaks to this experience. In regards to her first time working in New York Nengudi states:

I deal with stuff in an abstract way but it comes from a black place. I wanted to do nationalistic things but I couldn't, it wouldn't come out that way. So that wasn't fully understood in New York because everyone was doing nationalistic kinds of things. They told me okay you have to decide are you going be a downtown artist or are you going be an uptown artist, so it was really hard ... So I decided I don't want to be downtown I want to be uptown. I did work but I was terrified the people I hung out with wouldn't appreciate my approach to art.⁶

Uptown refers to Harlem and the Black Arts community with the mainstream white art world being downtown. Ultimately Nengudi decides to work within the Black community in New York, but did not create work with this same Black Nationalist aesthetic, choosing instead to be a part of this space for the communal support rather than aesthetic direction.⁷

The same powerful sense of community she found in New York she also encountered in Los Angeles among other Black artists. Nengudi's explanation of her abstract aesthetic in relation to her time in New York is crucial for a number of reasons; it reveals a number of key tensions that are important in understanding why *R.S.V.P.* manifests as such an absolute lack of critical discourse during the 1970s. First, it establishes her commitment to her identity as first and foremost an African American

⁶ Senga Nengudi, "Modern Art in Los Angeles: African American Avant-Gardes 1965 - 1990".

⁷ In his 1968 essay "The Black Arts Movement" scholar Larry Neal describes the relationship between the Black Nationalist visual aesthetic and the Black Arts Movement writing, "Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the Western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is politics; the other with the art of politics."

artist, but one unwilling to adhere to deeply nationalistic or explicitly political aesthetic parameters. It is likely this refusal to explicitly reference her race or create more commercial art caused certain critics and gallerists to dismiss her work. As iterated by Hammons, the critique of some within Nengudi's circle was that her performance-based installations and abstract sculptural forms of pieces like *R.S.V.P.* and *Water Compositions* were inherently apolitical.⁸

Aesthetically key components of *R.S.V.P.* reflect Nengudi's time in Los Angeles working within a variety of institutions, such as the Watts Tower Art Center and the Pasadena Museum of Art, as well as the African American community of artists within this city. In a 2008 group interview with Barbara McCullough, Hassinger and Ulysses Jenkins, Nengudi explains her relationship with other Black artists in Los Angeles throughout the 1960s, 70s and early 80s. She states: "I'd like to talk about family and tribal relationships because during that time there was a major level of collaboration going on. We were very akin to one another, we supported one another..."⁹ Throughout the 1960s and 70s these fellow Los Angeles artists were Nengudi's most profound means of creative and professional support. Like Nengudi, these artists—David Hammons, Ulysses Jenkins, Barbara McCullough and Maren Hassinger—were often informed by the city's dynamic relationship with the Civil Rights and Black Liberation politics of the era. Their location as artists in Los Angeles informed their aesthetic choices as well as the content they created within this space, the momentum of which happens in large part in the aftermath of the Watts uprisings.

⁸ Kellie Jones, "Black West, Thoughts on Art in Los Angeles," 62.

⁹ Senga Nengudi, "Modern Art in Los Angeles: African American Avant-Gardes 1965 - 1990".

First, it is important to understand the cultural context of Los Angeles as a site of political struggle for Black artists and ultimately a space where politics and aesthetics become inseparable. In 1965 the intertwined roots of various historical, artistic, political, and social movements came to a head for the African American community living in the Watts neighborhood of this Southern California city. In August of 1965 civil unrest in Watts was at its peak due to rising unemployment, racist housing practices, heightened instances of police brutality, and the planning of a freeway system that allowed wealthy inhabitants to glide over the cities urban centers while leaving its poorer residents frustrated with shrinking public transportation options. Due to rampant housing discrimination, the majority of working class African Americans were spatially confined to the center of Los Angeles, while industry and already dwindling job opportunities moved to portions of the city inaccessible through public transportation.

As Kellie Jones points out, “The city’s fortunes shifted as it went from being one of the world’s largest areas of growth in the immediate postwar period, to a scarred map of urban deindustrialization in the 1960s and 1970s, demonstrating signs of crisis and conflict as it devolved into a militarized enterprise zone of world capital.”¹⁰ In 1940 there were roughly 64,000 African Americans living in Los Angeles. By 1946 this population had more than doubled and would continue to increase well into the 1960s.¹¹ The now greatly expanded population of African Americans was left to live in a Los Angeles that lacked a sufficient infrastructure to support them. The cracks in the veneer of Southern

¹⁰ Jones, “Black West, Thoughts on Art in Los Angeles,” 45.

¹¹ Gerald Horne, “Black Fire: “Riot” and “Revolt” in Los Angeles,” in *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California* ed. Lawrence Brooks De Graaf et al., (Los Angeles: Autry Museum of Western Heritage; Seattle: University of Seattle Press, 2001), 381.

California's postwar reputation as an idyllic suburbia with a booming economy fractured and split as black residents became increasingly frustrated with a lack of resources and opportunity. Ultimately these frustrations culminated during the early weeks of August of 1965 in a series of riots around the neighborhood of Watts. The six days of destruction cost the city of Los Angeles over \$40 million dollars in damages and left much of the Watts neighborhood completely destroyed.

Artist, Noah Purifoy was appointed director of the Watts Tower Art Center in 1964 and the center thus became a hub for black artists and educators, including Nengudi who began working there in 1965. Purifoy, and his collaborator Judson Powell, ventured into the smoldering rubble of the city immediately following the rebellions to collect material to transform into art. In 1966 *Los Angeles Times* staff writer Art Berman interviewed Purifoy in an attempt to describe the circumstances surrounding the assemblage practice of Purifoy and in turn, the accompanying exhibition:

Unlike many Negroes who picked over the debris of the Watts riot seeking something of monetary value, Powell and Purifoy looked only for worthless junk. They were excited by what they found—hunks of melted neon signs, medicine bottles embedded in the molten remains of colorful plastic raincoats, twisted bits of metal, charred wood, pieces of smashed automobiles. . . . Powell and Purifoy and their students in Watts art classes have been transforming their treasured 'junk' into unique and fascinating art forms. A charred window becomes a picture frame. A lump of lead and neon becomes a bouquet of flowers. ¹²

Led by Purifoy, Powell, and six other LA artists, *66 Signs* debuted the assemblage sculptures and installations created from the debris of the Rebellions. The *66 Signs of Neon* exhibition debuted in the spring of 1966 at the Simon Rodia Commemorative Watts

¹² Art Berman, "Junk From First Watts Riot Turned into Works of Art," *Los Angeles Times*, March 28, 1966.

Renaissance of the Arts Festival.¹³

Most of the work today is lost and the few photographs of the artworks that remain are from recreations of the exhibitions more famous pieces such as Purifoy's *Sir Watts* (Figure 1.3). *Sir Watts*, both in title and construction, resembles a suit of armor for a knight. With the shape of an honorific portrait bust, the sculpture appears as an empty metal helmet, chest, and shoulders—one shoulder a service bell and the other a cog of a wheel. The open chest reveals a mass of safety pins, scraps of metal, a fork, some of which spills out and forward of the figures chest. The chest sits on top of a set of pull out drawers. *Sir Watts* appears as a symbol for the community of Watts, emerging from scraps, determined to persist in the face of larger forces of destruction.

It is this destruction at Watts that changes how Nengudi and her fellow artists engage with materials. As the catalogue essay for Purifoy's *66 Signs* explains:

The art works of *66* should be looked at, not as particular things in themselves, but for the sake of establishing conversation and communication, involvement in the act of living. The reason for being in our universe is to establish communication with others, one to one ... We wish to establish that there must be more to art than the creative act, more than the sensation of beauty, ugliness, color, form, light, sound, darkness, intrigue, wonderment, uncanniness, bitter, sweet black, white, life and death. There must be therein a ME and a YOU, who is affected permanently. Art itself is of little or no value if in its relatedness it does not effect change.¹⁴

For Purifoy, key to the *66 Signs of Neon* show was the understanding that through artistic engagement with materials deemed urban detritus, art had the power to evoke change in the individual and the community—in other words, its relatedness necessitated and

¹³ *66 Signs of Neon* would go on to tour through college student unions, and with the exception of showing at the Washington Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., it received limited institutional recognition from museums or galleries.

¹⁴ Noah Purifoy, *Junk Art: 66 Signs of Neon*, (Los Angeles: 66 Signs of Neon, 1966).

encouraged communal transformation. Nengudi personally has described how the destruction at Watts and the resulting artistic and communal shift left her feeling like “a phoenix rising from the ashes”.¹⁵ Purifoy’s assemblage practice had a profound effect on this generation of Black artists in Los Angeles—many, among them Nengudi, will incorporate this assemblage aesthetic into their work. Assemblage was the dominant model for Black artists, but the aftermath of Watts puts a decidedly political spin on the aesthetic repurposing of materials. It changed how Black artists in this community looked at the potential of their work. The sociopolitical impact of the Watts Rebellions informs material and aesthetic choices of Black artists in Los Angeles as well as the content of their work.

Figurative work by Black artists, pieces like Hammons’s *Injustice Case* (Figure 1.4) or Betye Saar’s *The Liberation of Aunt Jemimah* (Figure 1.5), typified this political aesthetic. Betye Saar reappropriated racist stereotypes in order to infuse them with new meaning, as seen in one of her most famous pieces, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1969). Rife with charged symbols—i.e. the black-faced mammy figure of Aunt Jemima holding a broom in one hand and a rifle in another, the black power fist in the center of the image—*The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* made its message of black liberation clear to the viewer. This social commentary is also made clear in Hammons’s famous 1970 *Injustice Case*. Featuring the artist’s famed body print technique, Hammons sits gagged and bound to a chair visibly struggling and pushing against these restraints. Furthermore, the print is superimposed upon an American flag, clearly identifiable around the edges of

¹⁵ Senga Nengudi, “Modern Art in Los Angeles: African American Avant-Gardes 1965 - 1990”.

the body print. The political message of the piece is clear and Hammons confirms this by explaining the piece is a reference to the conspiracy trial of Bobby Seale, co-founder of the Black Panthers. By making work that spoke to the racism and injustice that framed the experiences of so many of Los Angeles's black residents, works like this fit neatly into Purifoy's philosophy about the transformative power of art, and its status as a relational tool to promote change and communal engagement.

The *R.S.V.P.* sculptures undergo a different sort of transformation than the one proposed by Purifoy's *66 Signs* catalogue and utilized in the more figurative work of her peers like Hammons and Saar. *R.S.V.P.* is something to be touched and manipulated instead of just looked at, and through the relatedness of this process between performer and found object, this is where the transformation occurs. Nengudi reveals how important the sense of touch is to the viewer's experience of art in a contemporary museum or gallery setting:

I remember a show at the Fowler Museum on African art ... It was one of the best African shows I had ever seen because of the way they installed it ... they arranged everything so close together you almost had to brush against the work, and you could smell the wood. This idea that people can brush up against sculpture, have a sensual experience with it, is really attractive to me.¹⁶

Ultimately one must "brush" against a sculpture and Nengudi was able to replicate this tactility and sensuality of material through her own performative installation of *R.S.V.P.* In an excerpt from a 1980 interview with Nengudi conducted by Judith Wilson, Nengudi described how the creation of her *R.S.V.P.* sculptures invoked this sense of touch and

¹⁶ Jori Finkel, "Q&A: Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi," *Los Angeles Times*, November 27, 2011, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/nov/27/entertainment/la-ca-pst-kellie-jones-interview-20111127>.

experience, stating: “There’s a lot about touch there, not so much terribly about vision—but feeling it.”¹⁷

Touch becomes a multilayered and complicated experience in Nengudi’s *R.S.V.P.* sculptures. In an essay for the exhibition catalogue of 2013’s *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* scholar and curator Naomi Beckwith describes the combination of movement and sculpture Nengudi employed in these performative installations during the 1970s:

The shapes were produced by sets of choreographed actions, however sometimes performed in front of a camera or audience—that broke away from conventions of private studio practice. The resulting image is one that records the intertwining of dance and sculpture but also allows the viewer literally to enter into the space of art practice—not to mention the fact that Nengudi originally intended audiences be able to touch the sculpture.¹⁸

A black and white photograph used as part of the promotional materials for *Now Dig This!* depicts the performative and haptic qualities of the material, as well as its sensory installation. In the image Nengudi is seen arranging and creating the shapes of one of the *R.S.V.P.* sculptures (Figure 1.6). The black and white photograph, provided by Nengudi and her gallerist Thomas Erben for the exhibition, is dated from 1976. Although the caption provides no indication of who took the photograph, it states Nengudi is in the process of setting up for a performance of *R.S.V.P.* inside her Los Angeles studio. In the image Nengudi, dressed in a pantsuit and white turtleneck, stands with her back straight, neck slightly bent as she looks down while sticking her arm through an opening in part of

¹⁷ Audio Interview with Senga Nengudi conducted by Judith Wilson, July 1, 1980, Judith Wilson papers.

¹⁸ Naomi Beckwith, “Dark Mirrors: Performance Documents as Bodily Evidence,” in *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*, ed. Valerie Cassel Oliver (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2013), 31.

the sculpture as she lifts another part off the ground. The photograph depicts a sculpture consisting of two, perhaps three, attenuated sets of interconnected pantyhose. One leg of the material has been tacked to the gallery wall above Nengudi's head while she stretches the other end and holds it against her chest. The second set of pantyhose, the bottoms of which, (in what one can assume would be the feet if they were being worn) have been filled with sand and now sit on the floor. The weight of these sand filled pendulums makes the stretched material above seem razor thin as Nengudi seemingly tugs and arranges the sculpture. The camera has caught this act of tugging and arranging as one flaccid section in the middle appears blurry and out of focus, assuming the camera caught this movement in mid motion. Captured in mid motion, the blurred sculptures depicted in the image highlight the performative elastic quality inherent to the material and foreshadow the performance that will then take place when the artist's body is inserted within the materials.

R.S.V.P.'s used pantyhose takes the impetus of the found object—as Nengudi gathered them from friends, family, and thrift stores—but shifts its aim to something more experiential. By embracing the formal quality of the nylon mesh, the shapes of the *R.S.V.P.* sculptures both hint and conceal the figuration of the body. Instead of a sculpture like *Sir Watts*, in which scraps of metal, paper clips, and staples are transformed into bits of entrails pouring from their metallic portrait-like bust, the nylon mesh of *R.S.V.P.* maintains its original function as malleable performative material. The impetus is placed on this performance that transforms the shapes of the material rather than the materials figurative repurposing. For Nengudi part of the benefit of the dimensionality of

sculpture is this element of touch and performance, she states: “they don’t allow you to do it, but the real thing is that you should touch the sculpture... you should really have ... this experience with the art work, not just looking at it, but... totally connecting with it.”¹⁹ For Purifoy, the transformation proposed in *66 Signs* occurs through looking, but for *R.S.V.P.* it occurs through touch. Both the elastic sensual material of the sculptures and their performative installation challenge the primacy of the visual as the most profound form of knowing and experiencing.

Touch occurs through Nengudi’s sometimes public assembling of her sculptures as well as how she utilizes them as performance objects. Figure 1.7 is a companion photograph to Figure 1.6—it depicts Nengudi setting up her *R.S.V.P.* sculptures for a performance.²⁰ In this photograph the haptic quality *R.S.V.P.*, that of the material itself and their use as performance objects, is made explicit. The image appears slightly out of focus and blurry—instead of simply a small section of the sculptures in motion juxtaposed against Nengudi’s still frame like the previous image, the artist’s entire body appears active in this process of arranging the material. In the image she leans forward and crouches down with one arm raised high above her head holding a part of her sculpture. Her other arm pushes a bulb like sack of sand and pantyhose that sits on the floor. In both images the spindly sections of the sculptures form stark minimalist lines whose shadows and that of Nengudi’s are mirrored on the gallery wall.

With its delicate spindly pantyhose sculptures whose forms hint at elastic flesh,

¹⁹ Transcript of Oral History Interview with Senga Nengudi conducted by Elissa Auther, 4.

²⁰ The image is part of the online Archive of African American Performance art and was a donation from Nengudi to the website in 2009.

R.S.V.P. resists easy or immediate categorization alongside more canonical works like that of Saar or Hammons for a number of reasons. This is not to say other Black artists, like Hammons and Saar, didn't engage in more conceptual or abstract practices but rather this type of work has been written about very little in the context of the Black Arts Movement.²¹ Additionally, Nengudi and Hassinger cite seeing a posthumous Eva Hesse exhibit at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1973 as one of the most formidable moments of their careers as young sculptors. While *R.S.V.P.*'s incorporation of found materials is part of Purifoy's legacy at the Watts Tower Art Center, the abstract shapes of *R.S.V.P.*, (what Hammons previously referred to as her "outrageous abstraction") and their use as performance props, trace back to Nengudi's time at the Pasadena Museum of Art.

Kellie Jones describes some of the tensions that came as a part of being a Black artist who embraced abstract or non-representational forms, like Nengudi and her *R.S.V.P.* sculptures. In an essay for the exhibition catalogue of *Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction 1965—1980* Jones writes of these artists, "In the Black Nationalist atmosphere of this period, many of these artists were rejected by more militant practitioners and institutions that believed figuration was a more useful way to combat centuries of derogatory imagery centered on people of African descent. Abstraction was characterized as "white art in blackface""²² As Jones points out, there

²¹ The Getty Museum conducted a private oral history session coupled with a public forum titled "Modern Art in Los Angeles: African American Avant-Gardes" that discussed the more conceptual or experimental strategies of Nengudi, Hassinger, Jenkins, and McCullough throughout the 1960s-1980s. This interview is one of the only, if not the only, critical sources that discuss the contributions of these practices to the Los Angeles Black Arts Movement.

²² Kellie Jones, "To the Max: Energy and Experimentation" in *Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction 1964-1980*, ed. Kellie Jones and Lowery Stokes Sims (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2006), 14.

was an expectation that Black artists who considered themselves a part of these politics had a duty to somehow allude to this identity in their work, or at the very least avoid practices that had been so heavily valorized by the white Eurocentric canon.

During the 1970s and 1980s a handful of shows and galleries sought to challenge assumptions about Black artists and abstraction. Noteworthy instances include Linda Goode Bryant's Just Above Midtown Gallery's 1978 publication of *Contextures*, which catalogued black artists' explorations in abstraction during the 1970s – and is coincidentally one of the only primary sources that provides a critical discussion of *R.S.V.P.*. Another example would be April Kingsley's 1980 show at P.S. 1 at MoMA in New York, *Afro-American Abstraction*, which included Nengudi's sculptures. In a 1980 interview, Nengudi explained that although it was disappointing the show received so few critical reviews it was one of the rare instances that work from black artists wasn't relegated to the basement or off in a corner near the bathroom of a major museum.²³ It was equally exciting that the show took place at such a prestigious institution located in a city often regarded as the center of the American art world. However, as can be expected, these rare instances of press were unable to generate further institutional support of critical writing about more experimental work by black artists. It is very likely that this tension between material and form is a large part of why *R.S.V.P.* manifests as such an absence in the primary critical literature about Los Angeles's Black Arts Movement.

The Pasadena Art Museum is also where Nengudi was first exposed to the work of artists like Kaprow, Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns. As a young artist Nengudi sought

²³ Transcript of Oral History Interview with Senga Nengudi conducted by Elissa Auther, 12.

to integrate movement within sculpture and her time interning in the dance department at the museum proves crucial to how she sought to combine the two. She explains the impact the museum, and being exposed to the work of artists like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, had on her work, stating: “And so we had these happenings, and that, of course, influenced me. You know, I thought... this is great. I can do dance without this issue of body type and all that kind of stuff—I can do whatever I want to do. I can incorporate anything into my art practice, and so that experience was pivotal for me.”²⁴ Seeing the possibilities performance art and happenings offered prompted her to explore how to combine sculpture and movement, as well as how the viewer could touch and interact with her *R.S.V.P.* sculptures. While this method of artistic engagement would guarantee Nengudi the freedom of movement within her work, the performance element of *R.S.V.P.* proved a serious commercial hindrance in the small but vital Los Angeles gallery scene that catered to the work of Black artists. This was then further compounded by the delicate nature of the sculptures themselves.

Figure 1.8 is an image from the Pearl C. Woods Gallery in Los Angeles with different variations of the Nengudi’s initial *R.S.V.P.* sculptures situated throughout the room.²⁵ The sculpture in the far left corner is made of multiple pairs of pantyhose in noticeably different flesh tones. The bundle of sculptures stretches from almost floor to ceiling as the leg portions seemingly spill out of the wall. Some sections are tied off in series of repetitive small knots like that of prayer beads, while others are pendulum-like

²⁴ Transcript of Oral History Interview with Senga Nengudi conducted by Elissa Auther, 7.

²⁵ This image is from the artists website, the caption information says it was taken sometime between 1975-1980 at the Pearl C. Woods Gallery in Los Angeles.

in a cascade of material whose sand filled portions rest on the floor. This particular variation is almost voluminous compared to the sculptures surrounding it. Against the adjacent wall is another sculpture; the voluminous cascading quality of the adjacent sculpture has been replaced by a variation noticeably more delicate and two-dimensional. This sculpture sits eye-level, centered in the middle of the wall and appearing flat like a canvas. Instead of being weighted and rounded with sand, the top portion of the material is empty. It appears nearly translucent as the stark whiteness of the wall peeks through the material that has been thinly stretched to its limit. The third set of sculptures in the room appears the most delicate of all, as tiny thin sections of material disrupt and cut through the surrounding space at sharp angles. None of the sections have been filled with sand and the sections of the sculpture that extend from the wall to the middle of the ceiling are stretched so thin they appear almost invisible to the camera. Ultimately this image makes clear that with its performative installation and fragile construction the *R.S.V.P.* sculptures were not *saleable* objects that could easily be transported or displayed elsewhere.

R.S.V.P.'s lack of commercial viability in a gallery setting would prove problematic for a number of reasons. Black artists in Los Angeles had relatively no institutional support from the city's museums. In 1968 two African American preparators at LACMA started the Black Arts Council, an activist organization that worked towards the inclusion of Black artists within the eminent preexisting museums of Los Angeles. The Black Arts Council was partially successful; they managed to petition the museum into having two shows devoted exclusively to black artists. A review of one of the shows "Los Angeles

1972: A Panorama of Black Artists” from the *Los Angeles Times* by art critic William Wilson illustrates the disdain many in the art world had for work being created by Black artists. Wilson’s review discusses how LACMA is hesitant to label the show a bona fide “exhibition,” and that the work exhibited is ultimately “amateur, amusing,” and “substandard” for a museum show.²⁶ Nengudi describes the difficulty in gaining institutional recognition for Black artists:

The whole thing with museums was terrible. It was really bad with a lot of picketing by artists on both coasts. They would allow artists of color—and that includes Latino artists and some Asian artists to exhibit, but only in the basement, or they’d have one room ... right as you would come into the museum ... Typically, the concession was to create a community room or something as a way to appease us, but it never felt like real exhibition space. So it wasn’t given the same value as ... being on the upper floors or something like that. So that was ... a real, real issue. And the only reason that happened was because of pressure consistently applied by artists.²⁷

With minimal possibility for museum support, *R.S.V.P.* would be dependent on the gallery scene, but there were only a handful of galleries in Los Angeles that would show Black artists.

On the West Coast *R.S.V.P.* debuted at the Pearl C. Woods Gallery owned by Nengudi’s friend and fellow artist Greg Pitts. The space was an extra room of what was part of the “Triangular Church of Truth” at the time. Founded in 1932 by Pitt’s grandmother, Pearl C. Woods, “it was the first black nondenominational congregation in Los Angeles.”²⁸ The eclectic history of the space and its rather improvisational function as an art gallery shows just how few spaces existed for Black artists whose work was

²⁶ William Wilson, “County Museum Showing Work by Local Blacks”, *Los Angeles Times*, February 13, 1972.

²⁷ Transcript of Oral History Interview with Senga Nengudi conducted by Elissa Auther, 12.

²⁸ Emory Holmes II, “The Painting Pastor”, *Los Angeles Times*, October 18, 1998. <http://articles.latimes.com/1998/oct/18/magazine/tm-33577>

more conceptual, or dealt with somewhat dematerialized practices. As Nengudi explains, in Los Angeles during the 1970s there were simply “no real places for experimental Black art.”²⁹ According to Nengudi, when she first created *R.S.V.P.* critics in Los Angeles were simply uninterested in more performance based or conceptual work from Black artists. This disinterest was something many artists in the Black arts community had to contend with, especially those who engaged in more participatory-based performance practice and ventured beyond the realm of painting and sculpture.

In a 2008 public forum interview of the Getty Museum’s “Modern Art in Los Angeles: African American Avant-Gardes” Nengudi explains that as a Black artist in Los Angeles during the 1970s and ‘80s, artistic success occurred when three elements were present: communal collaborative support among one another, critics willing to write about their work, and spaces willing to show the work. She referred to this as the triangular effect. Consequently, perhaps the most significant factor in *R.S.V.P.*’s initial dismissal was the lack of sustained critical press the series received. As she explains,

We were doing our work, Barbara and other people were documenting it, but there was also another element that we needed and that’s the critical aspect—critical writing about our work. We did not get any press of substance ... for the majority press the excuse often was ‘we have no words to review you. We don’t know how to explain what you’re doing’. A lot of what went on at that time was an issue of omission. We were omitted.³⁰

This is certainly reflected in the archival material about *R.S.V.P.*’s initial performances. With the exception of a small selection of photographs, and the handful of paragraphs written about *R.S.V.P.* in Linda Goode-Bryant’s 1978 *Contextures*, there are few primary

²⁹ As explained to the author in a phone interview, April 28, 2015.

³⁰ Senga Nengudi, “Modern Art in Los Angeles: African American Avant-Gardes 1965 - 1990”.

documents, or interviews about the series. In regards to the gallery scene in Los Angeles

Nengudi elaborates,

I would like to mention another element I was talking about the triangle thing, the other element was the few places we had to show, which would be Gallery 32 which was Suzanna Jackson's gallery and Brockman Gallery so our venues were limited and that was another reason we took to the streets as a means of showing what we did.³¹

This lack of support in Los Angeles for what Nengudi calls “experimental Black art” makes the influence of Linda Goode-Bryant's Just Above Midtown Gallery, or JAM, in New York quite paramount, and it is at JAM where *R.S.V.P.* makes its East Coast debut. When Nengudi was first experimenting with used pantyhose as material for sculpture she attempted to coat the material in resin, hoping it would make the sculptures more stable and durable. These processes destroyed the elasticity of the material, and ultimately the elasticity and pliability of the material won over a more permanent construction. Nengudi attributes the decision to foreground the performative quality of the *R.S.V.P.* sculptures over their salability to the experimental nature of JAM and the encouragement of Linda Goode-Bryant. Bryant's motto was that “it's about the work, not about the sale.”³² JAM was one of the only spaces where Black artists in the 1970s were encouraged to explore more experimental work; it was about the artists' practice rather than the marketability of their work as an object to be sold.

This model stands in contrast to one of Los Angeles' only spaces for work by Black artists—the Brockman Gallery. Opened in 1967 by art educators and brothers Alonzo and Dale Davis in Leimert Park Los Angeles, the Brockman Gallery was opened with the

³¹ Senga Nengudi, “Modern Art in Los Angeles: African American Avant-Gardes 1965 - 1990”.

³² As explained to the author in a phone interview, April 28, 2015.

intention to support and exhibit the work of Black artists of the community. It was one of the first spaces to show the early work of artists like Hammons, Saar, and John Outterbridge. Although the intention was that the gallery function as a gathering space for the community (which it somewhat did) it more heavily emphasized its purpose as a commercial gallery with a distinct business model. In 1978 the gallery facilitated Nengudi's *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*, a collaborative performance ceremony performed with Hammon's Studio Z collective. This was rather uncommon for the gallery. They tended to focus on more traditional practices, such as painting and sculpture—in other words, work that could generate some sort of profit.

Differing from this gallery model was Suzanne Jackson's Gallery 32.³³ Although only open for a handful of years, Gallery 32 had a vibrant position in the Los Angeles art scene and positioned itself more as a community based non-profit than a commercial gallery. It was also the first gallery owned and operated by a black woman in Los Angeles. Gallery 32 serves as paramount example of the grassroots art organizations, as well as the Black Arts Council, that typified the political and social activism of the era. Opened in Los Angeles in 1968, Gallery 32 “introduced the work of young relatively unknown LA artists to a broad West Coast audience. Significantly, Gallery 32 was one of just a few local arts organizations ... that supported and exhibited the work of LA's emerging artists in the late 1960s and 1970s.”³⁴ Gallery 32 privileged no specific medium

³³ Jackson was an artist as well and a friend of Nengudi.

³⁴ Carolyn Peter and Damon Willick, “Gallery 32 and Los Angeles's African American Arts Community,” *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* 30 (Spring 2012): 17.

or aesthetic from black artists and thus the space became “a site for artistic innovation and community activism.”³⁵

Gallery 32 was also host to the exhibition *Sapphire, You’ve Come a Long Way Baby* (Figure 1.9). Organized in 1970 by Betye Saar in conjunction with Jackson, it was the first exhibit devoted exclusively to black women artists in Los Angeles.³⁶ The show featured the work of Saar, Jackson, and Nengudi (then Sue Irons), along with other artists Gloria Bohanon, Yvonne Cole Meo, and Eileen Abdulrashid. This was also the exhibition where Nengudi showed her *Water Compositions* sculptures. Scholar Damon Willick explains: “The group decided to mount the exhibition after growing frustrated over the frequent exclusion of African American women artists from both the mainstream contemporary art scene and the rising Black Arts and feminist art movements of the time. Saar noted that the leaders of the feminist movement ‘had no idea that there were black women artists. They were ignorant [of the subject]’”.³⁷ The circumstances surrounding the *Sapphire* show are crucial to understanding *R.S.V.P.* because they exposed the many gaps and cycles of exclusion Black female artists like Nengudi had to contend with, as well as their determination to support one another in light of these exclusions.

Nengudi and many other female artists in the Black Arts Movement have been vocal about the dismissal they incurred from their white counterparts. As artists they were marginalized by the lack of intersectionality within the white feminist art community of the 1970s in Los Angeles. Many of the issues the white feminist artists incorporated into

³⁵ Carolyn Peter and Damon Willick, “Gallery 32 and Los Angeles’s African American Arts Community,” 17.

³⁶ The name “Sapphire” referenced the stereotype caricature of a black woman as rude and aggressive.

³⁷ Carolyn Peter and Damon Willick, “Gallery 32 and Los Angeles’s African American Arts Community,” 24.

their artistic practice—i.e. an aversion to domesticity, their roles as house wives, a desire to work outside the home—seemed rooted in principles of class rather than feminist concerns. Children were not welcome at meetings where these white artists would gather, excluding many working class female artists of color who didn't have the financial means to delegate childcare to someone else. The push for white female artists to have a career outside of familial duties did not resonate with Nengudi as particularly progressive either; she stated, “Black women have always had to work.”³⁸

Because of Nengudi's use of a seemingly feminine material, some scholars have situated *R.S.V.P.* as part of this feminist practice. Nengudi has been clear that the impetus of her work at this time reflects her identity as an African American, rather than any inclinations towards a distinctly feminist practice. In a 2009 interview with feminist art historian Amelia Jones, Nengudi stated:

My own Black community I found the most engaging and inspiring ... The feminist movement was a WHOLE other story. Don't get me started! We were included in as a necessity. I hardly felt like an equal partner. Although I did sit on a couple Women's Building committees, it never quite felt like home in the early days ... Maren Hassinger was asked to be in a Women's Building show ... she was the only Black female to be asked to be in the show. Though she was included in the show we did a protest performance on the steps of the entry to the exhibit. It was called the “Spooks Who Sat by The Door.” We stood there in silence. They didn't get it. Once again we were invisible.³⁹

Many Black female artists in Los Angeles, like Nengudi, found the black community as a much more powerful means of support than their white female counterparts—but this support is not without its own set of issues of exclusion and marginalization.

³⁸ This information is taken partially from the 2008 “Modern Art in Los Angeles: African American Avant-Gardes 1965 - 1990” oral history group interview and moderated public conversation, as well as a phone conversation with Nengudi on April 28, 2015.

³⁹ Senga Nengudi Interview Transcript conducted by Amelia Jones, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions archive, October 2009, 2.

In 1971, Occidental College, with the help of the Brockman Gallery, mounted a show titled “Black Art: The Black Experience.” The show featured the work of five artists: David Bradford, David Hammons, John Outterbridge, and Noah Purifoy, and one woman, Marie Johnson. Despite the inclusion of Johnson, the language of the opening statement in the exhibition catalogue makes clear that the black experience during this time, be it artistic or otherwise, was defined by the experience of black men. The exhibition catalogue states, “The present exhibition defines “Black Art” as an expression which develops its emotional tenor and environmental content from the unique experience of the black man in America.”⁴⁰

Female artists working within the Black Arts community were not selected as often for group exhibitions and gallery shows as their male counterparts, hence the necessity for an event like Gallery 32’s *Sapphire* show. This experience was not singular to the politics of the art world; it was mirrored in the leadership structures of Black social justice movements of the time. Kellie Jones has outlined a similar critique of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and ‘70s, positing that, among other reasons, the decline of the movement stands in direct correlation to the growing visibility of black women writers in this previously male dominated space.⁴¹ Saar was very conscious of this exclusion, in an interview about the Los Angeles gallery scene during this time she is quick to point out how gender often mitigates a Black artist’s success. She posits one of the reasons Hammons became so famous was because as a man he was able to abandon

⁴⁰ “Black Art: The Black Experience” (Los Angeles: Occidental College and the Brockman Gallery, 1971).

⁴¹ Jones, “Black West, Thoughts on Art in Los Angeles,” 65.

his family in order to move to New York and focus on his career—a luxury that his Black female contemporaries were not afforded.

These levels of exclusion experienced by Black female artists in Los Angeles illustrate how collaboration serves both an artistic and pragmatic purpose. Jackson's Gallery 32 hosts the *Sapphire* show. It is also Jackson who encourages Alonzo Davis of the Brockman Gallery to use their grant from Los Angeles CETA program (a 1970s version of the WPA) to fund Nengudi's *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*. It is during this performance that Hassinger and Nengudi meet and became lifelong friends. Barbara McCullough's role as a video artist meant she was often the one filming performances, Nengudi stated she could always on McCullough for support.⁴² She filmed Nengudi's 1980 *Rapunzel* installation and has filmed many performances since then. Relationships between these women provided personal support and guaranteed their artistic survival, and *R.S.V.P.*'s collaborative performance between Hassinger and Nengudi illustrates just that.

As discussed throughout this chapter the galleries, institutions, and neighborhoods of Los Angeles—places like Gallery 32, the Watts Tower Art Center, the Pasadena Art Museum—explicitly inform and define Nengudi's artistic practice and her *R.S.V.P.* sculptures. Los Angeles as site is constituted through physical locations like these—systems of freeways, landmarks, and neighborhoods—spaces that when placed in relation to one another form a distinct site. Art historian Miwon Kwon posits that key to

⁴² See Transcript of Oral History Interview with Senga Nengudi conducted by Elissa Auther, 12. In the interview Nengudi explains how McCullough was the only person documenting many of these performances and that they were also quite close friends. In regards to her friendship with McCullough she states: "She was really pivotal and I could call on her pretty much at any time. We didn't live terribly far apart ..."

understanding site, and in turn the artistic production generated by this space, is that site is defined not only in the physical spaces of the city as place but as a social collection of bodies—by a community of people both individual and collective. Kwon explains “ ... site itself is here conceived as a social entity, a “community”, and not simply in terms of environmental or architectural design”.⁴³ Therefore, the presence and the actions of Nengudi and the community of Black Arts Movements artists creating work in this city are equally essential in defining Los Angeles as a space.

Kellie Jones utilizes Kwon’s framework in her discussion of the Black Arts Movement explaining how much of the work at this time “ceded to its environment, placed itself in the context of the world, and became enamored of a public role which penetrated social frameworks and concerned itself with contemporary life... these people insinuated themselves in the environment in a quest to claim and hold space.”⁴⁴ Consequently, equally essential in understanding Los Angeles as site is that this space is constituted through a community of bodies whose *actions* define such space as site. In references to the relationship between the *R.S.V.P.* sculptures and their performances, Nengudi states: “I looked at them as artifacts ... that was what was left after the performance.”⁴⁵ It is here where an examination of *R.S.V.P.* not just as sculptures but also as a series of performance practices explores the politics of which bodies have the right to hold space and site in Los Angeles.

⁴³ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 95.

⁴⁴ Jones, “Black West, Thoughts on Art in Los Angeles”, 45.

⁴⁵ Transcript of Oral History Interview with Senga Nengudi conducted by Elissa Auther, 21.

Chapter Two

Activating Space: R.S.V.P. & the Body

As discussed in Chapter One, Senga Nengudi grew up in Los Angeles, moved back and forth between both coasts, and studied abroad, ultimately coming back to Los Angeles only to leave again. Instead of understanding these shifting environments as complicating or diminishing the relationship between Los Angeles and *R.S.V.P.* as a product of this site, these shifts instead speak to the nature of *R.S.V.P.* (1975/2003) as a series of performance practices that are continuously reconfigured both internally and externally over time. During the 1970s, different women, in different locations, with different movements, executed these performances. Additionally, the performances that occurred decades later in the 2000s were staged with new materials and as well as new sets of performers, resulting in a reconfiguration that refers to both the shifting situational context of the initial performances from the 1970s, as well as their more contemporary restaging.

During the 1970s the collaborative nature of the *R.S.V.P.* performances made them highly improvisational, the movements were largely unchoreographed and dependent on whichever artist was working with the material. The documentation of these performances was equally improvisational; contingent upon whatever friend of the artist was available to photograph the process. Despite their improvisational nature, all of the *R.S.V.P.* performances utilize a similar interactive procedure rather than aesthetic outcome. During these initial performances Nengudi and Hassinger, sometimes individually and sometimes in tandem, would perform and dance within the nylon mesh

sculptures that had been attached to the walls of the gallery space. On the occasions where just Hassinger would interact with the sculptures, Nengudi would start the show with a smaller performance that usually involved her setting up and situating the sculptures (Figures 1.6 & 1.7). The two would then activate the performative elastic quality of the material by inserting themselves within the sculptures, stretching and pulling the material around themselves as they danced.

Harmon Outlaw's 1977 photograph taken at the Pearl C. Woods Gallery is a photograph of one of these collaborative performances; both Nengudi and Hassinger are performing with the *R.S.V.P.* sculptures (Figure 2.1). In Figure 2.1 around 10 thin strips of material are attached to the wall of the gallery space. Nengudi and Hassinger, dressed in matching black dancer's leotards with their backs to the camera, are entwined within the sculptures as they pull at the material. Hassinger is balanced on the tip of her toes as she leans far back, one arm stretched above and behind her head, the other straight out in front of her to maintain her center. One strip of material is stretched around her midsection and the other supports her neck as her body leans far back against these restraints, giving the sense that her balance is precariously dependent it appears solely dependent on the support of the sculptures attached to the wall. In contrast to Hassinger's pose, Nengudi's seems grounded and stable yet no less immersive. As she sits on the floor with her back to the camera, she extends her upper arms in front of her body perpendicular to her torso, pulling the material forward as she leans back like that of a rower. Despite Nengudi and Hassinger's different positions and movements evident within the photograph, both demonstrate an immersive performance practice tied to the

sculptures of *R.S.V.P.* with their whole bodies involved in this act of stretching, pulling, and manipulating.

By moving within and against the confines of the sculptures each performer is made acutely aware of their bodies' relationship to the space around them, a consequence that has profound implications for understanding *R.S.V.P.* when the work is examined within the context of 1970s Los Angeles. Hassinger explained that for her this merging of dance and sculpture is about "moving in space and knowing where your body is in relation to space."¹ Thus, Nengudi and Hassinger's initial performances of *R.S.V.P.* allowed both artists to explore the more formal relationship between sculpture and dance, particularly the ways in which objects like the elastic sculptures as well as the artists' own bodies interrupt and structure the performance space of the work. More importantly though, the collaborative, improvisational process that offers a dual exploration of the body unites the series of performances enacted across time and place. This two-fold exploration of the body occurs first in how the body is examined materially through the performative quality of the pantyhose sculptures, and secondly through the experience of physically performing with one's own body. By utilizing found objects, alongside a collaborative improvisational performance practice, the *R.S.V.P.* performances are a means for Nengudi to know and define her identity as a Black female artist in Los Angeles.

Nengudi has explained a consistency of process, like that utilized in *R.S.V.P.*, is an essential part of her performance practice. In a group conversation for the Getty during

¹ Curtia James, "Interview: Maren Hassinger," *Art Papers* 18 (February 1994): 6–9.

2008, Nengudi stated that this consistency of process is always based in the movement of the body. Defining this process as a ritual, she explains: “There’s movement related to ritual ... rituals are satisfying, grounding and they’re about control.”² In light of Nengudi’s statements, *R.S.V.P.* in all of its iterations should be understood as a ritual—that is, the consistent repetition of a process that allows her to know, explore, and *control* the movements of her body, as well as that of the spaces around her.

Black artists in Los Angeles consistently employed ritual practice as a way to affirm their relationship to one another, their creative process, and Los Angeles as a site that facilitated these interactions—giving further weight to understanding Nengudi’s *R.S.V.P.* in terms of ritual process. Consider, for example, the 1981 experimental film titled *Shopping Bags, Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflection on Ritual Space* produced by Nengudi’s close friend and filmmaker Barbara McCullough. The film explores the use of ritual in the work of nine Los Angeles based artists, through photographs and interviews with several artists, including Nengudi. McCullough begins the video with her own connection to ritual and why she wants to pose these same questions to other artists:

For me ritual is a symbolic action that I have dealt in terms of my own internal state to help me release myself and move from one time and space to another.... I know in African societies art and ritual are related, in that ritual objects are actually art objects. So therefore I thought, what I would do is ask other artists in different media that I know: why is it they employ ritual?³

² Senga Nengudi, “Modern Art in Los Angeles: African American Avant-Gardes 1965 - 1990” (oral history group interview and moderated public conversation with Maren Hassinger, Ulysses Jenkins, Barbara McCullough, and Senga Nengudi as generated by the Getty Research Institute through its Modern Art in Los Angeles and Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. initiatives, conducted by Kellie Jones and Judith Wilson, January 15-16, 2008).

³ Barbara McCullough, *Shopping Bags, Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflection on Ritual Space*, 1981.

Through a series of interviews with the nine artists *Shopping Bags*—among them Nengudi, Hammons, and Saar—the film explains how artists of the time defined ritual within their daily lives and how they incorporate this understanding into their artistic practice. According to the artists interviewed, rituals are necessarily interactive and multilayered processes. For example, in the film Betye Saar explains for her ritual as a process is based in acts of doing: “The doing it becomes the ritual, putting it out there becomes the ritual, finding the objects becomes a ritual.”⁴ Saar’s emphasis not only on the creation and sharing of her sculptures, but on the act of finding materials for those works further parallels Nengudi’s *R.S.V.P.*. Furthermore, in another segment of the film, David Hammons is picking over what looks like an abandoned construction site and rearranges the materials. Cars and city buses whizz by as Hammons arranges chunks of debris, explaining: “Your ritual comes out of your environment, ritual establishes. It reaffirms relationship between people, places, and things.”⁵ Key here is Hammons’s reference to ritual as an ‘action’ word—a sentiment demonstrated consistently throughout McCullough’s *Shopping Bags* and Nengudi’s *R.S.V.P.* series.

Additionally, McCullough’s short experimental film, *Water Ritual #1: An Urban Rite of Purification* (1979) further exemplifies this connection between art and ritual practice common to black artists of Los Angeles in the 1970s. *Water Ritual* was filmed in the middle of an abandoned factory site in Los Angeles and was later included in the beginning of *Shopping Bags*. In a 1979 interview for a UCLA student cable program McCullough explains how the largely improvisational film explored her own

⁴ Barbara McCullough, *Shopping Bags, Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflection on Ritual Space*.

⁵ Ibid.

understanding of ritual practice. *Water Ritual* begins with a woman named Milanda, played by McCullough's friend Yolanda Vidato, touching and arranging a series of found objects like corn, bits of glass, seashells, a broken record.⁶ The act of arranging these objects—an act comparable to that of *R.S.V.P.*'s performances—becomes a way for Milanda to communicate with her ancestral African past, as a way of channeling spirits and allowing the self to move from one time and space to another.

For McCullough the artistic process of creating *Water Ritual* functioned as a type of catharsis. In other words, she was able to ground herself in an action-based process, one that allowed her and Vidato to explore who they were as black people, as women, and artists. This was particularly important to both women as their creative actions empowered them to explore and enact their own identities during a time in which they felt consistently frustrated by being told what these identities entailed.⁷ Both *Water Ritual* and *R.S.V.P.* embrace collaboration as a social act and foreground the ritual processes involved in the manipulation of found objects as a means to control and structure their environments.

Further demonstrating this connection between action, ritual, and the body, scholar Catherine Bell defines ritual as grounded in the movements of the body and in social action. Bell proposes “an approach to ritual activity that stresses the primary of the social act itself, how its strategies are lodged in the very doing of the act, and how

⁶ Ntongela Masilela, “Women Directors of the Los Angeles School,” in *Black Women Film and Video Artists*, ed. Jacqueline Bobo, (New York: Routledge, 1998), 35.

⁷ “L.A. Rebellion Barbara McCullough on UCLA’s “The View”,” YouTube video, 2:50, an excerpt from UCLA Student Cable Program “The View” c. 1979, posted by “UCLA FilmTV Archive,” May 3, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wx0eRt-vOF8>

‘ritualization’ is a strategic way of acting in specific social situations.’⁸ Like Purifoy venturing into the rubble of the Watts Rebellions to collect material and transform into sculpture, McCullough’s Milanda collecting and ordering found objects, Hammons rearranging debris in the middle of a Los Angeles construction site, *R.S.V.P.*’s execution as a series of collaborative improvisational performances that utilize found objects gathered from various sources must be understood as an example of the same ritual process. Applying this understanding of ritual practice, in which repeated actions or processes are actually strategies developed in relation to specific social circumstances, reveals a network within *R.S.V.P.* that developed in relation to Nengudi’s identity as a Black female artist and mother in the space of Los Angeles.

In between Nengudi’s creation of *Water Compositions* and her first experiments with the *R.S.V.P.* sculptures she gave birth to her first child—an event that profoundly shaped her approach to art making. In a 1980 interview with Judith Wilson Nengudi discussed her relationship with performance, explaining she came to performance because it was “easier” for her. When Wilson asked what she meant by “easier”, Nengudi responded: “Oh well while Oji was tugging on this leg and Sanza is asking for something in the refrigerator then I can think, I can think of these ideas. I don’t have to stop everything I’m doing, and you know, like, actually physically make something, so yeah it’s been a really big tool for me at this point.”⁹ Motherhood, thus, ushered in a pragmatic

⁸ Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 67. Bell selects this approach, understanding ritual as a study of social action, as a way to move past the theoretical impasse of whether one can situate ritual acts as a distinct category of social behavior or if all social behaviors are forms of ritual.

⁹ Audio Interview with Senga Nengudi conducted by Judith Wilson, July 1, 1980, Box 11, Folder 27, Judith Wilson papers, Archives of American Art, Washington DC.

shift in Nengudi's artistic practice that is manifested in her *R.S.V.P.* series. As a result, the *R.S.V.P.* performances must be understood as a strategy for artistic survival—a way for Nengudi to be both an artist and a working mother.

However, performing *R.S.V.P.* was also a way for Nengudi to return to her love of dance without the constraints of the discipline. In addition to her education in Los Angeles as a sculptor and visual artist, Nengudi had a strong background in modern dance. She studied with members of the Lester Horton Company, many of whom went on to work with famed choreographer Alvin Ailey. Originally, Nengudi wanted to be a dancer but felt she lacked the appropriate body type to do so after being the only black woman in the dance department at Cal State LA.¹⁰ In addition to feeling she was not the right body type for dance, Nengudi also chose to be an artist because she felt her career could have more longevity, as opposed to that of a dancer whose career is limited by the finite capability of their body's athleticism. Instead, performance art became a way for her to combine her interest in movement with her role as a visual artist, she explains:

My need to do body related art and performances came from my love of dance and to be honest my own body issues. Even though I was a dance minor in college I did not fit the dancers mold in body type or how I looked at movement. Happenings and performance art allowed for a certain freedom for me related to movement.¹¹

This freedom of movement offered by performance art was explored collaboratively alongside Maren Hassinger during the *R.S.V.P.* performances. Like Nengudi, Hassinger

¹⁰ Transcript of Oral History Interview with Senga Nengudi conducted by Elissa Auther, July 9-11, 2013, Archives of American Art, Washington DC, 6.

¹¹ Senga Nengudi Interview Transcript conducted by Amelia Jones, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions archive, October 2009, 3.

studied dance and sculpture in college and was similarly interested in integrating both within her artistic practice, leading to many collaborations between the two artists.

Collaborative performance practice, like that of Nengudi and Hassinger, was a common practice for Black artists in Los Angeles during the 1970s to promote further visibility of their work amidst an art world in which they were largely overlooked. Most importantly, Black artists collaborated as a way to pool artistic resources, support one another's artistic endeavors, and promote greater visibility of their work in as many arenas as possible. As Nengudi explains:

The one thing I am sorry about is that we did not document more of our art activities and performances. It was about the process. One of us would get an idea and hurriedly gather everyone together to execute it. Filmmaker Barbara McCullough was our "go to" film and photo documentarian. However, sometimes there was no time or no one to photograph or film something as it was happening. Other times nobody even had money to buy the film to put in the camera. And forget coverage by the white media ...¹²

Because of this rejection from the white art world, projects like *R.S.V.P.* were performed regardless of whether there was a means to document their execution. Nengudi's explanation of this process illustrates the social nature of these improvisational collaborative performances of *R.S.V.P.*, as well as the necessity in documenting each other's work because no one else would. As a result, for Nengudi and her peers the ritualized artistic process was also fundamentally interactive and communal – that is, executing and documenting projects like *R.S.V.P.* was dependent on the friendships and relationships they had built amongst one another as Black artists. Consequently, *R.S.V.P.*'s execution as a series of collaborative performances exposes the intersections

¹² Senga Nengudi Interview Transcript conducted by Amelia Jones, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions archive, October 2009, 3.

of exclusion experienced by Nengudi as a Black artist. Thus, this collaborative improvisational performance art enacted by Nengudi and her fellow artists of Los Angeles must be understood as politicized practice.

Collaboration refers to multiple artists working together within the same performance, as depicted in Figure 2.2. However, it also refers to the artistic process through which these ideas are developed and executed, inherently intertwining the improvisational and collaborative aspects of *R.S.V.P.* to one another. In an interview with Judith Wilson and Kellie Jones, Nengudi explains how collaborative and improvisational performance practices were intricately connected for Black artists in Los Angeles during the time of *R.S.V.P.*'s initial conception:

I found myself making body art and doing performance art in my studio as well as studios of colleagues. But just as often if not more so in my immediate neighborhood as well as other parts of LA. These performances were often impromptu. It was about the tribe. We'd rally the troupes and try out each other's ideas. It could be David Hammons and me. It could be Maren Hassinger and me. It could be me Maren, Houston Conwill and Franklin Parker. It could have been all of us together.¹³

Thus, as Nengudi illustrates, collaboration was a fundamental part of developing work—performances emerged as a result of spontaneously getting together and learning from one another. It also affirms their support for one another as friends and artists, what Nengudi referred to as her 'tribe'.

Figure 2.3 is a 1977 black and white photograph of Nengudi and Hassinger at what appears to be the Pearl C. Woods Gallery in Los Angeles. In the seemingly candid image Nengudi and Hassinger are dressed in matching black tights and leotards. One of

¹³ Senga Nengudi, "Modern Art in Los Angeles: African American Avant-Gardes 1965 - 1990".

Nengudi's *R.S.V.P.* sculptures is attached to the wall behind them and the two are situated on either side of the sculpture. Seated on the floor of the gallery space their poses appear coincidentally symmetrical, both leaning back against the wall with their knees drawn towards their chests and their heads turned toward each other. Hassinger's mouth is closed and her arms are crossed as she looks intently at Nengudi, the tips of Nengudi's fingers are pressed onto floor as if gesticulating midsentence. Neither of the artists is performing with the sculptures, nor is Nengudi setting up the installation. Rather the image depicts the two women simply sitting side by side in conversation with one another. Despite the seeming inaction of the performers' bodies—i.e. their lack of interaction with the sculptures of *R.S.V.P.*— the image is just as important to understanding the series as those of the women performing within the sculptures. It reveals yet another of collaboration within *R.S.V.P.*. Most importantly, this photograph situates collaborative communication and interaction as an integral part of the final product of the *R.S.V.P.* performances, rather than simply just a means for their execution.

Los Angeles artists like Hassinger, Hammons, and McCullough were Nengudi's most profound means of creative and professional support and their collaborative performance work had dual purposes. First, collaboration was both a physical lived action in which they would come together as artists and create performance based art. However, collaboration also served to validate their identities as black artists in Los Angeles, giving visibility to each other's work and practices as they acted as both participant and witness for each other. Nengudi explains, "We supported one another because the majority culture had no interest in what was going on with us and so we validated each other ...

even if our aesthetic was different our support was the same, we all allowed each other to extend beyond ourselves ... We were invisible and only amongst ourselves did we know that we existed and what we were doing was valid.”¹⁴ Thus, largely ignored by the white art world, collaborating and working together was a means of confirming their shared identity as Black artists.

Amelia Jones further explains the necessity of collaborative performance practice as an artistic strategy for marginalized artists in Los Angeles during the 1970s. In analyzing the connection between collaborative performance and visibility for artists like Nengudi and her collaborators, Jones writes:

... most of these practices surfaced or activated bodies as a means of politicizing art, making bodies otherwise kept out of cultural domains visible. While today we rightly question the notions of visibility as necessarily proffering cultural or political power, in the 1970s no such luxuries were available.¹⁵

Jones’s commentary on the nature of performance as an artistic and political tool for marginalized artists is particularly important in light of Peggy Phelan’s discussion of representation and visibility in her text, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. Phelan challenges a core tenet of identity politics by negating the efficacy of representation as a political/aesthetic strategy, defining representation as that which occurs in “photographs, paintings, films, theatre, political protests and performance art.”¹⁶ Borrowing from Lacan, she argues, “visibility is a trap”, explaining that visibility “... summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for

¹⁴ Senga Nengudi, “Modern Art in Los Angeles: African American Avant-Gardes 1965 - 1990”.

¹⁵ Amelia Jones, “Lost Bodies: Early 1970s Performance Art in Art History” in *Live Art in LA: Performance Art in California, 1970 – 1983*, ed. Peggy Phelan (New York: Routledge, 2012), 115.

¹⁶ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), 4.

possessions.”¹⁷ Arguing that performance ‘summons’ or ‘provokes’ this consumptive gaze of power misattributes agency to a supposed omnipresent white male spectator. It assumes marginalized subjects are presenting themselves for this specific viewership; and consequently, reduces those who dare to be visible to subjects intent on presenting the self for consumption. In positioning the visibility of performance and protest as antithetical to power, Phelan negates the possibilities of subversion or resistance in the expressive body and denies said performer agency of their own subjectivity. Furthermore Phelan’s argument fundamentally misinterprets the nature of visibility of performance and protest when practiced in *collaboration*. In other words, visibility in the context of collaborative performance practice cannot be reduced to a binary of agential subject/disempowered object. Rather, collaboration should be considered and valued as a means of seeing one another in the act of doing or performing. Because the majority culture was not interested in the work of Nengudi and her peers, projects like *R.S.V.P.* and as well as her later *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*, were performed primarily amongst other members of the Black Arts community. Furthermore, when Nengudi would assemble the *R.S.V.P.* sculptures for the camera as opposed to an audience, the operator was almost always a fellow artist, like McCullough, documenting her work as a way of supporting Nengudi. As a result, *R.S.V.P.*’s performances are not only about the social act of collaboration itself, but also how this collective act functions as a form of resistance. In other words, this collaborative performance was a means of visibility and therefore validation for one another as Black artists, and not necessarily a white spectator.

¹⁷ Phelan, *Unmarked*, 6.

Furthermore, Phelan's argument also fails to take into account that performance is one of the only tools for artists who are marginalized particularly in terms of their access to materials or resources, from larger structures of institutional power. Nengudi has been vocal about her interest in combining art with movement and how she came to performance art partially out of her own interest in dance and the body. However, the pragmatic reasons for her doing so provide a crucial and necessary critique of Phelan's rather classist discussion of performance and visibility. Often performance practice is one of the only ways many marginalized working class artists are able to produce work. For instance, as a working mother—an experience derided by the white feminist artists of the era and inconsequential to the male artists who dominated the Black Arts Movement—performance became a means for Nengudi to improvise as an artist. Performance practice allowed Nengudi the ability to create and think about concepts without physically having to labor to create and produce a tangible object.

In combining her identities as both an artist and a mother, Nengudi's performance practice necessitated an improvisational component—one that is evident throughout the *R.S.V.P.* series and inherently tied to her identity as a Black artist. According to Nengudi, “improvisation is a survival tactic and creative technique for black life in general.”¹⁸ As seen in Purifoy transforming the rubble of his destroyed neighborhood into sculpture or Nengudi turning used pantyhose into sculpture and performing her *R.S.V.P.* series, improvising is a means of resistance and protest. It demonstrates a determination to make due and create, and illustrates how collaborative performance practice becomes a means

¹⁸ Senga Nengudi, “Modern Art in Los Angeles: African American Avant-Gardes 1965 - 1990”.

of creative survival for Nengudi as both a Black artist as well as a mother in 1970s Los Angeles.

In a shift from discussing *R.S.V.P.* in terms of its collaborative and improvisational qualities, critics and Nengudi, herself, have also referred to the execution of these performances as “activations”—a term that is crucial to understanding the series and its relation to the body, site, and identity. As mentioned earlier, when *R.S.V.P.* is performed the bodies of the performers work *within* the installation of the sculptures. “Activation” firstly refers to this integration of sculpture and dance in which the distinction between object practice and performance practice is dissolved. In other words, as the performers of *R.S.V.P.* use the sculptural objects to insert and hold themselves within space, they imbue the objects with the agency to define and structure the space around them.

Keeping with the inseparability of aesthetics and politics of Black cultural production in post-Watts Los Angeles, Nengudi and Hassinger’s performances of *R.S.V.P.* —i.e. their “activation” of the sculptures and spaces in which they perform—parallel the political activism of the era in which Black bodies collaborate to activate spaces as a means of protest. Although the execution of *R.S.V.P.* is a reflection of Nengudi’s aesthetic sensibilities as an artist, the collaborative improvisational nature of the *R.S.V.P.* performances was a strategy to combat structures of racism and exclusion that discursively shaped the lived experience Black artists and residents of Los Angeles. Furthermore, engaging in these practices asserted both the identity and the right of Black

bodies to claim site as their own. Therefore, *R.S.V.P.* must be understood as politicized performance practice in light of its collaborative and improvisational qualities.

In order to better grasp the strategic function of collaboration and improvisation inherent to *R.S.V.P.*, it is important to locate these practices within Nengudi's other performance work in 1970s Los Angeles, particularly the 1978 performance *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*. David Hammons's *Studio Z*, a loose collective of male and female LA artists that included Nengudi, Hassinger, Hammons, Houston Conwill, Frank Parker, staged the performance. Funded by a grant from LA's CETA program, a governmental program of the 1970s that commissioned artists to produce work for public spaces around California, the Brockman Gallery sponsored the performance. As Nengudi explains, the goal and projects of *Studio Z* differed greatly from the art typically supported by the Brockman Gallery. Nengudi states, "We [the Studio Z collective] were interested in applying performative interactions to our practices. We wanted to break with the exclusive studio solo relationship between an artist and their work ... We were interested in this kind of total theatre thing."¹⁹ To create this kind of 'total theatre' effect *Freeway Fets* was performed by an ensemble of artists, set in a public outdoor space, and employed the use of costumes, live music, and dance.

Ceremony was performed underneath a freeway overpass off Pico Boulevard in Los Angeles (Figure 2.4). The site was selected because it was adjacent to several Latino and Native American communities at the time, highlighting the desire of the city's urban population of artists to define their presence within Los Angeles through social action.

¹⁹ Transcript of Oral History Interview with Senga Nengudi conducted by Elissa Auther, 13.

According to Nengudi, with its small palm trees and unpaved ground the space had a distinctly “African” feeling and energy. Hassinger credits Nengudi for wanting the performance to be not just outside the traditional studio space but outdoors as well. While *Ceremony for Freeway Fets* was a collaborative performance much of it was organized and developed by Nengudi including the costumes, the selection of site, and the incorporation of dance. Nengudi describes the event as a ceremony rather than a performance; one image features her consecrating and blessing the site for the event (Figure 2.5).

The energy of the ceremonial ritual and collaborative practice was meant to heal what Nengudi describes as a divide between black men and women within her community.²⁰ The ceremonial ritual, now grounded in its urban environment of Los Angeles, combines elements of African performance that seek to heal the residents of this specific site. For Nengudi much of this process is informed by the ritual practice of African ceremony, which she then tries to configure into her own performance practice. Explaining how she integrates these African practices into her performance work in Los Angeles she states: “I ... see the performance activity as fully bodied. In African ceremonies it is about ritual, art, movement, and the spirit (holy ghost so to speak). My African American history also of course greatly influenced me and how these (African) practices and philosophies translated over here. The praise house in the south is one

²⁰ Transcript of Oral History Interview with Senga Nengudi conducted by Elissa Auther, 16.

example.”²¹ Nengudi studied various forms of social dance and was well aware of the role dance plays in both African and African American culture:

Africanist theorists place specific emphasis on the expressive/dancing black body—and its relationship with music and orality—as the site of spiritual survival and expression. It, follows, then that in African diaspora religion, culture, and performance, spirit functions as embodied knowledge and contributes to and underlies meaning on deeply metaphysical cognitive, somatic planes.²²

In turn, as part of the *Ceremony for Freeway Fets* performance Nengudi positions the dancing/moving body as a powerful transmitter of knowledge—it has the ability to heal and affect change in relationships. Dance and performance are a means of survival for Black culture, both creative and spiritual.

Barbara McCullough attempted to film the performance, but keeping with the nature of improvisational performance, the film didn’t take. Instead, a series of photographs taken by fellow *Studio Z* member Roderick Kwaku Young, are what remain of *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*. The images document the performance itself, and like *R.S.V.P.*, the collaboration involved in setting up the performance. These include the prepping of the site and costumes, creating an explicit sense of theatre and staging. In Figure 2.6 Nengudi wears a white construction hard hat as she ties her pantyhose sculptures to the top of the massive cement pylons. Variations of her pantyhose sculptures were tied around the pillars that supported the overpass, the dangling entrails’ like forms of the sculptures could then dance as they moved with the wind. Nengudi designed the costumes for the performances – one image shows her carefully adjusting a

²¹ Senga Nengudi Interview Transcript conducted by Amelia Jones, 1.

²² Carl Paris “Reading Spirit and the Dancing Body in the Choreography of Ronald K. Brown and Reggie Wilson” in *Black Performance Theory*, ed. Thomas DeFrantz & Anita Gonzalez, (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2014), 100.

headdress on Maren Hassinger (Figure 2.7). The ceremony takes on a familial or generational component as well; Barbara McCullough reveals Nengudi had written the name of the performers children on the pantyhose sculptures attached to the pylons.²³ Some performers carried tall wooden talismanic like staffs wrapped in fabric, another carried an African flywhisk. Several images depict performers in flowing multicolored robes, the shapes of which recall the clothing of Yoruba or Kabuki dance rituals— dance practices Nengudi studied and integrated into her work. Artists wore these pantyhose headdresses and masks designed by Nengudi as they danced or played music.

The choice of elaborate costumes was meant to help facilitate the healing spiritual component of the performance (Figure 2.8). Nengudi explains how the costumes transformed her improvisational choreography stating, "... when I wore this mask, you know, that I created, it was like I had never worn a mask before, and it was like I was—I hate to say possessed, but I was—I was no longer myself, and this mask or whatever was going on allowed me to be freer, to you know, be more expansive with my movements and so on."²⁴ One image captures another performer in mid jump, suspended in the air in mid flight as he holds onto a talismanic like staff covered in decorations, as if the object allows them to ascend from one world into the next (Figure 2.9). Like Nengudi's description, several photographs depict performers with their arms spread wide, the outstretched robes of their costumes creating huge square shaped swaths of color that register as blurs of movement (Figure 2.10). The blurs of the head to toe costumes transform the performers presence as they seemingly oscillate between spirit/energy and

²³ Barbara McCullough, "Modern Art in Los Angeles: African American Avant-Gardes 1965 - 1990".

²⁴ Transcript of Oral History Interview with Senga Nengudi conducted by Elissa Auther, 17.

material. Incorporating material objects, such as the African flywhisk, masked costumes, pantyhose sculptures dangling from pylons, and talismanic staffs, gives the performers the ability to redefine their relationship with the space that surrounds them. Through utilizing these objects the performers are able to transform the space from a freeway overpass underneath Los Angeles's Pico Boulevard into a ceremonial site of healing. Like *R.S.V.P.*, objects and their incorporation within a collaborative improvisational performance practice allow performers to redefine and structure their relationship with one another as well as a performance space.

In an interview with Amelia Jones about performance art in Los Angeles, Hassinger explained that while the ceremonial dance portion was improvisational it was also inspired by the music that was played by a live band. Figure 2.11 features an orchestra of artists holding various musical instruments—drums, a bell, xylophone, flute and two saxophones are all visible. The improvisational quality of the *Ceremony for Freeway Fets* and *R.S.V.P.* performances, in which there is no set choreography to their performances and instead artists react to materials and the movements of their collaborators, stems from live jazz music. Translating jazz music into a visual aesthetic was a common practice for many in the Los Angeles Black Arts community of the 1970s. For example, in 1978 Ulysses Jenkins produced a short film titled *King David* that explored David Hammons's sculpture practice in Los Angeles during this time. In the video Hammons discusses a sculpture he made about jazz musician Charlie Parker, explaining the importance of jazz music as a means of Black expression, he states: "Music has been so consistent over the years, the art has been denied us for such a long

time...we're all still searching for the art form that expresses us best...jazz music is all we have that is truly ours."²⁵ This sentiment was not specific to just Hammons, Nengudi as well explicitly likened her own performance practice during the 1970s to that of a jazz musician.

In a 2003 interview with Amelia Jones, Jones asked Nengudi about the types of cultural art forms she was interested in while creating and performing *R.S.V.P.* and *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*. Nengudi responded to Jones' with a quote by jazz musician Ralph Ellison and prefaced her response with "This quote says it all.":

True jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment (as distinct from the uninspired commercial performance) springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest, each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity, as individual, as member of the collective and as link in the chain of tradition. Thus because jazz finds its very life in an improvisation upon tradition materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it.²⁶

Like *R.S.V.P.*, Ellison's explanation of group performance in relation to identity, draws on these same parallels of improvisation and collaboration, as well as how these elements are a part of a process that occurs *through* the actions of the body. First, whether it is a jazz musician playing instruments, the *Studio Z* members donning robes and talismanic staffs, or Nengudi dancing within the fleshy material of the *R.S.V.P.* sculptures—these performances are embodied in both action and objects, the physical action of *doing* is a way of *knowing*.

In her text *Sensational Flesh* scholar Amber Jamilla Musser further discusses this relationship between the body and identity, as well as flesh, writing:

²⁵ Barbara McCullough, *Shopping Bags, Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflection on Ritual Space*, 1981.

²⁶ Senga Nengudi Interview Transcript conducted by Amelia Jones, 3.

... thinking about flesh means thinking about embodiment, it articulates a particular relationship to embodiment in that it is mediated through the social. Flesh connects bodies to the external world by emphasizing the various conditions that make bodies visible in particular ways; it is about power and difference. Historically, flesh is the province of marginalized subjects... to equate women and others with racialized.²⁷

Key to Musser's explanation of the relationship between flesh and embodiment is that embodiment is created through the social; the relationship between flesh and the body is constructed through interactions with other bodies. Embodiment is a physical process—a series of actions and interactions such as those evident in *R.S.V.P.* or *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*. Like Nengudi's execution of the *R.S.V.P.* performances demonstrates, knowing the body is a necessarily collaborative process that is inherently improvisational because it is reacting to *other* bodies. Dressed in the leotards and pantyhose of ballet dancers (Figures 2.1 & 2.2), Nengudi and Hassinger's collaborative improvisational actions activate the performative quality of the sculptures and their material. This materiality plays a vital role in an analysis of *R.S.V.P.* as a performance versus a sculptural display. When *R.S.V.P.* is performed the flesh like quality of the sculptures is doubled and magnified. Elastic, pliable, able to extend and contract at the slightest tug, the *R.S.V.P.* sculptures become an extension of the performers bodies as they move.

In a large color photograph (Figure 2.12) Hassinger, dressed in the plain black leggings and leotard of a dancer, demonstrates the supportive quality of the material as it becomes an extension of her performing body. She holds out her arm as she balances on one leg, as if on a tight rope. Her left foot is grounded to the floor and her right foot

²⁷ Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism*, (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 20.

perpendicularly juts out towards the camera, toes pointed but blurred in mid movement. Her arms are stretched straight out as she looks down as if concentrating on balancing. In the background on the white walls and suspended from the ceiling of the gallery space hang other versions of the *R.S.V.P.* sculptures. Supporting her movements, or perhaps restricting them, a series of rubber band like legs of pantyhose are wrapped around her head, ribcage, and legs, and then attached to the wall. The sculptures appear to be stretched to their limit as Hassinger's body pulls them away from the wall, their sharp lines crisscrossing tangled over each other like geometric designs.

Shot from above, another color photograph (Figure 2.13) shows Hassinger laying on her back on the floor of the gallery. The anthropomorphic leg portions of the sculptures are stretched into wide V shapes that converge with Hassinger at the center. Though her black leotard and leggings are the same, it is difficult to tell if it is from the same performance as the preceding photograph—she is no longer intertwined with the sculpture in the same way and the material is stretched even further from the wall. She is twisted within four sets of pantyhose—one set over her hands and the other three over her legs. Both of her arms are directly up and her hands are through a center hole in the sculpture whose perimeter connects the two stretches of the material that appear as thin spider like legs. Hassinger's legs are inserted within the center of the sculptures in a similar fashion. On the gallery wall in between the stretched sculpture legs hangs another sculpture, its limp flaccid form a stark contrast to its surrounding elements, at its center an empty bodiless circle of material. There is no blurry movement and Hassinger appears still within the center of the material. The way Hassinger is configured within the

material makes it appear as if she is emerging from its center, as if the sculpture is giving birth to her as she is partially inside and partially outside its entanglements.

A similar photograph (Figure 2.14) builds on this concept of sculpture birthing performer, or in the case of this photograph, performer appears to be birthing sculpture. Instead of Hassinger lying prone on her back in the same all black dancers outfit, she sits up with her legs vertical in the air and open in a V shape. Her back is curved and she supports her weight on her hands placed behind her. One part of the sculpture is wrapped around her head, another her rib cage, and the rest around her legs. Her toes are pointed and resting on part of the sculpture as it stretches outwards. Hassinger's legs and the stretched pantyhose legs of the sculpture attached to the wall form an empty triangle cocoon of space, as if leaving space for an element that is about to merge from Hassinger's body.

In addition to the process of dance and the movement of the body, the material of the *R.S.V.P.* sculptures provides a freedom of movement because it mimics the flesh of the body. The similarity was intentional and a necessary part of the performance process. Nengudi developed the concept for *R.S.V.P.* after giving birth to her first child and watching her body stretch and expand, and she searched for a material that could reflect this same process for both the performer and the viewer of the experience. The elastic quality of the sculptures demonstrates how the body changes during motherhood, as well as Hassinger's movements within the sculptures that reflect the cyclical quality of birth and rebirth. Nengudi explains, "I wanted to express how I was feeling about my body and my mind. I had just had children, so I was investigating what my life looked like as an

observer as well as a person experiencing it. This led me to work with nylon stockings because I wanted to find something that had the elasticity, the texture, and even the coloring of the body.”²⁸ Situating the *R.S.V.P.* sculptures as flesh like bodies has important implications for their transition from static to inherently dynamic objects that perform as an extension of the body. Through the action of the expressive body, that of the performers as well as that of the material, the *R.S.V.P.* performances are a way for Nengudi to explore her personal relationship with her body as it underwent changes of time and motherhood.

There is also a clear tension present in Nengudi’s explanation about using the material in relation to her experiences as a mother. Although she states she selected the nylon pantyhose because it allowed her to explore how her body changed throughout pregnancy, as photos illustrate, Hassinger often activated *R.S.V.P.* without Nengudi. In regards to Hassinger’s solo performances of *R.S.V.P.* (depicted in Figures 2.12 – 2.14), Nengudi explains: “I asked her to interact with me in this sculpture. And all of the classic pieces are of her, of course, because it’s a cleaner image.”²⁹ Perhaps this assumption that Hassinger’s performances offered a cleaner image refer to this tension between dance and the politics of what constitutes the ideal body for performance. In a statement for Art Forum online in connection with *R.S.V.P.*’s contemporary performances, Nengudi explains that her choice of material reflects this very tension, this stress of existence: “I’ve incorporated used pantyhose from friends and thrift stores ... because they contain

²⁸ Senga Nengudi as told to Paige K. Bradley, Artist Statement, Art Forum, April 3, 2014. <http://artforum.com/words/id=46049>

²⁹ Transcript of Oral History Interview with Senga Nengudi conducted by Elissa Auther, 21

a residue of energy of stress left over from the person that had worn them before. It's an ideal material for this type of reflection because it can mostly come back into shape after it has been tested to its extreme limits.”³⁰

Hassinger's performances are in stark contrast to one of the only photographs of Nengudi's solo performances of *R.S.V.P.*. Unlike Hassinger's performances, Figure 2.15 depicts Nengudi removed from the entanglements of the sculptures. She conceals her body with a large black covering, highlighting the disassociation of her movements from the presence of both her body and the surrogate bodies of the *R.S.V.P.* sculptures with which she performs. In the image, dated from 1976, Nengudi appears to be squatting on the ground on the left side of the image; her body is concealed by a large black cloth with only her right arm and hair visible. Her black covering almost skims the floor as she is crouched down, making it appear as though she is hovering over the ground. Her hair and covering are the same jet-black color, the only discernible difference between them being their texture. Her single arm is directly vertical above her head as she holds up a long sinewy leg of the sculpture that stretches the length of the image; the other leg of the sculpture is tacked to the wall. Dangling from the still clearly visible crotch of the pantyhose sculpture is another set of pantyhose, with weighted swollen like pendulums that touch the floor. As an African American woman Nengudi's performative disassociation from her movements—in which her black covering displaces her from the movement of the sculptures—has a historical precedent in relation to slavery and motherhood, and she incorporated this history into her choice of materials:

³⁰ Senga Nengudi as told to Paige K. Bradley, Artist Statement.

I am working the nylon mesh because it relates to the elasticity of the human body. From tender, tight beginnings to sagging end ... The body can only stand so much push and pull until it gives away, never to resume its original shape. After giving birth to my own son, I thought of black wet-nurses suckling child after child—their own as well as those of others, until their breasts rested on their knees, their energies drained. My works are abstracted reflections of used bodies.³¹

During slavery, pregnancy and motherhood were experiences enslaved Black women were unable to control. These women were forcibly disassociated from their bodies, unable to even partially own or claim the experience of motherhood as either a physical process or one of an embodied identity. Nengudi's concealed performance in Figure 2.15 explores the nature of this disembodiment, a process from which one is both present and absent.

As illustrated in Figure 2.15, *R.S.V.P.* maintains a temporal continuity of Black female subjectivity in relation to both past and present experiences. As both a process and a product, *R.S.V.P.* is specifically informed by its relationship with Los Angeles during the 1970s but the continuity of the series occurs through the action of the performing body. The performing body within *R.S.V.P.* renders Los Angeles a space open to this same continuity, ultimately demonstrating the discursive nature of Los Angeles as site. *R.S.V.P.*'s redefining of site through performance and the actions of the body reveals a number of tensions in regards to the inherently political nature of performance practice. In her text *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* performance theorist Diana Taylor offers a poses a vital question in regards to the ephemerality of performance, "Debates about ephemerality of performance art, of course,

³¹ O. Donald Odita, "The Unseen, Inside Out: The Life and Art of Senga Nengudi," *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* 6-7 (Summer/Fall 1997): 27.

are profoundly political. Whose memories, traditions, and claims to history disappear if performance practices lack the staying power to transmit vital knowledge?”³²

R.S.V.P.'s transformation of space through the actions of the body challenges the theorization of performance as inherently ephemeral. For example, art historian Peggy Phelan has theorized that performance art in the United States, is defined by its own disappearance.³³ In her text *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* Phelan posits: “Performances only life is the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations: once it does so it becomes something other than performance. Performance ... becomes itself through disappearance.”³⁴ Nengudi's *R.S.V.P.* cannot be situated within Phelan's paradigm of performance for a number of reasons. First, Nengudi's sculptures carry the tension and action of the performing body. The material of the sculptures traces and holds the body's actions in both the assembling and constructing of the sculpture's forms, as well as their manipulation during the performances. Second, because different performers in different sites executed these *R.S.V.P.* performances, their impromptu and collaborative nature, grounded in the actions of the body, allows for continual re-performances. These continuous performances are able to occur because bodies themselves are entities that are not geographically or temporally fixed, their physical presence is fluid across time and space—as the contemporary iterations of *R.S.V.P.* demonstrate.

³² Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 5.

³³ Phelan, *Unmarked*, 146.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

In a performance from 2012 as a part of the *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* exhibition (Figure 2.16), Hassinger, with the help of Nengudi, activates the *R.S.V.P.* sculptures during the three-minute performance. Against a white wall inside of the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston are six sets of Nengudi's sculptures; their position on the wall is reminiscent of Hassinger's initial poses from the 1970s (Figures 2.12 – 2.14). Hassinger inserts herself within the material as Nengudi stands beside her. Hassinger stretches and pulls at the material tugging it from the wall, testing its flexibility and strength in relation to her movements. She bends forward, letting the support of the sculptures hold her up as she goes limp, and slowly pulls herself up. Hassinger then sits on the ground and extends her arms towards the top set of nylon stockings clearly out of her reach, Nengudi comes forward to pull them towards her. Nengudi gently places this material around Hassinger's head. With this new support, Hassinger slowly bends forward as she explores the support this new sculpture provides her. Nengudi then helps Hassinger remove herself from the entanglements of the sculptures, the performance ends when Nengudi has removed all of Hassinger's restraints, Nengudi then places a sand filled portion of the sculpture on the ground.

Understanding performance as an event that cannot be repeated fails to address the most critical components of *R.S.V.P.* – elements of improvisation, collaboration, and dance as vehicles for embodiment and identity. The consistency of *R.S.V.P.* as a performance comes from this exploration of the moving dancing body. Dance and ritual practice, like those utilized as a part of Nengudi's *R.S.V.P.*, are forms of embodied

knowledge. Embodied practice and embodied practice belong within what Taylor calls a *repertoire*, writing:

Embodied memory, because it is live, exceeds the archive's ability to capture it. But that does not mean that performance – as ritualized, formalized, or reiterative behavior – disappears. Performances also replicate themselves through their own structures and codes. This means that the repertoire, like the archive, is mediated. The process of selection memorization or internalization, and transmission takes place within (and in turn helps constitute) specific systems of re-presentation. Multiple forms of embodied acts are always present, though in constant state of againness. They reconstitute themselves, transmitting communal memories histories, and values from one group/generation to the next. Embodied and performance acts generate, record, and transmit knowledge.³⁵

In light of the *R.S.V.P.* performances from the mid 1970s and their reenactments that began in 2002, the series' emphasis on improvisation, collaboration, performance, and dance can in part be understood within this context of an embodied memory or *repertoire*. Taylor's model illustrates the importance of the performance element of *R.S.V.P.* and the series recreation, but Taylor's model also reveals a tension in disassociating objects from the agency of the body. *R.S.V.P.* does leave an archival trace through photographs and text-based accounts, but also through the sculptures themselves—sculptures that have stretched and expanded in correlation with the performers movements, through action. Understanding the repeated actions of the body as existing within a *repertoire* allows for different performers, sites, materials, and movements. The *R.S.V.P.* performances are in continuous states of flux because they are mediated through multiple bodies in collaboration—an inherently interactive and spontaneous process.

³⁵ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 21.

Through consistent re-performances across different geographical locations, bodies, and materials, *R.S.V.P.* becomes a type of ‘ritualized, formalized, reiterative behavior’. Taylor’s model explains the shifts in the dynamics of *R.S.V.P.* as inherent to the nature of the *repertoire* and embodied practice explaining: “As opposed to supposedly stable objects in the archive, the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same. The repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning.”³⁶ Through a manipulation of found objects from specific sites, *R.S.V.P.* undergoes this same transformation of meaning. Nengudi’s *R.S.V.P.* enacts and explores various aspects of Black femininity in relation to being both an artist and a mother. Nengudi takes the found object of nylon mesh pantyhose, and makes it relational across different times and spaces—the material references a post-Watts assemblage practice, the community of female friends that supported her creative process, as well as what she described as the bodies of Black wet nurses. This material then gathers a different significance as it ages, reflecting the ever-changing, impermanent body, one that is unfixed in terms of material, site, or space. Through a consistent reconfiguration of the relationship between site and the body, *R.S.V.P.* renders the body *as* site, and site as constituted *through* the body. Thus the *R.S.V.P.* sculptures and performances can be understood as rituals that explore the complicated nature of identity, one that occurs through a continuous destabilization and restructuring of the relationship between body, object, and site.

³⁶ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 21.

Conclusion

As David Hammons explained in the introduction to this thesis, during the 1960s and 70s some dismissed Nengudi's aesthetic as inherently apolitical, proposing work like *R.S.V.P.* was simply not 'Black art'. One of the central themes discussed by Black artists during meetings at both David Hammons's studio space and Suzanne Jackson's Gallery 32 was this idea of a singular Black aesthetic – what were the limitations and was such an aesthetic possible across a variety of mediums? Regardless of the various answers to the questions these artists posed, all who participated in the discussions were committed to the idea of making art that spoke to their Black experience, and Nengudi's *R.S.V.P.* is no exception. *R.S.V.P.* redefines Black art of the 1970s, and even today, through shifting away from fixed representations and instead emphasizing a lived and therefore inherently interactive experience.

These lived experiences were a part of the defining circumstances surrounding the practices of Black artists in 1970s Los Angeles. The social upheaval of the Watts Rebellions of 1965 and the ethos of Noah Purifoy's preceding *66 Signs* exhibition demanded Black artists reexamine how their work could speak to their experiences within this space. In addition to creating artwork that made their experiences visible, they equally sought to change the physical dynamics of Los Angeles as a site by repurposing and transforming both space and material. Black artists and activists created galleries and exhibition spaces like the Brockman Gallery and Gallery 32 that would nurture and support one another's work. Black artists improvised, transforming sites like the Pearl C. Woods Gallery from church to exhibition space. Assemblage artists gathered materials

from the rubble of destruction to repurpose into sculpture. Spaces under freeway overpasses became sites of transformation, combining jazz, healing, and dance. Black artists improvised and collaborated on performance work, their actions restructuring Los Angeles as a space that made their presence visible.

For *R.S.V.P.* the used pantyhose of friends and family became sculptural objects that even when stretched, pulled, and stuffed, refused to break. The *R.S.V.P.* sculptures clung to walls, ceilings, and light fixtures, paradoxically both reflecting and defining their environment. This reflective process is key in understanding *R.S.V.P.*. In regards to the title of the series Nengudi stated, “I really have this thing about the viewer saying something to me. I want you to respond. I want you—I’m inviting you to respond to this work. And if it has any power at all it will—you will respond to it ... it was an invitation.”¹ Through the relatedness of the found material of the sculptures and their movements that become an extension of the performing body, *R.S.V.P. Répondez S’il Vous Plaît* solicits a response from the viewer. The fleshy bodies of the *R.S.V.P.* sculptures question the nature of space as inherently fixed or static, and in turn this process of interaction and questioning redefines the structure of said space.

Nengudi’s *R.S.V.P.* proposes the actions of the body as a reflection of the space in which it interacts. In *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology* author Martin C. Dillon proposes a similar interactive and inherently dynamic relationship between the body and space:

The body also has an interrogative function: it is questioning of the world, and its mobility is a response to the questions the world raises ... The active, constituting, centrifugal role of the body, its transcendental operation is inconceivable apart from its receptive, responsive existence as flesh amidst the

¹ Elissa Auther, “Interview with Senga Nengudi,” *Smithsonian Institute*, July 9, 2013, 18.

flesh of the world. The body does not synthesize the world *ex nihilo*; the body seeks understanding from the bodies with which it interacts.² Pg. 146.

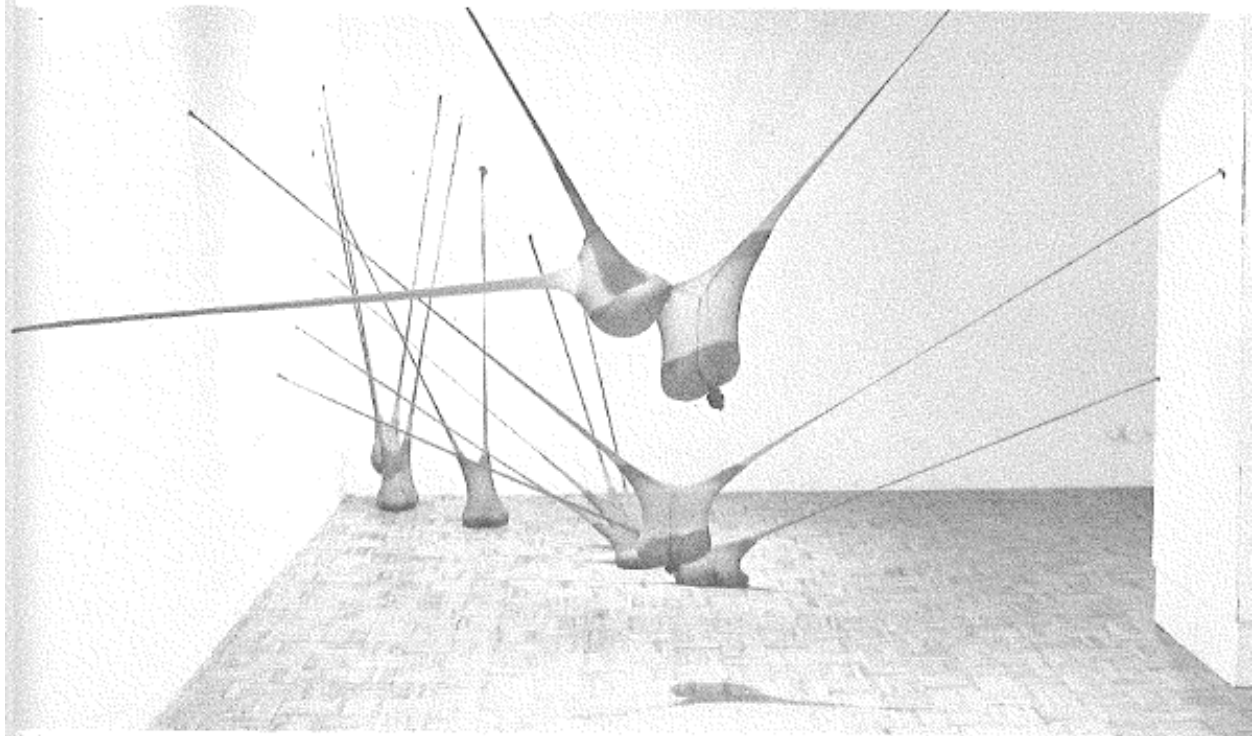
Central to Dillon's proposal is the idea that bodies and flesh are understood through interactions with other bodies. Bodies ask questions and they solicit a response. The *R.S.V.P.* sculptures and performances propose a reflective experience of what it means to exist within a space—specifically a space that consistently seeks to disassociate one from one's own body, that tries to deny the right of said body to be visible. As a series of performances that span decades, coasts, and the bodies of various performers, *R.S.V.P.* demonstrates the discursive nature of Los Angeles as site.

As both performances and sculptures Nengudi's *R.S.V.P.* mirrors the relationship bodies have within Los Angeles as site—bodies are put under outside stressors and have to shift in accordance to the systems of exclusion within this space. But as the work illustrates, certain bodies—the racialized body, the feminine body, the aging body—encounter a very different and necessarily mutable existence than others. The dynamism of this mutability is reflected in these recreations. As the series shifts with time, both the objects and performances are reinscripted—they ask new questions. The power of *R.S.V.P.* lies in its ability to allow every iteration of the series open to inhabitation by new performers, new materials, within new spaces, and with each recreation renewed possibilities of subversion and resistance.

² Martin C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* 2nd Edition, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997) 146.

Figures

Figure 0.1. Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P. I*, 1977.



10. SENGA NENGUDI. I. 1977

Figure 1.1. Senga Nengudi, *Water Compositions*, 1969.



Figure 1.2. Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P.*, 1975/2003



Figure 1.3 Noah Purifoy, *Sir Watts*, 1966.



Figure 1.4. David Hammons, *Injustice Case*, 1970.



Figure 1.5. Betye Saar, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1969.



Figure 1.6. Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P.*, 1976.



Figure 1.7. Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P.*, 1976.



Figure 1.8. Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P.*, 1975.



Figure 1.9. Exhibition announcement for *Sapphire, You've come a long way, baby.* 1970.

gallery 32

SAPPHIRE SHOW

G. Bohanon *S. Jackson* *B. Sarr*



You've come a long way, baby.



S. Irons *Y. Cole Meo* *E. Abdulrashid*

July 4th Thru July 9th Daily 3:00 to 7:00pm Reception Sat. July 4th 7:00 to 10:00

THE GRANADA BLDGS./672 SOUTH LAFAYETTE PARK PLACE LOS ANGELES 90057/386-4169

Figure 2.1. *R.S.V.P.*, Senga Nengudi & Maren Hassinger, 1977.

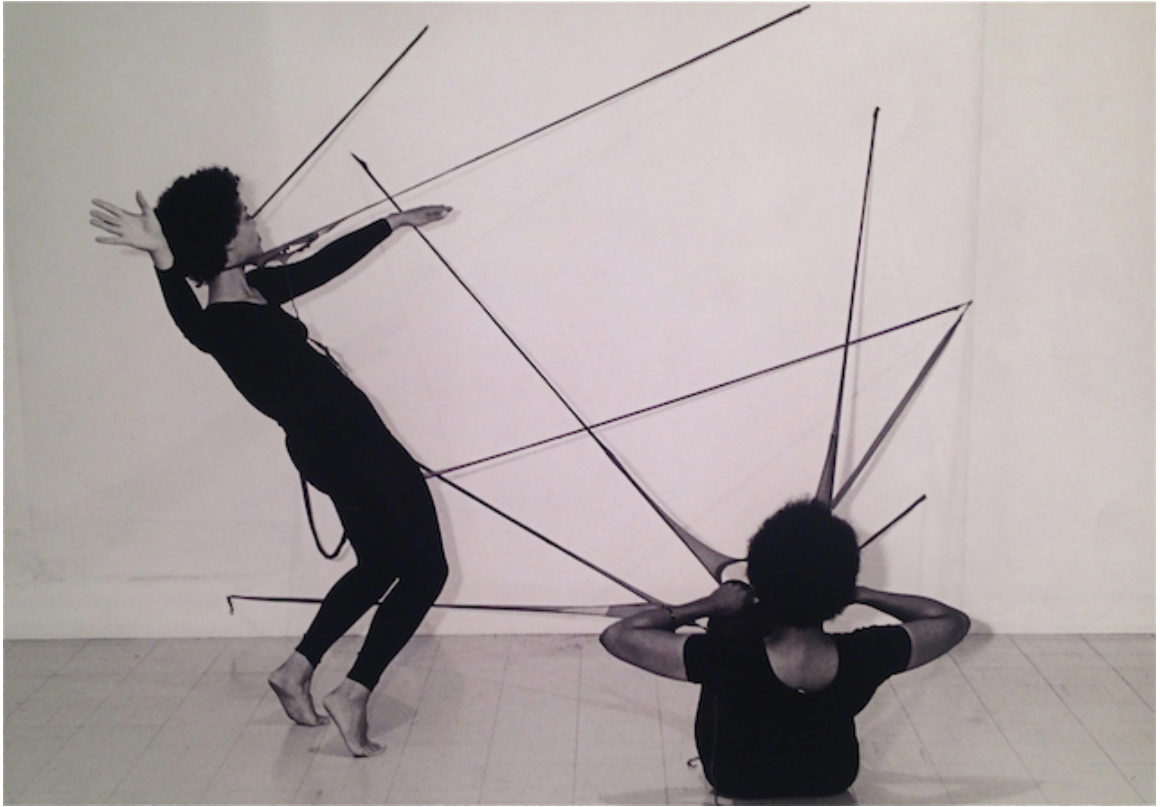


Figure 2.2. *R.S.V.P.*, Senga Nengudi & Maren Hassinger, 1977.



Figure 2.3. Senga Nengudi & Maren Hassinger, 1977



Figure 2.4, Senga Nengudi & Studio Z, *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*, 1978.



Figure 2.5, Senga Nengudi & Studio Z, *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*, 1978.



Figure 2.6. Senga Nengudi and Studio Z, *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*, 1978.



Figure 2.7. Senga Nengudi and Studio Z, *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*, 1978.



Figure 2.8. Senga Nengudi and Studio Z, *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*, 1978.



Figure 2.9. Senga Nengudi and Studio Z, *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*, 1978.



Figure 2.10. Senga Nengudi and Studio Z, *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*, 1978.



Figure 2.11. Senga Nengudi and Studio Z, *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*, 1978.



Figure 2.12. Senga Nengudi, activated by Maren Hassinger, *R.S.V.P.*, 1977



Figure 2.13. Senga Nengudi, activated by Maren Hassinger, *R.S.V.P.*, 1977



Figure 2.14. Senga Nengudi, activated by Maren Hassinger, *R.S.V.P.*, 1977



Figure 2.15. Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P.*, 1977



Figure 2.16. Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger, Still from *R.S.V.P.*, 1977/2012



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