The Materiality of Sand and Nylon:

Challenging Museological Convention and Conservation in Senga Nengudi's *R.S.V.P.* Series

Julia Lamare

A Thesis in The Department of Art History

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Master of Arts (Art History)

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

April 2025

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Julia Lamare

Entitled: The Materiality of Sand and Nylon: Challenging Museological Convention and Conservation in Senga Nengudi's R.S.V.P. Series

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Art History)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final examining committee:

Dr. Rebecca Duclos Examiner

Examiner

Dr. Alice Ming Wai Jim Thesis Supervisor(s)

Thesis Supervisor(s)

Approved by

Dr. Nicola Pezolet Chair of Department

Annie Gérin Dean Faculty of Fine Arts

Abstract

The Materiality of Sand and Nylon:

Challenging Museological Convention and Conservation in Senga Nengudi's *R.S.V.P.* Series

Julia Lamare

This thesis considers the ways in which artist Senga Nengudi's *R.S.V.P.* series (1975-ongoing) occupies museum collections presently and how the works' material conditions affect conservation processes. Further, this thesis seeks to understand Nengudi's *R.S.V.P.* series as an unruly and rebellious form of cultural invention and intervention in the museum. *R.S.V.P.* is a series of sculptural and performative artworks that utilise worn, nylon pantyhose filled with sand to create bulbous, bodily forms, tautly pinned and stretched across the gallery walls or resting weighty upon the gallery floor. Bringing together interdisciplinary research, this thesis contends with the work's materiality of pantyhose, sand, and its connection to skin, tactility, and the Black body to address the ongoing acquisition and conservation of *R.S.V.P.* within museums. As artworks that are ephemeral, tactile, and performative, they possess sensorial and haptic qualities that rebel against museological systems. By drawing on Black studies, contemporary conservation theories, and performance studies, this thesis calls for an ethics of care in attending to *R.S.V.P.* within a museological collection. Ultimately, it proposes that *R.S.V.P.* has the potential to redirect conservation processes away from traditional methods predicated on restoration and authenticity, urging institutions to engage with works in ways that meaningfully attend to their material and conceptual complexities.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Alice Ming Wai Jim for her guidance on this thesis, for the fruitful challenges that strengthened my work, and for the encouragement in getting to the finish line. Thank you to my second reader, Dr. Rebecca Duclos, for your generous and thoughtful feedback, and for offering many more kernels to explore that extend far beyond these pages. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to the Art History faculty at Concordia. Thank you to Dr. May Chew, Dr. Joana Joachim, and Dr. Julia Skelly for your rigorous and affecting courses, and for allowing me to think openly and creatively.

To my peers, I could not have asked for a better cohort to share this time and degree with. Thank you for being great friends, both inside and outside of the classroom. Safia, Kitty, and Margot, thank you for the endless support, commiserating, and yapping, and for making Montreal feel like a home. None of this would have been possible without you. Margot, a special thank you to you for the many hours spent reading and re-reading my work and helping me think through my ideas.

To my longtime friend Jules, I'm grateful to have navigated this grad school journey with you, even if at a distance. Thank you for always listening to me and for lending me your eyes and thoughts through many drafts of this work. And Doenja, thank you for your unending enthusiasm and encouragement, and for showing me the way through academia.

To my family, who unequivocally supported me going back to school, thank you for the infinite ways you are there for me. Finally, Rosa, thank you for your limitless and unwavering love and support, always, but especially over these last two years. I cannot begin to express how grateful I am to have you as a partner. Thank you for being my number one cheerleader.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

In a 2021 review of the catalogue and exhibition *Senga Nengudi: Topologien / Topologies,* art historian Lauren Taylor asks,

> Can a museum display recognize the elements of [Senga] Nengudi's practice that deliberately eschew institutional norms without draining those works of their significance? To exclude such works would produce a warped and incomplete image of the artist's career—but to absorb them could be equally problematic, undermining their fundamental attachments to site, interactivity, and community.[1]

Her query begins to address the tension between the inclusion or exclusion of African-American artist Senga Nengudi's artwork in museums. This thesis seeks to understand Nengudi's *R.S.V.P.* series (1975-present) as an unruly and rebellious form of cultural invention and intervention in the museum. The overall aim of this thesis is to develop a deep material understanding of Nengudi's work to examine the implications of its collection, and what an ethics of care in its conservation may resemble.

Bringing together interdisciplinary research, this thesis considers the ways in which Nengudi's *R.S.V.P.* series occupies museum collections presently and how the works' material conditions affect conservation processes. It contends that the work's relationship to the Black body and ongoing material persistence resists the conditions and narratives of dispossession that have long been created and enforced by the Western museum. I argue that *R.S.V.P.*'s ephemeral, transient, haptic, and sensorial qualities—which are entangled with its conceptual underpinnings and historical contexts—give the work the capacity to rebel against taxonomic museological

---

[1] Lauren Taylor, review of *Senga Nengudi: Topologies*, by Matthias Mühling and Stephanie Weber, eds. CAA Reviews, December 9, 2021. Though Taylor's text is brief as an exhibition review, her ruminations importantly indicate a gap in, and the relevance of, such research. *Senga Nengudi: Topologien / Topologies* (hereafter referred to as *Topologies)* is a monograph on Nengudi, produced alongside a travelling retrospective exhibition of the artist's work. It was presented at the Lenbachhaus, Munich (2019); Museo de Arte de São Paulo (2020); the Denver Art Museum (2020-21); and the Philadelphia Museum of Art (2021).

systems that define artworks today. To situate my research on the acquisition and conservation of Nengudi's *R.S.V.P.* works, I focus on major museum collections in the United States, as well as the political conditions, historically and contemporarily, surrounding the work in a North American context.[2]

Senga Nengudi, born Sue Irons in Chicago in 1943, grew up in Pasadena and Los Angeles and continued to develop her artistic career across Southern California and on the East Coast during a politically charged era marked by racial social unrest in the US. The civil rights movement and other Black activist actions, such as the Black Power and Black Arts Movements were central to this place and time. Most well-known for her *R.S.V.P.* series, Nengudi's expansive and experimental practice is centred around abstraction, and shaped through sensorial sculptural forms, guided by or incorporating dance and movement. Known for her pivotal role in Black avant-garde artistic communities in LA in the 1970s, collaborative action is central to her practice. Nengudi's work has been the subject of many exhibitions, most recently: *Las Vegas Ikebana: Maren Hassinger & Senga Nengudi*, curated by Allie Tepper in 2024.[3] Additionally, her work has been featured in numerous group exhibitions focusing on the inscription of Black artistic practice in major museums, including *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* (2012-14), curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver; *Now Dig This!: Art and Black*

[2] Nengudi's work has also been acquired in European museum collections, including the Centre Pompidou, Paris; Lenbachhaus, Munich; Museum Ludwig, Cologne; Migros Museum of Contemporary Art, Zurich; and Tate Modern, London. Additionally, beyond the previously mentioned *Topologies*, her work has been widely shown in solo and group exhibitions outside of the US, including *Viva Arte Viva*, 57th Venice Biennale (2017); *Senga Nengudi*, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds (2018-19) and Fruitmarket, Edinburgh (2019); *Gossamer*, Carl Freedman Gallery, Margate (2019); *Senga Nengudi: Hourglass*, Oakville Galleries (2021); *Senga Nengudi—A Collaboration with Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch*, Von der Heydt-Museum, Wuppertal (2022-23); *Choregraphies of the Impossible*, 35th Bienal de São Paulo (2023); and *Woven Histories: Textiles and Modern Abstraction*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (2025); among others.

[3] The exhibition was presented at the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College, Portland and will be accompanied by a forthcoming publication including writing by Allie Tepper, Lowery Stokes Sims, Leslie King-Hammond, Kemi Adeyemi, Sampada Aranke, and Steffani Jemison. See: Allie Tepper, ed, *Las Vegas Ikebana: Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi* (Pacific and Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College, 2025).

Los Angeles 1960–1980 (2011-13), curated by Kellie Jones; and *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85* (2017-18), curated by Catherine Morris and Rujeko Hockley.[4]

Nengudi made her first nylon mesh work in 1975.[5] It would be called *R.S.V.P.*, and would later become an ongoing endeavour of creating, recreating, and stretching the possibilities of an artwork over decades. *R.S.V.P.* is an iterative series of artworks that evokes the Black body, presence, and resilience, defining its own material language and methods. The early 2000s saw a resurgence of the series, leading to widespread exhibition and acquisition of the pieces across mainstream museums—sites that had not readily welcomed practices by Black women in previous decades. Discussing institutional exclusion in the 1970s, Nengudi affirms, "We were fighting against racism, fighting against [not] getting into the museums and so on."[6] Consisting of numerous versions and recreations, *R.S.V.P.* entangles modalities of artmaking from sculpture and installation to performance, complicating how these categories can be understood and function art historically. The ungraspability of this series and its refusal of easy categorization is

---

[4] *Radical Presence* was exhibited at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (2012); in two parts in New York at Grey Art Gallery, New York University and The Studio Museum in Harlem (2014); and at The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2014). *Now Dig This!* was presented at Hammer Museum, LA (2011); MoMA PS1, NY (2012); and the College Museum of Art, Williamstown (2013). *We Wanted a Revolution* was exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum (2017); the California African American Museum, LA (2017-18); the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo (2018); and The Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston (2018). Each of these exhibitions is accompanied by a major publication. For a more comprehensive list of Nengudi's exhibition history see: "Senga Nengudi," Sprüth Magers. Accessed January 9, 2025. https://spruethmagers.com/artists/senga-nengudi/.

[5] When the works were first produced, *R.S.V.P.* was used as a title for certain pieces, whereas the series was more broadly referred to as "nylon-mesh works." It was in a 1977 exhibition at Just Above Midtown Gallery (JAM), NY eponymously titled *R.S.V.P.*, that this name came into use to refer to the series broadly. Since then, and in more recent scholarship, *R.S.V.P.* and "nylon-mesh works" continue to be used to refer to the series collectively. For more on this exhibition, see pages 30-31.

[6] Senga Nengudi interviewed by Bridget R. Cooks and Amanda Tewes, "Black Avant Garde Visual and Performance Artist," 69. Further commenting on exclusion and resilience of artists during this time, Nengudi states, "We have stuff inside of us that has to be expressed. Even if the institutions aren't recognizing us, we can't let that stop us. We just have to go forward with what we are doing." Senga Nengudi interviewed by Allie Tepper, "Individual Collective: A Conversation with Senga Nengudi," in *Side by Side: Collaborative Artistic Practices in the United States, 1960s–1980s*, edited by Gwyneth Shanks and Allie Tepper, Vol. III of the Living Collections Catalogue (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2020).

reflected in the immense variety of nomenclature used to refer to the work.[7] The variation in terminology is not merely an issue of language but rather is indicative of *R.S.V.P.*'s resistance to taxonomic categories that are imposed upon artworks by institutions to indubitably define them.

R.S.V.P. makes use of worn, nylon pantyhose filled with sand to create bulbous, weighty, bodily forms that are tautly pinned and stretched across the gallery walls or lying slumped across the floor (figs. 1-2). Extending the pantyhose to their tensile limit creates an energetic tension that suggests the possibility of the moment where the material extent is met while drawing attention to their elastic possibilities. As the title *Répondez S'il Vous Plaît (Please respond)* suggests, these works were made to evoke sensorial and haptic encounters for their audiences. Using worn pantyhose is significant for Nengudi as they carry the residues and stories of the women who previously donned them. The nylon's material memories bear bodily traces, as well as the affective histories and, importantly, collective memories of Black life beyond a singular person. Art historian Carol Hunt attests to the faculties of worn textiles, maintaining that "well-used fabric has a capacity—if not unique then unusually powerful—to embody both a communal, historical moment and a local individual, specific story."[8] These affective residues in *R.S.V.P.* hold space for difficult histories of dispossession and violence against Black women. As contemporary art and media scholar Rizvana Bradley gently articulates, "Nengudi's sculptural

---

[7] During my research process, I compiled a list of these different terminologies—gathered from academic texts, media sources, and exhibition materials present in this thesis—which consists of: live sculptural event, performance-based sculptures, a delicate pas de deux between sculpture and performance, sculptural performance, nylon works, nylon sculptures, sculptural installation, soft sculptures, performative sculpture, performance objects, free-form sculptures, suspended pantyhose sculptures, nylon mesh works, antiform sculpture, inventive sculptures, and body-like sculptures. The variety of terms with which *R.S.V.P.* has been described mirrors the work's expansiveness. This list is not exhaustive and can continue to grow.

[8] Carole Hunt, "Worn clothes and textiles as archives of memory," *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty* 5, no. 2 (2014): 226. For more on the political and emotive powers of used textiles in art see: Alice Dolan and Sally Holloway, "Emotional Textiles: An Introduction," *TEXTILE* 14, no.2 (2016): 152-159 and Megan Corbin and Daniela Johannes, "Activating Affect Aura Through Art: clothing as witness," *Angelaki* 27, no.2 (2022): 44-56.

practice touches upon the difficult embodied aspects of black life, history, and culture."[9] *R.S.V.P.* is positioned in relation to historical and intimate labours performed by Black women, as well as the artist's own experiences with pregnancy.[10] Reflecting on *R.S.V.P.* Nengudi states,

> I am working with 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 way, 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—visual images that serve my aesthetic decisions as well as my ideas.[11]

Importantly, Nengudi's work is also grounded in possibility and futurity, asserting the presence of Black life through its rebellious actions and forms.

Scholar Katherine McKittrick puts forth the notion of Black rebellion as a mode of survival that is the crucial re/invention of artistic or cultural forms that hold and care for Black life. Rebellion is a method of pronouncing Black livingness in dehumanising contexts.[12] With

---

[9] Rizvana Bradley, "Transferred Flesh: Reflections on Senga Nengudi's *R.S.V.P.*," *TDR: The Drama Review* 59, no. 1 (2015): 164.

[10] The difficult histories *R.S.V.P.* holds space for can be related to the medical exploitation of Black women, which are the root of ongoing bio-medical racism today for Black birthing people in particular. In 2021, the National Center for Health Statistics, US reported that mortality rates for Black birthing people was 2.6 times higher than for white birthing people, a stark testament of the continuation of this crisis. For more, see: Donna L. Hoyert, "Maternal Mortality Rates in the United States, 2021," NCHS Health E-Stats, Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (March 2023) and Geraldine Oribhabor, et al., "A Mother's Cry: A Race to Eliminate the Influence of Racial Disparities on Maternal Morbidity and Mortality Rates Among Black Women in America," *Cureus* 12, no.7 (July 15, 2020):1-4. This information continues to be under reported and represented in the US and Canada. For a less statistical examination of these issues, and a recent comprehensive study on obstetric racism and reproductive injustice in maternity care in Canada, see: Priscilla N Boakye, et al., "Obstetric racism and perceived quality of maternity care in Canada: Voices of Black women," *Women's Health* 19 (2023): 1–13. For further sources on the entanglement of the history of enslavement and ongoing structural medical racism, see: Deirdre Cooper Owens and Sharla M. Fett, "Black Maternal and Infant Health: Historical Legacies of Slavery," *American Journal of Public Health* 109 no. 1 (October 2019): 1342–1345; Emily West and R. J. Knight. "Mothers' Milk: Slavery, Wet-Nursing, and Black and White Women in the Antebellum South," *Journal of Southern History* 83, no. 1 (2017): 37-68; and Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987). This by no means an expansive examination of this issue, deserving of extensive analysis, beyond the confines of this note.

[11] Senga Nengudi artist statement on nylon mesh works 1977, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Senga Nengudi Papers, 1966-2017, reproduced in: Stephanie Weber and Matthias Mühling, eds. *Senga Nengudi: Topologien / Topologies* (Munich: Hirmer, 2019), 156.

[12] In particular, McKittrick situates the invention of Black music as a pronouncement of Black humanity emerging out of, against, and despite the conditions of enslavement.

this, she traces how cultural creations are rebellious acts, which subvert colonial systems that dispossess and dehumanise Black life. Though McKittrick's research is primarily oriented around Black music invention, it accounts for broader cultural practices, including the visual arts. She argues that "academic institutions colonize the production of knowledge by defining, policing, determining, financing, what categories […] should live and die."[13] With these considerations in mind, I draw similarities between academic institutions and mainstream museums that have developed taxonomic systems for organizing knowledge.[14] This "act of relentless categorization"[15] is discipline—which McKittrick defines as canonical academic frameworks used to control people, identities, and life—and does not account for Black life and embodied knowledge.[16] For McKittrick, Black methodologies have the capacity to undo this oppressive discipline and use rebellion as a tool for resistance.[17] It is through this understanding that I aim to consider how the rebellious registers of *R.S.V.P.*'s material behaviour, and its anti-categorical nature, operate in the site of the present-day museum collection.

---

[13] Katherine McKittrick, "The Smallest Cell Remembers a Sound," in *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 40.
[14] As McKittrick continues to attest, "This story is not meant to eschew academic institutions." Rather she looks towards how Black methods and methodologies, within and external to academia can challenge or undo discipline. McKittrick, "The Smallest Cell," 41. Similarly, I do not dismiss the important work undertaken within museum and academic spaces, such as in university galleries, alternative institutional models, and in many facets of museum and educational programming, which seek to create systemic change. While a broader consideration of such radical work, practitioners and spaces is warranted, it falls outside the scope of this research, wherein I looked to traditional museum structures.
[14] McKittrick, "The Smallest Cell," 41.
[15] McKittrick, "The Smallest Cell," 35.
[16] McKittrick understands "discipline, disciplinarity, disciplined thought, as academic *areas* of study," and not the rigorous and careful/ing "*practice and work of study*." McKittrick, "The Smallest Cell," 35 (n2). For a further discussion on McKittrick's understanding of discipline, see pages 24-25.
[17] McKittrick, "The Smallest Cell," 41.

Literature Review and Methodology

While Nengudi's work is well studied and the subject of widespread exhibition, what has become evident through my research is the limited discussion on the status of the work in museum collections. Previous research on the artist has focused largely on varying facets of the production and significance of Nengudi's major artworks, her life, her career, and her profound artistic contributions. It is crucial to further investigate the relation of *R.S.V.P.* to the museum because of the sustained interest in the work, as is evidenced by its continual acquisition by major institutions. This generates a need to better understand the responsibility of museums to reconsider how they conserve artworks originally made to be ephemeral and engaged through tactile encounter or performance. Therefore, this thesis queries what it means for an artwork created to be governed by movement and bodily connection to be situated in a museological container, and how institutions can ethically attend to it. To this end, this research explores how *R.S.V.P.* has the potential to critically urge museums to reconsider and redefine their ways of working. The objectives of this thesis are to: 1) develop a deep material understanding of the work that centralizes the inextricable connections between its materiality and conceptual conceits; 2) examine how *R.S.V.P.*'s unruly materiality rebels against traditional conservation methods and processes rooted in notions of fixity and authenticity; and 3) contextualize the artwork's present-day relationship to the museum by incorporating a historical examination of the exclusion or complicated inclusion of artworks by Black artists in institutional collections. This thesis draws on contemporary and new materialist art histories; performance, museum, and conservation studies; and is informed by Black studies theories and methodologies.

To provide the framework through which to understand historical perspectives on Nengudi's work, I draw primarily on past curatorial scholarship. In particular, I look toward

curator Linda Goode Bryant, who was a key figure in supporting the development of Nengudi's work and the *R.S.V.P.* series.[18] To situate Nengudi's work in the contemporary moment, I build upon contemporary art historical scholarship, notably by Rizvana Bradley, Rachel Jane Carroll, Sarah Louise Cowan, Amelia Jones, and Ellen Y. Tani. Additionally, I refer to exhibition-related materials, including catalogues, essays, and press materials, contextualizing current curatorial frameworks surrounding her work. Pivotal to this research is *Topologies*, with key contributions by Kellie Jones, Ian Edward Wallace, and Stephanie Weber.[19] Each scholar, curator, or author approaches Nengudi's practice from a distinct position, introducing numerous ways to comprehend her work. Weber offers a thorough overview of Nengudi's practice, life, and most salient works, providing essential context to this thesis.[20] Wallace and Bradley primarily delve into the performative aspects of Nengudi's practice.[21] Both authors consider how physical corporeal and material contact connects *R.S.V.P.* to difficult histories while simultaneously signaling possibility. Tani analyses the diverse cultural influences and personal experiences that profoundly shaped Nengudi's artistic practice, focusing on how themes of transformation and mobility are paramount to her work.[22]

A central focus of this thesis is developing a material understanding of the work through an examination of the relationship between three integral components of *R.S.V.P.*—haptics, pantyhose/nylon, and sand—which are all tethered to matter, skin, and tactility. Nengudi's use of

---

[18] Linda Goode Bryant and Marcy S. Phillips, *Contextures* (New York: Just Above Midtown, 1978).
[19] Kellie Jones, "The World According to Z," Ian Edward Wallace, "Used Bodies," Stephanie Weber, "Dynamic Topologies: On Consistency and Transience in the Work of Senga Nengudi," in *Senga Nengudi: Topologien / Topologies*, ed. Stephanie Weber and Matthias Mühling (Munich: Hirmer, 2019). Additional contributors include Catherine Wood, Linda Goode Byrant, and Barbara McCullough.
[20] Stephanie Weber, "Dynamic Topologies," 36-51.
[21] Rizvana Bradley, "Transferred Flesh: Reflections on Senga Nengudi's *R.S.V.P.*," *TDR: The Drama Review* 59, no. 1 (2015): 161-166 and Ian Edward Wallace, "Use Bodies," 134-140.
[22] Ellen Y. Tani, "'Really African, and Really Kabuki Too': Afro-Asian Possibility in the Work of Senga Nengudi," in *Transnational Perspectives on Feminism and Art, 1960-1985*, ed. Jen Kennedy, Trista Mallory, Angelique Szymanek (London: Routledge, 2021), 169-183.

pantyhose is most comprehensively studied by Carroll, whose research provides an in-depth analysis of nylon's social, political, historical, and cultural implications.[23] Carroll orients her arguments around the connection between nylon, labour, and extractive power while illustrating how Nengudi recontextualizes pantyhose within a lexicon of Black feminist aesthetics. Analysing the relationship between pantyhose and skin, I draw on skin studies research put forth in Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacy's book *Thinking Through the Skin*.[24] In particular, Shirley Tate's contribution to the anthology and Cowan's article *To Touch Time: U.S. Black Feminist Modernist Sculpture in the 1970s and 1980s* are essential in considering the racialization of skin.[25] Though sand is acknowledged by the aforementioned scholars, few have extensively addressed its role in *R.S.V.P*. In her essay for *Topologies*, Kellie Jones concisely discusses sand through Vanessa Agard-Jones' text "What the Sands Remember," which examines sand as a metaphor in Black histories and memory.[26] Agard-Jones' theories become a central touchstone for understanding the symbolic aspects of the material in *R.S.V.P.* This discussion is furthered by ruminating on the physical properties of sand and how the intrusive nature of the granular matter can disrupt the sanitized conditions of the museum. To attend to the sensorial and haptic capacities of *R.S.V.P.*, this thesis converses with art historical and sensory studies research. I return to Cowan's text, wherein she positions *R.S.V.P.* as a haptic sculpture that—through the centralization of the body and touch—refutes the prevailing conditions of modernism in the 1970s. An understanding of haptics is also established in line with Jennifer Fisher's theories, which consider the role of

---

[23] Rachel Jane Carroll, "Remains to Be Seen: Black Feminist Art and US Militarism in Asia." *Social Text* 41, no.154 (2023): 47-70.
[24] Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, eds., *Thinking Through the Skin* (London: Routledge, 2003).
[25] Shirley Tate, "'That is my Star of David': skin, abjection and hybridity" in *Thinking Through the Skin* (London: Routledge, 2003), 209-222 and Sarah Louise Cowan, "To Touch Time: U.S. Black Feminist Modernist Sculpture in the 1970s and 80s," *Arts* 13:21 (2024): 1-19.
[26] Vanessa Agard-Jones, "What the Sands Remember," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, no. 2 (2012): 325-346.

haptic perception, asserting the value of sensorial engagements within artistic encounters.[27] Arguing for the importance of *R.S.V.P.*'s sensory faculties, this thesis also draws upon sensory scholars Constance Classen and David Howes' research on the sensorial capacities of objects in the museum.[28]

Contextualizing the discussion on the mainstream American museum and how its institutional systems impact artworks, this thesis brings together a variety of scholarly perspectives from art historical and museum studies research that considers the complicated presence or exclusion of Black artists in the museum.[29] Bridget R. Cooks' book *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum* chronicles the historiography of the entry of Black artists into museums and issues of representation within such institutions.[30] Katy Bunning's book *Negotiating Race and Rights in the Museum* critically analyses how racial ideas both shape and upend museum practices and how, under the guise of neutrality, such institutions continue to perpetuate racial disparities.[31] Both authors reveal that despite the ever-prevalent, yet often superficial, work undertaken by many institutions today to address systemic and social inequities within their operations, many museums continue to be impacted by the colonial foundations upon which they were built. It is imperative that this research also engages with the historical socio-political conditions in which the work was produced outside of the museum. Therefore, Kellie Jones and Amelia Jones' research on Los Angeles from the 1960s to

---

[27] Jennifer Fisher, "Relational Sense: Towards a Haptic Aesthetics," *Parachute* 87 (July-September 1997): 4-11.
[28] Constance Classen and David Howes, "The Museum as Sensescape: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artifacts," in *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden, and Ruth Phillips (New York: Berg, 2006), 199–222.
[29] While this thesis focuses on mainstream white museums, I acknowledge there and are many significant Black practitioners and institutions working differently and tirelessly. Some of these are discussed in this thesis in relation to Nengudi, notably Goode Bryant and included in the scholarship or Kellie Jones and Bridget R. Cooks, among others.
[30] Bridget R. Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011).
[31] Katy Bunning, *Negotiating Race and Rights in the Museum* (Oxon: Routledge, 2022).

1980s informs my understanding of the specific locale Nengudi was working in.[32] Both scholars demonstrate that the activism and racial political conditions in LA in the 1970s impacted the artistic production of the milieu, giving rise to experimental practices like Nengudi's and those of the Black artistic communities she belonged to. Additionally, drawing on the scholarship of Lowery Stokes Sims and Fernando Domínguez Rubio in conversation with Katherine McKittrick this thesis discusses the creation of limiting taxonomic systems in museums.[33] These scholars examine the risk of utilising identity markers, such as race and gender, or museological categories to erroneously or exploitatively define people or artworks.

Finally, this thesis considers *R.S.V.P.*'s capacities to challenge common practices of collection, preservation, and restoration, and how this can be interpreted as a form of resistance. Conservation studies scholarship and new materialist art histories, notably by Hannah B. Hölling, Hélia Marçal, Kelli Morgan, and Rubio call for foundational reorientations within the field of conservation that depart from traditional methods, embracing instead relationality, care, and accountability. Through this study, I do not aim to ascribe unequivocal power to museological institutions as the sole authorities governing how art is understood and managed, but rather I examine the radical potential of *R.S.V.P.* to defiantly press against the innate workings of institutions to provoke change. To analyse these capacities of *R.S.V.P.*, I turn to *Object-Event-Performance: Art, Materiality and Continuity Since the 1960s*, edited by Hölling, which examines the role of preservation in the changing and unstable material lives of artworks

---

[32] Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Kellie Jones ed., *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980* (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2011), exhibition catalogue; and Amelia Jones "LOST BODIES: early 1970s Los Angeles performance art in art history," in *Live Art in LA: Performance in Southern California*, 1970-1983, ed. Peggy Phelan (London: Routledge, 2012): 115-184.

[33] Fernando Domínguez Rubio, "Preserving the unpreservable: docile and unruly objects at MoMA," *Theory and Society* 43, no.6 (2014): 617-645; Lowery Stokes Sims, "Subject/Subjectivity and Agency in the Art of African Americans," *The Art Bulletin 76*, no. 4 (Dec 1994): 587-590; and McKittrick, *Dear Science*.

produced since the 1960s. This is a crucial resource in understanding the resistive qualities of artworks and progressive conservation practices.[34] The anthology *Performance: The Ethics and The Politics of Conservation and Care*, edited by Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin, provides an in-depth interdisciplinary set of research with which to reconsider traditional conservation methods for performance and ephemeral art, moving towards relational practices rooted in care.[35] Morgan's chapter in particular provides perspective on the intersection of race and conservation—an area of research I have not widely encountered in my engagement with conservation studies scholarship—contending with Black performance art and museological reform.[36] In their respective research, scholars Marçal and Rubio address similar questions about conservation through a broader consideration of artworks, not only those rooted in performance, and how their agency and materiality can challenge established norms.[37]

Importantly, this thesis returns to several notions put forth in Katherine McKittrick's *Dear Science and Other Stories*—which creatively presents and enacts Black research methodologies and theories—particularly those related to rebellion, discipline, and citation. Building on the methodological approaches presented in McKittrick's richly textured book, I aim to undertake a research praxis that is rooted in collaborative methods. I engage in a citational practice that acknowledges the collective nature of research and the myriad of scholars, thinkers, and people that contribute to such work. Crucially, a citational practice allows for a

---

[34] Hanna B. Hölling, *Object-Event-Performance: Art, Materiality, and Continuity since the 1960s* (New York City: Bard Graduate Center, 2022).
[35] Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman and Emilie Magnin, eds. *Performance: The Ethics and The Politics of Conservation and Care, Volume I* (Oxon: Routledge, 2023).
[36] Kelli Morgan, "Peeling the paint off the walls: Kelli Morgan on Black performance and racial justice in Western institutions—A conversation with Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman and Emilie Magnin," in *Performance: The Ethics and The Politics of Conservation and Care, Volume I*, edited by Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman and Emilie Magnin (Oxon: Routledge, 2023), 188-199.
[37] Hélia Marçal, "Becoming Difference: On the Ethics of Conserving the In-Between," *Studies in Conservation* 67, no.1-2 (2022): 35-36 and Rubio, "Preserving the unpreservable," 617-645.

methodological conversation that embraces unknowing, decentralizes expertise, and is a means to share how we know rather than what we know.[38] Like *R.S.V.P.*, this research path is a non-linear web of knots that are the ideas, practitioners, and tangential references in which I find myself tangled. The footnotes are extensions of those knots that I reach for but that cannot be contained within the academic body of this text. As a white scholar, I acknowledge my outsider position in the study of Nengudi's work. I arrive at this research with a background in curatorial work that persistently contends with museological strictures, responsibilities, and possibilities. The story of Senga Nengudi's life and work is not mine to tell, and so I extend this conversational methodology by abundantly incorporating her voice throughout this thesis. These quotational insertions highlight her words to ensure the primacy of her voice in my research, theorizing, and wondering. I rely on published interviews with Nengudi to centralize her words and her first-person perspective, including oral histories conducted by Bridget R. Cooks and Elissa Auther, alongside other interviews by Osei Bonsu and Allie Tepper. [39]

Finally, rather than distilling the focus of this thesis to a singular artwork or collecting institution, I approach the *R.S.V.P.* as a whole (punctuated by specific examples) to reflect the expansiveness of the series. To analyse and compile data on the *R.S.V.P.* artworks discussed in this thesis, and those collected by major US museums, I consult the *Topologies* catalogue, as well

---

[38] Katherine McKittrick, "Footnotes (Books and Papers Scattered about the Floor)," *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 17. This insistence on sharing the importance of *how* we know over *what* we know undergirds *Dear Science.*

[39] Senga Nengudi interviewed by Bridget R. Cooks and Amanda Tewes, "Black Avant Garde Visual and Performance Artist," Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2022, under the auspices of the J. Paul Getty Trust, 2022; Senga Nengudi interviewed by Osei Bonsu, "'I Believe Deeply that the Best Kind of Art is Public': An Interview with Senga Nengudi," *Frieze* Issue 198, September 22, 2018.; Senga Nengudi interviewed by Elissa Auther, "Oral history interview, July 9-11, 2013," Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; and Senga Nengudi interviewed by Allie Tepper, "Individual Collective: A Conversation with Senga Nengudi," in *Side by Side: Collaborative Artistic Practices in the United States, 1960s–1980s*, edited by Gwyneth Shanks and Allie Tepper, *Vol. III of the Living Collections Catalogue* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2020).

as information presented by the artist's representing galleries, Sprüth Magers, Thomas Erben, and Lévy Gorvy.[40] As artworks that are roving in form, action, and temporarily, imbued with a multiplicity of meanings, I aim to echo their ungraspability and underline their resistance to containable determinations.

Outline of Sections

This thesis is divided into three sections. Section I reflects on the historical context of Los Angeles in the 1970s—out of which Nengudi's artistic practice developed—and its profound impact on shaping her artwork. This section considers the relationship of Nengudi's works to mainstream museums and how the categorical organizational systems of such institutions are antithetical to her work. To this end, this section examines how certain frameworks or narratives often imposed upon her restrict the ways in which her practice can be understood. Section II delves into a deeper analysis of the object of study, developing a material understanding of *R.S.V.P.* through the convergence of its physical properties and conceptual conceits. It analyses the three primary components of the work— haptics, pantyhose/nylon, and sand—to understand their relationship to tactility, as well as their historical and symbolic significance. Finally, Section III explores the conservation of *R.S.V.P.* Specifically, it considers how museums must ethically attend to the *R.S.V.P.* series and how these artworks have the agency to challenge traditional preservationist practices in museums.

[40] For an overview of the artworks in the *R.S.V.P.* series in US museum collections see: Appendix A.

Section I: Frameworks of Containment and Sites of Possibility

This section summaries the historical context in which Nengudi gained prominence, emphasising its importance in shaping her practice and material lexicon. It also reflects on the historical inclusion and exclusion of Black artists from the mainstream museum sector, in which Nengudi's work is presently acquired. Museum collections ensure the lasting presence of the material artworks and therefore play an important role in re/defining the narratives surrounding them through how they are categorized and organized. I provide this context to begin considering the present-day status of *R.S.V.P.* in the museum and its tensions with practices of conservation. Finally, this section argues that identity-based and medium-specific categories as defined by institutions of power are limiting frameworks through which to understand Nengudi's practice.

Pursuing formal training in the arts, Nengudi began her education at the Art Institute of Pasadena City College in 1961, transferring to California State College, LA the following year, where she majored in fine arts and minored in dance.[41] Though Nengudi did not pursue dance as a formal career, this training was profoundly impactful for developing the kinesthetic language and interest in movement that would later become integral to her artistic vocabulary.[42] During the 1960s Nengudi undertook several dance internships, while also teaching art at the Pasadena Art Museum (PAM) and the Watts Towers Art Centre, founded in the 1960s by artist Noah Purifoy.[43] At PAM artists like Allan Kaprow and Claes Oldenburg were experimenting with new forms of artistic expression. It was in these settings Nengudi would have first encountered modern and

---

[41] California State College is now California State University.

[42] On this subject Nengudi states, "I never had a 'dance body' or anything like that. I always felt as though I could not do it, although that's been proven wrong by many people. I personally had a hang-up about that. I continued to dance but never really did it full force because of that. And basically, even with dance, I preferred the creative side of it, choreography or developing concepts for movement." Senga Nengudi interview, June 1996, quoted in Jones, *South of Pico*, 192-193.

[43] The Watts Towers Art Centre was a cultural centre that offered classes and staged artistic events such as exhibitions and concerts for local youth, while also providing employment opportunities to artists.

postmodernist art practices, including those oriented around performance and process-based art.

After earning a BFA, Nengudi spent a year in Japan at Waseda University, where she was exposed to new cultural perspectives, expanding her knowledge of artistic expression beyond Western frameworks.[44] Returning to California in 1967, Nengudi undertook an MA degree in sculpture at California State College. Following her formal educational pursuits, Nengudi relocated to New York City for several years, where, as Ellen Y. Tani states, she "receiv(ed) an informal education in African-American art history from her politically engaged peers."[45] During this time, Nengudi began to develop her artwork with textiles and bodily material forms, which would make an indelible mark on her lifelong work. One such example is *Spirit Flags* (1969-71) (fig. 3)—a series of silhouetted bodily sculptural forms made of nylon flag material suspended from fire escapes, staircases, and other architectures in Harlem. Installed outdoors, these textile forms moved fluidly and were made to honour the people and communities she encountered in her neighbourhood. This early orientation towards the abstracted body, movement, and textiles set the foundation for the *R.S.V.P.* series and Nengudi's recurring use of nylon.

With her return to LA from the East Coast in 1974, she changed her name from Sue Irons to Senga Nengudi, signaling a new phase in her artistic practice and political consciousness.[46] Nengudi's schooling, work endeavours, engagements with artists, and cross-cultural experiences,

---

[44] For more on the intersection of the Afro-Asian in Nengudi's practice and the influence of such aesthetics and rituals: Stephanie Weber "Connections, Missed and Made—Senga Nengudi and Gutai," in *Senga Nengudi: Topologien / Topologies*, ed. Stephanie Weber and Matthias Mühling (Munich: Hirmer, 2019), 120-127 and Tani, "'Really African, and Really Kabuki Too,'" and.

[45] Tani, "'Really African, and Really Kabuki Too,'" 169.

[46] For Nengudi, the adoption of a new name reflected the transformation she saw and felt within herself. Additionally, she uses several names to reflect varying personas for her work in different mediums: Propecia Leigh, Photographer; Harriet Chin, Painter; and Lily Bea Moor, Writer. Reflecting on the roles of names and identity, Nengudi states "When we see an artist's name, we expect their work to look a particular way. When it doesn't, it's jarring. That's when I thought I'd like to play with names. Since we—as black people—have been called everything in the book, why not name ourselves? That's how these personas came about. When I'm using these different names, however, I don't change my art at all. I just use that name, and then the viewer has to decide something, has to be active in the process of taking in and interpreting the work. That's something that's important to me, that there is an exchange that goes on between the viewer and the work." Senga Nengudi interviewed by Allie Tepper.

as well as her upbringing in the charged political climate of the US, imparted a multitude of ideas and ways of thinking that fundamentally informed her practice.[47] During this formative time, she was also exposed to West African ritual traditions, Japanese theater, as well as Afro-Caribbean, and other forms of dance. Underscoring all of Nengudi's disparate influences is her identity as an African-American woman, which is shaped by intersecting forces of racism, sexism, and Western cultural norms. Crucially, her engagement within alternative Black artistic communities and her education allowed her to develop a unique artistic language that defies mainstream museological categorization. Nengudi's practice, as Tani aptly articulates, can be understood as an "accumulat[ion of] reference points."[48]

Los Angeles and Studio Z: Collectivity and Community Care as Survival

During the 1960s and 1970s—because of its broader socio-political and geographic conditions—LA emerged as a hub for artistic experimentation, providing fertile grounds for the development of radical art and exhibition spaces for Black communities outside of the strictures of the mainstream art world.[49] In her book *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s*, Kellie Jones argues that with the relocation of many African-Americans to California throughout the twentieth century—highlighting both the history of forced migration

---

[47] For a timeline mapping Nengudi's life alongside significant historical and political events in the US surrounding Black like, culture, and artistic creation see: Anna Staetman, "Contexture—Connection, Background and Influence" in *Senga Nengudi: Topologien / Topologies*, ed. Stephanie Weber and Matthias Mühling (Munich: Hirmer, 2019), 314-327. For a more detailed chronology of artistic events against the racial backdrop and anti-racist movements in the US during the 1960s and 80s see: Jennifer Vanore, "Selected Chronology, 1960-90," in *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980*, ed. Kellie Jones, (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2011), 328-339, exhibition catalogue.

[48] Tani, "'Really African, and Really Kabuki Too,'" 178. Tani further details the myriad of influences that impacted the shape of Nengudi's career in this chapter.

[49] During this time, LA itself became a fodder for material and artmaking. Many artists used the city as a site for artmaking, staging outdoor performances and incorporating found materials in their artworks that bore connections to the contexts they were sourced from.

due to slavery and subsequent migratory flows—communities were able to define new kinds of spaces and conditions for living. Echoing these sentiments, Amelia Jones asserts that "The openness of LA spatially, ideologically, and culturally made alternative expressions and institutions possible."[50] Further, the ongoing racial violence in America, and LA in particular, during this period gave rise to widespread political activism and significant social uprisings, such as the Watts Rebellion in 1965.[51] These events had a deep-seated impact on African-American communities and, in turn, the practices of Black arts practitioners in this milieu. This effect on the city's artistic production gave rise to the founding of several important Black-owned and operated arts and exhibition spaces, as well as tight-knit artistic communities that fostered support networks for one another.[52] Such artistic mobilizations and creations were part of a broader demand for revolutionary change in the art world to meaningfully represent and account for Black artistic production. Simultaneously on the East Coast, New York—being a long-standing epicenter for artistic production—was at the forefront of this struggle and also saw the emergence of many exhibition spaces focused on Black arts and artists.[53] Both of these cities would be important for Nengudi in the development of her artistic language and career.

---

[50] Jones, "LOST BODIES," 138.

[51] The Watts Rebellion was a six-day racial uprising in LA—spurred by the violent arrest of Marquette Frye by white police—in response to the racist mistreatment of primarily Black youth by the police, which led to numerous deaths, injuries, and arrests. Kellie Jones explains that it was "the largest urban uprising in U.S. history up to that point," demonstrating the significance of the action. Jones, *Now Dig This!*, 19.

[52] Notable Black-owned gallery spaces in LA at the time include Brockman Gallery, founded by Dale and Alonzo Davis; Gallery 32, founded by artist Suzanne Jackson; and a variety of spaces initiated by Samella Lewis such as The Gallery, Multi-Cul and Gallery Tanner. Many significant projects and publications were produced through or alongside these galleries. For an in-depth history on the development of these spaces and their impact see: Jones, *South of Pico*.

[53] For more on the development and role of Black arts institutions in New York in the 1960s and 1970s, and the relationship of Black artists to mainstream museums, see: Mary Ellen Lennon, "A Question of Relevancy: New York Museums and the Black Arts Movement, 1968–1971," in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, ed. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006); Susan Cahan, *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); and Darby English and Charlotte Barat, ed., *Among Others: Blackness at MoMA* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2019).

For both Amelia Jones and Kellie Jones, the artistic rebellions in LA in the 1970s were inextricable from the aims of revolutionary social and political evolution. In this locale and political moment, new abstract and experimental artistic forms characterized by more sensory, performative, and ephemeral approaches and styles emerged.[54] In particular, within Back artistic communities

> works tied to traditional media—painting, drawing, prints, sculpture—gave way to dematerialized postminimal installation and body-centered performance. Within these styles and formats were spatial ideas that changed how artists accessed and incorporated notions of history and virtuality, the real and the imagined.[55]

Importantly, while these artists worked with abstraction, their concerns diverged from the dominant modernist practices concerned with the isolation of the art object. Instead, the work generated within these communities was inseparable from its surroundings and political context. Moreover, the emphasis on the sensory represented a shift away from the apolitical mainstream formalism and minimalism of the period.[56]

It is within this context that Nengudi's practice emerged, particularly through engaging with Black artistic communities in LA, such as Studio Z—an informal collective of experimental Black practitioners. The Studio Z artists worked with unconventional material modalities and political aims that were not per the standards of what the mainstream white art world expected of Black artists at the time. As Kellie Jones attests, "Uncategorizable, in that it seemed outside of

---

[54] Amelia Jones further contends that there is a correlation between the anti-racist activism of the 1960s and 70s and the increasing orientation towards performative art as a means of embodied activism. Jones, "LOST BODIES," 129.
[55] Jones, *South of Pico,* 17.
[56] On this subject, Goode Bryant and Marcy S. Phillips, aptly articulate: "Abstraction, since abstract expressionism, has consistently been involved in the isolation, reduction and illumination of the physical, perceptual and metaphysical properties which constitute reality. The nature of these pursuits has been primarily focused on finding and exposing the properties as they exist naturally and inherently within the confines of the art object. In doing so, the art becomes self-definitive ceasing to rely on or refer to the external phenomena for definition. By isolating and separating its physical and perceptual and metaphysical properties, reducing its effect on relation to external phenomena and maintaining its definition within the art object's confines, art is placed in a restrictive context; its definition and, thus, reality or marginal." Goode Bryant and Phillips, *Contextures*, 39.

traditional representational roles, the work of Studio Z both vexed and freed black representational practice."[57] Studio Z was a means for gathering and radical collective artmaking, forming out of a necessity to create avenues for Black artists to show and make work. While fluid, the artists in Studio Z include RoHo, Joe Ray, Franklin Parker, Houston Conwill, Kathy Cyrus, Ron Davis, Greg Edwards, David Hammons, Duval Lewis, Barbara McCullough, Senga Nengudi, and Roderick Kwaku Young.[58] Many would become Nengudi's lasting friends and collaborators, a testament to the importance of these collective forms of supportive artmaking. Tani attests that "Communities like Studio Z were essential outlets for career support as well as a ready audience for Black artists, many of them women, who laboured in obscurity for years without opportunities to show their work in a gallery context."[59] While LA provided a platform of radical possibility and gave rise to many experimental, non-institutional exhibition spaces, these practitioners were not immune to the difficult exclusions or contentious inclusions Black artists faced regarding mainstream museums. Discussing Studio Z and collectivity, Nengudi explains, "Collaboration […] equaled support. If we weren't getting validation from the institutions, at least we were able to validate ourselves and each other. That was really important."[60]

Museological Inclusion, Exclusion, and Imposed Taxonomies

The 1960s and 1970s saw a continued increase in exhibitions including Black artists, however, many of these were mired in controversy, or relegated to peripheral exhibition spaces or public

[57] Jones, "The World According to Z," 58.
[58] This list is as articulated by Allie Tepper in "Individual Collective: A Conversation with Senga Nengudi."
[59] Tani, "'Really African, and Really Kabuki Too,'" 177.
[60] Senga Nengudi interviewed by Allie Tepper.

programming.[61] While I do not deny the important impacts of these initiatives, many were not meaningfully integrated into museum programming, perpetuating exclusionary practices. Additionally, I acknowledge the important role of Black institutional repositories, such as the Studio Museum in Harlem, NY which is the first museum to include a piece from the *R.S.V.P.* series in its collection, acquiring *R.S.V.P. V* (1976) (fig. 4) in 2003.[62] Importantly, the Studio Museum continues to be the only museum collecting Nengudi's work that has a mandate focused exclusively on exhibiting work by, or inspired by, Black artists.[63] Though it is a major institution in the US, it is telling that the first museum to acquire her work is one that champions the work of Black artists. In 2005, the Museum of Contemporary Art, LA and the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh acquired *R.S.V.P.* (1975) and *R.S.V.P. XI* (1977/2004), respectively (figs. 5-6). From the 2000s onwards, with a steady increase in the late 2010s, major museums continued to collect Nengudi's work, where today it is included in over twenty public collections throughout the US.

Reflecting on the entry of Black artists in the museum in the twentieth century Bridget R. Cooks—in her book *Exhibiting Blackness*—argues that despite their inclusion in white museological spaces, such institutions still determined what constituted "appropriate Black art," and thus controlled what artworks crossed the museum threshold. Here I make a distinction between the entry of Black *artists* into the museums—that is when artworks by Black

---

[61] As art historian Susan Cahan affirms, "Prior to 1967 one could count fewer than a dozen museum exhibitions that featured the work of African American artists, with the exception of museums at historically black colleges and universities. On rare occasions when the work of African American artists was shown, it was typically in segregated contexts." Cahan, *Mounting Frustration*, 1. Cahan further echoes Cooks' arguments stating that "In major museums the inclusion of African American artists was undertaken as a supplement to existing programs, thus confirming rather than challenging hegemonic art historical narratives." Cahan, *Mounting Frustration*, 253.

[62] I draw the notion of Black repositories from Ashley Bouknight-Claybrooks to refer to Black museums and archives. For more on the history of the creation of such spaces in America, see: Ashley Bouknight-Claybrooks, "The Power of Preservation: Black Museology in the Early Twentieth Century," *The Public Historian* 43, no. 2 (2021): 20-27.

[63] "About Us," Studio Museum in Harlem, accessed August 6, 2024, https://www.studiomuseum.org/about.

practitioners began to be collected by and exhibited in the "Art" museum—and the entry of Black *bodies and cultures* into the natural history or anthropology museum. With the latter, I refer to the extractive and exploitative practices of depicting Black bodies and culture by and for Western perspectives, beginning with early colonial conquests that entered stolen African goods into European museums. Entangled in these enterprises are also dehumanising ethnographic photographic practices and imperial exhibitionism that display Black bodies as non-human objects for entertainment and study.[64] In an artistic context, Cooks affirms work by Black artists entering the museum—through collections or special exhibitions—was usually segregated based on erroneous definitions of identity and imagery deemed suitable by the institution.

Museums sought artworks that could be confined to consumable modernist ideals and categories while demonstrating clear apolitical African influences or aesthetics. With this—despite providing visibility to Black artists—museums were able to "preserv[e] White cultural nationalism" through "maintained racial segregation."[65] What is evinced in Cooks' arguments is that museums are generators of knowledge and are responsible for creating racially biased narratives and myths around Black art, culture, and communities. In particular, museum operations rely on, as Elke Krasny and Laura Perry affirm, the "*classification*, or the creation of knowledge through identification and categorization that sustains the definition of the groups or individuals who are 'acceptable' or 'inacceptable.'"[66] These classificatory designations and processes that define museums are also produced by "the unequal social relations of gender,

---

[64] Further, in the art museum, Black cultures have often been exploited as subjects by European artists. I acknowledge these practices to illustrate how the colonial foundations of the Western museum continue to underpin its systems and operations today. For more on this, see: Charmaine A. Nelson, *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Mara Gladstone and Janet Catherine Berlo, "The body in the (white) box: Corporeal ethics and museum representation," in *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics: Redefining Ethics for the Twenty-First Century Museum*, ed. Janet Marstine (London: Routledge, 2011), 353-378.
[65] Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness*, 4.
[66] Elke Krasny and Lara Perry, "Unsettling, Gender, Sexuality, and Race: 'Crossing' the Collection, Classifying and Spectacularising Mechanisms of the Museum*," Museum International*, 72: 1-2 (2020): 133.

sexuality, and race that pervade European and settler colonial societies."[67] The imperial legacies and modes of operation museums were built upon continue to inform the organizational logic of collections, and how artworks are conserved and cared for in the present day.[68]

Museums have the ability to produce inequality rather than merely reproducing or reflecting the societal inequalities that exist outside of their structures. In drawing out the effects of historical issues of racial representation in American art museums to the present day, Cooks demands museums critically consider how Black artists are included in their institutions in ways that take on the "challenge of eliminating the exclusive racial paradigm."[69] For Cooks, this racial paradigm is based on two methodologies that have historically guided and continue to inform the acquisition and exhibition of Black artists' work. The first is the "anthropological approach" (the reinforcement of a Black-white dichotomy and narratives of racial difference) and the second is the "corrective narrative" (the attempt to address issues of historical omissions and absences in the exhibition of work by Black artists).[70] Importantly, she argues that within these paradigms, institutions largely uphold discriminatory principles rather than questioning them. Increasingly and crucially, there are calls for the meaningful integration of Black artists (historically and presently) in museum collections and exhibitions that are not predicated on tokenizing and limiting categories based solely on racial identity, but rather on artistic merit. I reflect on these

---

[67] Krasny and Perry, "Unsettling Gender," 132.
[68] Classen and Howes aptly articulate that "Collecting is a form of conquest and collected artifacts are material signs of victory over their former owners and places of origin." Classen and Howes, "The Museum as Sensescape," 209. While I acknowledge that the collecting process for contemporary artworks differs from the aims of these early collections, museums continue to operate as repositories of artworks and objects through the act of collecting itself. Therefore, the historical foundations of these processes cannot be disavowed or wholly extrapolated from current practices. Museums, rather, should remain critical of their processes around collection and care, and how these objects—historical and contemporary—live in the museum. I use the word live purposefully to refute the conception of fixity or stillness that objects and collections from early colonial conquests are imbued with, where often extant cultural objects were removed from their contexts to be placed in a static collection. It is important for contemporary collections not to replicate this practice and render non-static objects static.
[69] Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness*, 160.
[70] Cooks asserts that the "corrective approach" methodology continues to be relevant in the contemporary moment.

museum practices to contextualize the tension between the inclusion of the *R.S.V.P.* collections and the problematics of its exclusion. While inclusion risks conservationist intervention and tokenization, exclusionary acquisition practices allow dominant institutions to perpetuate erasure.

The use of taxonomies, often based on identity markers as defined through the perspectives of dominant and biased systems, or material and medium are central to the organizational structures of many museum collections. Scholar Fernando Domínguez Rubio affirms that "it is through classification that institutions effectively standardize and synchronize actions and meanings across different domains, organize coherent systems of categories, distribute forms of value, and produce univocal and legible objects of knowledge." He continues, "Museum classifications have tended to be described as conventionally produced orders that place and mobilize artworks into a system of pre-existing social and cultural categories or schemes."[71] Such practices of strict categorization create narrow knowledge frameworks, excluding or rendering illegible practices that operate outside of these determinations. Through an artwork's occupation in museum collections, its original dispositions inevitably transform, taking on a new life within this differing context. This shift occurs, in part, as the work is organized and maintained according to the museum's classificatory systems. Thus, with its entry into collections—if museums do not critically assess their operations—I suggest Nengudi's work risks being confined to an understanding limited by the kinds of institutional art systems Rubio describes.

I draw on McKittrick to add to this examination as she cautions how the study of identity and its organization risks rendering it a fixed category tied to a biocentric order that disavows

[71] Rubio, "Preserving the unpreservable, 627.

humanity. She argues that "in academic settings, identity-disciplines function to uphold misery and empire and the segregation of ideas and idea makers precisely because *all* disciplines are *differently* enfleshed and classified and hierarchized."[72] For McKittrick, identity-based disciplines aiming to undo oppression (those rooted in race or gender, for example) are co-opted by dominant forces to organize, classify, and categorize people in restrictive and codifying ways.[73] These methods of organizing people bear relevance to the functioning of arts institutions, historically and contemporarily, that have exploited marginalized artists to serve their biased narratives.

To resituate this discussion within an artistic context I turn to curator Lowery Stokes Sims' scholarship, wherein she examines how artists' subjectivity and identity—shaped by the socio-political contexts of American society—constitute how their work is understood.[74] She argues

> The identity of the artist is by necessity conflated with the character of his or her work; somehow gender or race are factors which automatically predetermine the subject and nature of the work of women and African Americans (for example). The agent becomes subsumed by his or her subject. The result has been the conceptualization of separate aesthetic communities within the art world—most notably feminist and African American. Consequently, such aesthetic constructs have been exploited by the art establishment to stereotype artists and predetermine their status within the art world. This is particularly evident in the case of African American artists.[75]

Sims reveals how the artist's identity becomes indexed and used to delimit the meaning or subject of their work. In particular, she orients her discussion around Black artists working in abstraction in the 1960s and 70s whose works were less seriously regarded because of their race

[72] McKittrick, "The Smallest Cell," 40.
[73] McKittrick, "The Smallest Cell," 40.
[74] Sims, "Subject/Subjectivity," 587.
[75] Sims, "Subject/Subjectivity," 587.

and/or gender.[76] Working in an abstract lexicon, Nengudi's work was not understood within the political registers of what was considered "Black Art" or equally valued in the mainstream arts sector at the time.[77]

Additionally, due to her use of pantyhose in *R.S.V.P.* in particular, Nengudi has often been characterized as a feminist artist; a determination which she resists because of her position as a woman of colour in the context of the prevailing white feminism of the time.[78] As Nengudi articulates, "It's odd, because I'm often labeled a feminist, but that was a title that was put on me."[79] The defining of Nengudi's work solely through token identity markers determined by institutions of power can be limiting and does not adequately consider its expansiveness and radical possibility. As curator Stephanie Weber explains, "Nengudi resisted any clear attribution to herself and her work to existing ideological camps. She found her way to breathe political and physical life into materials and abstract forms."[80] Importantly, Weber, and Nengudi, do not dismiss the role of identity in the artist's practice. For Nengudi, her identity as a Black woman in

---

[76] As Sims explains, "While African American artists working in abstract styles had to struggle for recognition in the art establishment, they also faced resistance from certain camps of black self-image-making, which perceived abstraction as being outside an integral black identity." Sims, "Subject/Subjectivity," 588-589. Weber contextualizes this notion of aesthetically segregated and defined art with regards to Nengudi's practice, stating "[she] saw herself confronted with: the expectation of African American artists, both within the Black American art scene and from outside, was explicitly to work with a set of established symbolic forms whose political content had already been deemed legible. Abstract art was regarded as too opaque and academic to function effectively as a political tool." Weber, "Dynamic Topologies," 37.

[77] Nengudi's close friend, peer and collaborator, David Hammons has repeatedly been quoted saying "her work was so 'outrageously' abstract. [She] came to New York and still no one would deal with her because she wasn't doing 'Black Art.'" David Hammons interviewed by Kellie Jones, *Reallife Magazine*, no. 16 (Autumn 1986): 2, quoted in Jones*, South of Pico*, 192.

[78] On the subject of the feminist orientations ascribed to Nengudi, Tani states, "The conceptual rigour of the work was easily eclipsed by its perceived feminist iconography: dangling forms resembling breasts, wombs, scrota, and buttocks suggested symbols of fertility and sexuality, and the work's metaphorical link to pregnancy was palpable. These were traits commonly associated with Feminist Art, which was at the time coalescing in Southern California through the activities of The Woman's Building." Explaining Nengudi's reaction to such frameworks, she continues to reveal, "She felt colonised by the term, bristling at the suggestion of White feminist practice as the primary framework through which to understand her work." Tani, "'Really African, and Really Kabuki Too,'" 176.

[79] Senga Nengudi interviewed by Elissa Auther.

[80] Weber, "Dynamic Topologies," 37. Weber continues to articulate, "The political aspect of her own works […] was and is never immediately obvious but rather anchored in the sutures and scissions of material, form, and process, as well as a belief in the potential of collective creativity and improvisation." Dynamic Topologies," 37.

the US is inherently political and inseparable from her art. The artist explains,

> I was stating—and I guess still state, really—what it feels like to be an artist who is Black, who is American, who is a mother, who is a daughter, who is a wife. [That's what I was expressing…sometimes just stating who you are—like in my classes I would often say, "Being born Black is a revolutionary act in this country." So yeah, it's political.][81]

Her resistance is to siloed determinations imposed upon her that eclipse other aspects of her practice. It is crucial that Nengudi's work is understood through multiple entangled registers. These intersections in her practice and the expansive possibility of her material explorations with the *R.S.V.P.* series are further explored in the following section. These artworks exemplify Nengudi's persistent refusal to be easily confined into museological classifications and hegemonic ways of knowing, revealing how her work is grounded in possibility.

[81] Senga Nengudi interviewed by Elissa Auther (brackets in original). Nengudi also articulates, "It's another thing about grouping. I just did my work and it seemed to fall into that, so that was convenient for some people to say, 'Okay yeah, this is what it is.' Americans, I guess in a way, like to be tidy when it comes to stuff like that. Let's tidily put it in this—mm, mm, mm—let's put it here, so it's nice and tidy. We know what it is, we can figure this out, this is great." Senga Nengudi interviewed by Bridget R. Cooks and Amanda Tewes, 99.

Section II: Materiality, Corporeality, and the Sensorial

This section delves into the materiality and material significance of *R.S.V.P.*, as well as the history of the work and its performative state to introduce a discussion expanded upon in Section III on the function and evolving status of these materials in contemporary museums. Examining the inextricable relationship between the work's haptic capacities, the pantyhose, and sand, this section considers how these integral components of *R.S.V.P.* are all connected to skin and tactility. Finally, this analysis argues for the significance of the corporeal in Nengudi's work to consider the relationship between Black bodies and museums, as discussed in Section I.

Within art historical and contemporary art studies, materiality continues to be a contestable notion, with no singularly agreed-upon definition. Therefore, in this thesis, I employ the term materiality to refer to the entanglement of the physical properties that constitute an artwork with the symbolic, conceptual, and historical significance of those materials and their present-day functioning. My understanding of materiality is largely informed by Rubio's consideration of new material sensibilities in relation to objects within art institutions. In his text, "Preserving the unpreservable: docile and unruly objects at MoMA," Rubio reveals how the active material agency of artworks enables the production of cultural and social relations, disrupting and creating changes in institutional dynamics. With this, he maintains that material objects must not be regarded only as passive substrates on which meaning is imparted, but rather as active makers of meaning. Rubio asserts it is necessary to reorient how artworks are studied, considering the contingent dynamics between people, meanings, practices, and materials.[82]

Art historian Petra Lange-Berndt's ruminations on materiality additionally contribute to my framework. In the introduction to her book *Materiality,* Lange-Berndt asks: "What does it

[82] Rubio, "Preserving the unpreservable," 642.

mean to give agency to the material, to follow the material and to *act with* the material?"[83] Following and acting with materials entails exploring the societal power relations within artistic practices while situating them within their historical contexts. Like Rubio, Lange-Berndt acknowledges that materials have agency, asserting they are not static or singular objects, but always evolving and influenced by their changing contexts. This idea is well reflected in Nengudi's work, in which the embroilment of matter, meaning, and function cannot be disentangled. This section is grounded in a deep understanding of the work by following the materials within *R.S.V.P.* to better understand the entwinement of the work's physical properties and conceptual conceits. Considering the work's material behaviors and their potential to disrupt or inspire the re-orientation of museological practice is crucial to my theorizing around the present-day role of conservation in *R.S.V.P.*, which is examined further in Section III.

***R.S.V.P.*: Transformation and Exploration**

The artworks within the *R.S.V.P.* series, though expansive in numbers and composition, are primarily constructed through the coalescing of nylon pantyhose and sand to create forms that simultaneously signal possibility and restraint. Their installation is structurally reliant on the architectures in which they reside. The walls, ceiling, and ground become supportive armatures or substrates on which the artworks are postured, entangling the already loaded meaning of the materials with those of the gallery or museum. Curator Ian Edward Wallace asserts, "Nengudi's work might be understood as using site specificity as a means to stake a claim with institutional spaces that traditionally excluded black artists."[84] The sculptural forms, created through the

---

[83] Petra Lange-Berndt, "Introduction//How to Be Complicit with Materials," in *Materiality* (London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2015): 13.
[84] Wallace, "Used Bodies," 138.

amalgamation of humble materials—presented in their myriad of fleshy colours in which the particulate matter of sand is visible through the translucent textiles—suggest a body, while carefully never revealing it. The knotted, distended, and engorged pantyhose evoke qualities of the body, be it organs, limbs, or other abstract biomorphic forms. It is through this power of suggestion and restraint, conveyed with the use of weighty, malleable, and unruly materials that I argue *R.S.V.P.* rebels against the museological sites in which it is contained. When suspended from the walls or ceilings, the pantyhose are seemingly stretched beyond their limits, defying the gravitational pull of the weighted anchoring forms, such as in *R.S.V.P. I* (1977/2003) (fig. 1). In other iterations, like *R.S.V.P. VI* (1976/2021) (fig. 2), the nylon forms rest upon the floor, succumbing to the weight of the sand. Though physically still in their sculptural installations, the *R.S.V.P.* works are imbued with, and exude, vitality through the vast possibilities of the nylon's elastic extension and the energetic residues those fibres retain. At times these sculptural installations are activated through collectively improvised performances in which invited dancers or collaborators interweave their bodies within the nylon and sand forms.

While the first iterations of *R.S.V.P.* were solely presented as sculptural installations in a 1976 group exhibition at the Municipal Art Gallery, LA, a solo exhibition at Just Above Midtown Gallery (JAM), NY in 1977 prompted salient development in the work.[85] With the guidance and support of JAM's founder and curator Linda Goode Bryant, Nengudi began expanding the possibilities of *R.S.V.P.* beyond the constrictions of sculpture towards the kinesthetic and haptic through new material treatments. It was in a subsequent exhibition in 1977 at the Pearl C. Wood

[85] JAM, founded in 1974 in New York, was a seminal gallery that exhibited artwork by African American artists and artists of colour. Until its closure in late 1986, JAM offered exhibitions and visibility to many now-prominent artists, largely supporting experimental practices, such as Senga Nengudi's, among many others. For more on the impact and history of JAM see: Thomas J. Lax, Lilia Rocio Taboada, and Linda Goode Bryant, ed., *Just Above Midtown: Changing Spaces* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2022).

Gallery, LA where the works were first performed. This first activation took the form of a private performance for the camera rather than an audience, conducted by Nengudi's lifelong friend and collaborator Maren Hassinger.[86] The resulting photographs of this performance made by Harmon Outlaw are artworks themselves, known as *Performance Piece* (fig. 7), and are one of the few historical documents of these early activations.[87] Presently, images and videos of more contemporary activations can also be found online, yet conversely to Outlaw's photographs, these function strictly as documentarian records rather than artworks. While there is much more to be said about the role of photographic documentation in performance work, it exceeds the scope of this research, wherein I focus primarily on the role of the physical, sculptural forms. With this, I follow José Esteban Muñoz's call for "a hermeneutics of residue that looks to understand the wake of performance" to consider how the vestigial forms of *R.S.V.P.* can function as a record of the performative actions.[88] Nengudi continued to exhibit her works in

---

[86] Hassinger and Nengudi frequently collaborated to activate *R.S.V.P.* and on other artistic endeavors. Hassinger was instrumental in moving the *R.S.V.P.* towards the performative, as Nengudi recounts shyness in performing her work. Working with collaborative methods opened up the work's possibilities, fundamentally changing *R.S.V.P.*, its power, politics, and functioning. Collectivity and collaboration were important methodologies for Nengudi, and a part of many of the Studio Z artists' practices. As Allie Tepper attests, "a key tenet of Nengudi's practice [is] that collaboration is essential both as a vehicle for experimentation, and in the formation of artistic networks and platforms of support that would not otherwise exist." Tepper, "Individual Collective: A Conversation with Senga Nengudi." Weber further discusses the material possibilities of social relationships and the power of friendship in particular, see: Weber, "Dynamic Topologies," 51. For more on Hassinger and Nengudi's friendship and their collaborative work see: John P. Bowles, "SIDE BY SIDE: Friendship as Critical Practice in the Performance Art of Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger," *Callaloo* 39, no. 2 (2016): 405-407; Uri McMillian, "Sand, Nylon, and Dirt: Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger in Southern California," in *We Wanted a Revolution Black Radical Women, 1965–85: New Perspectives*, ed. Catherine Morris and Rujeko Hockley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 98-118; and the recent exhibition and forthcoming publication *Las Vegas Ikebana: Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi* at the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College. See: "Las Vegas Ikebana: Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi," Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College, accessed January 9, 2025, https://www.reed.edu/cooley/exhibitions/ikebana.html.

[87] *Performance Piece* generally consists of one to three black and white photographic prints in which Hassinger can be seen wearing a black leotard, weaving herself in and out of the nylon forms. Editions of these photographs are now also collected by several institutions, including the Centre Pompidou, Paris; the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; the Studio Museum in Harlem, NY; and Lenbachhaus, Munich. The production date for each print of the artwork varies across institutions from 1977-78, with printing dates additionally indicated in some instances.

[88] José Esteban Muñoz, "Gesture, Ephemera, and Queer Feeling: Approaching Kevin Aviance" in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 71.

avant-garde gallery spaces, but *R S.V.P.* fell into obscurity until the early 2000s, when at the urging of her gallerist Thomas Erben, she began to remake the work. This coincided with a time when performance or movement-based artworks began crossing the museological threshold.[89]

Nengudi's long-standing exploration into transformative materials, movement, and the body can be seen in her preceding *Water Compositions* (fig. 8) series. In these sculptures, Nengudi fills heat-sealed vinyl bags with coloured liquids, creating fluid, abstract forms slouched and splayed on plinths or supported by ropes affixed to the wall. These works evoke a sensuality inviting touch and lay the foundation for her development of the nylon-mesh works.[90] Discussing her choice of pantyhose as material in *R.S.V.P.*, Nengudi explains, "I had been looking for a material that would give a sense of the body and have the same characteristics of elasticity and flexibility."[91] Yet, in early material explorations for *R.S.V.P.*, Nengudi attempted to treat the nylon with glues, resins, and other fixatives to stabilize the works to achieve a condition of permanence; that which is expected by, and seemingly innate, to museum collections. These cementing materials made the work rigid and less bodily, limiting its mobility, and therefore Nengudi turned to sand to fluidly shape the pantyhose. Encouraged by Goode Bryant, Nengudi abandoned this quest for permanence, "embrac[ing] ephemerality as an inherent material quality,"[92] opening the work up to greater possibilities of activation and haptic connection. As Nengudi recounts,

> I played around with so many different materials: I tried using resin to make sculptures hold but they lost that bodily quality. Every time I tried to make the work more permanent in some way, the sculptures just lost their energy. Once I began really playing

[89] Weber confirms this moment, articulating when "Interest in Nengudi's work and in particular her pantyhose sculptures was revived in the 2000s, a time when live performance and dance began their triumphal procession through museum institutions." Weber, "Dynamic Topologies," 50.
[90] About the water compositions, Nengudi states, they "had to do with the body in the sense that they yielded to your touch. They produced a sensual experience." Senga Nengudi interviewed by Osei Bonsu.
[91] Senga Nengudi interviewed by Osei Bonsu.
[92] Tani, "'Really African, and Really Kabuki Too,'" 176.

> and exploring with nylons, the process automatically brought about a sense of performance.[93]

In line with the trends circulating in the artist communities Nengudi was enmeshed in, and with the artist's rife appetite for material exploration, additional found objects or what can be considered "remains" were also incorporated into certain pieces. These insertions can be seen in works like *R.S.V.P. XI* (1977/2004) (fig. 6), wherein an inflated, rounded rubber object is positioned within the waistband of the pantyhose evoking a pelvic-like form. Remains, as posited by Goode Bryant and Marcy S. Phillips in a catalogue for an important 1978 exhibition at JAM titled *Contextures*, are objects used within artworks that are tethered to a site, history, or memory.[94] This approach was central to the practices of many Black artists working within abstraction at the time, refuting the reductionist ideals common in the prevailing modernist practices of the era wherein the art object was isolated from any political context. For Nengudi and her peers, such materials were used precisely because they could not be disentangled from their political and situated contexts. On this subject, Kellie Jones maintains, "Art was defined not by what was inside its borders but by its siting, its margins, its frame, and its location."[95] Nengudi's pieces which include added objects are not without significance; however, for this research, I focus primarily on the materiality of nylon and sand, as it is a commonality within most of the *R.S.V.P.* artworks. Further, I suggest that the worn pantyhose are themselves a remain. Gathered from the artist's own closet, those of her friends, or thrift stores, they hold the

---

[93] Senga Nengudi interviewed by Osei Bonsu.

[94] *Contextures* aimed to locate Afro-American artists working within abstraction at the time, expanding how the movement at style could be understood. With this the curators sought to articulate a new style Black artists were working in, which they termed "contextures." This describes a mode developing since the early 1970s in which artists moved away from a hyperfocus on the art object as something which exists separately from the world. While the artworks themselves were important, contexturalistsed focused on the relation between art and its surrounding socio-political conditions. Numerous early works from Nengudi's *R.S.V.P.* series were included in this exhibition, situating her work within a context of Black abstraction, providing an important platform for the development, engagement, and early exhibition of these artworks.

[95] Jones, *South of Pico*, 187.

residues of the bodies that adorned them. With traces of past lives and energies impressed into the pantyhose, as Tani argues,

> [Nengudi] links her own experience to earlier generations of oppressed and objectified Black women, aligning the buoyancy of the flesh with life force and its sagging with the inevitable exhaustion of the body's emotional and physical labour. Situating the used body as an imaginative vehicle of creative potential, not simply an exhausted vessel.[96]

The importance of the residues held within discarded materials is exemplified through the use of nylon and its multivalent connections to the body.

R.S.V.P.'s collaborative and improvisational performances become another important moment of connection between the sculptural forms and the body. When activated, performers enter the work, entangling and disentangling their bodies with the materials, straining the nylon, and evoking simultaneous moments of constraint and care. The site of physical contact allows for the bodily conveyance of knowledge rather than the visual consumption of it. With this, I suggest that the activation of *R.S.V.P.* becomes what McKittrick calls a "shared and collaborative intellectual praxis"[97] through embodied knowledge. A tension exists both in the work's sculptural state and in the activation of *R.S.V.P.* The performers' movements and bodies are at once confined and restricted by the materials, yet in pushing the nylons to their extensive limits the forms simultaneously demonstrate strength by supporting and holding the performing bodies. Through direct corporeal contact with one another and the histories carried within the pantyhose, the performers tenderly enter a relationship with each other and the bodily sculptural forms. This collective labour of care enacted by the performers enlivens the sculptures, imbuing them with new energies and memories.[98] Regarding Black performance, curator Valerie Cassel Oliver articulates that:

---

[96] Tani, "'Really African, and Really Kabuki Too,'" 173.
[97] Katherine McKittrick, "Footnotes," 15.
[98] For an evocative account of *R.S.V.P.*'s performances see: Bradley, "Transferred Flesh," 161-166.

> For black artists, the emphasis on "body as material" does not come without its own historical tethers. The black body carries within it signifiers and markers that are deeply rooted in historical narratives. They as well embody the transcendence, evolution, and complexities of that same body long ago unshackled, affirmed, and given self-determination.[99]

Cassell Oliver emphasises that for Black artists, the body carries significant historical weight, serving as both individual expression and a representation of collective identity. These notions are well exemplified in *R.S.V.P.*'s performed state, where connections to the body and tactility are further kindled through moments of connectivity.

Though not all iterations of *R.S.V.P.* are performed or created with such intention reflecting on this aspect of the work is crucial, especially as the artworks enter museum collections and their activations become less frequent or a past presence. Muñoz articulates that "we also must understand that after the gesture expires, its materiality has transformed into ephemera that are utterly necessary."[100] The performance exceeds the singular moment of its activation and continues to exist through the remnant sculptural forms left to inhabit the gallery as records of that action. Considering the limited lifetime of performance, Amelia Jones expresses that:

> In the end, retrieving "what happened" or what a body in action *meant* at any past moment is always an impossible enterprise—but worth a try and, in fact, politically imperative. In fact, thinking about past events, performance or otherwise, is one of the most important gestures in a world driven by futurity and forgetting.[101]

Here she asserts the importance of not letting ephemeral performative moments fall into obscurity. It is imperative that when *R.S.V.P.*'s once active sculptural forms enter a more dormant state, the important collective moments of transference and connection garnered through their

---

[99] Valerie Cassel Oliver, "Preface," in *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 2013), 10.
[100] Muñoz, "Gesture, Ephemera," 81.
[101] Jones, "LOST BODIES," 118.

performance are retained within the material forms through the work's tactile qualities.[102]

Haptics: Touch and Affect

In her essay *To Touch Time*, scholar Sarah Louise Cowan explores Black artists who strategically employ what she refers to as haptic sculptural practices; a context in which she includes Nengudi, among other artists such as Beverly Buchanan and Betye Saar.[103] Cowan examines how these artists from the 1960s and 70s—who are largely excluded from mainstream canon—employed the haptic as a means to position their work within a broader lineage of Black artistic practice that resisted the marginalizing and obfuscating forces of modernism.[104] Understanding the haptic as "a bodily, touch-based approach to the material world that exceeds the visual […] as a tool for folding the past into the present,"[105] Cowan's theoretical propositions begin to elucidate how within *R.S.V.P.*, haptics can be understood as the relation of touch, body, temporality, residue, and material. Central to Cowan's determination of haptic sculptural practices are artwork's "textured surfaces that invite tactile curiosity."[106] Examining Saar's work as an example, the author elucidates that, like Nengudi, she collects ephemera in the form of familial and found memorabilia that chronicles the life of Black Americans. These materials, which could be considered remains, form the basis for Saar's 1970s assemblage works, like *Bitter Sweet (Bessie Smith)* (1974) (fig. 9), in which she has collaged images and posters with

---

[102] In discussing performative gestures, Muñoz importantly asserts that "The ephemeral does not equal unmateriality." Muñoz, "Gesture, Ephemera," 81. I carry forth this consideration in my reflections on *R.S.V.P.*
[103] Cowan in particular utilises "the term Black feminist modernisms [to describe] creative practices that unsettle the racist and sexist logics of dominant cultural institutions in part by engaging with modernist idioms." Cowan, "To Touch Time," 3.
[104] Cowan, "To Touch Time," 3. Central to her argument is also the notion that "Haptic marks constitute traces of human touch that generate distinctive viewing experiences," which "combats processes of silencing by registering historical occurrences in material form." Cowan, "To Touch Time," 5.
[105] Cowan, "To Touch Time," 3.
[106] Cowan, "To Touch Time," 5.

ornamental flowers, feathers, and other textured objects. With these works, Saar recasts the forms of modernist assemblage and "generates haptic surfaces through which to exchange acts of touch across generations."[107] The objects in Saar's works, having passed through the hands of the artists and various individuals or communities, evoke a sense of touch across temporalities. This recalls the tactile sensibilities produced in *R.S.V.P.* through the use of textured materials (sand) and those closely connected to the body and skin (pantyhose). These tactile material qualities impact audiences' experience, calling for more embodied engagements with the sculptural forms.

Following Cowan's considerations of Nengudi's haptic sculptural practice, I argue that the haptic is an essential component of *R.S.V.P.* Through its haptic qualities, which are directly linked to the work's sensorial faculties, *R.S.V.P.* refutes the stillness ensconced in museum objects. While often presented as sculptural installations, these works do not adhere to the static and individualistic state of the time's prevailing modernist and formalist sculpture. The title, *R.S.V.P. (Répondez S'il Vous Plaît)* or *(Please Respond)*, is suggestive of an invitation to the viewer, opening up the work to haptic and sensorial encounters rather than exclusive visual consumption.[108] Stemming from Nengudi's desire to explore the three-dimensional capacities of sculpture, *R.S.V.P.* was initially designed for tactile encounters with its audience. On the subject of sculpture and tactility Nengudi states: "They don't allow you to do it, but the real thing is that you should touch sculpture. You should really have this experience with the artwork, not just looking at it, but totally connecting with it."[109] Though the museum makes the handling of artworks illicit and touch impermissible, Nengudi nonetheless aims to incite a more embodied

---

[107] Cowan, "To Touch Time," 14.
[108] Discussing *R.S.V.P.*'s experientiality, Nengudi expresses: "*Répondez S'il Vous Plaît*; I really have this thing about the viewer saying something to me. I want you to respond. I'm inviting you to respond to this work. And if it has any power at all, you will respond to it. So it was an invitation, and I wanted you to respond to it." Senga Nengudi interviewed by Elissa Auther.
[109] Senga Nengudi interviewed by Elissa Auther.

and active connection or response from those who engage with it, disrupting the ocular-centric viewing conditions that are central to museum logics.[110] In defining her own material and conceptual artmaking language—one that operates beyond the prescribed understandings of both modernist sculpture and contemporary dance—Nengudi's pursuit of embodied experiences orients the works towards the body, movement, and touch. Through its haptic qualities, *R.S.V.P.* is positioned to create sensorial responses rather than be solely visually consumed.

Art Historian, Jennifer Fisher's article, "Relational Sense: Towards A Haptic Aesthetic" examines the interconnection between the haptic and aesthetic within artworks to explore how sensorial encounters shape a viewer's experience. For Fisher, "The haptic sense, comprising the tactile, kinaesthetic, and proprioceptive senses, describes aspects of engagement that are qualitatively distinct from the capabilities of the visual sense."[111] Calling for the use of haptic perception when engaging within artworks, Fisher invites us to consider and engage with artworks through a more complex array of sensory faculties.[112] She asserts that haptic perception can reveal the energies and emotions involved in sensing space, describing it as an affective touch that extends beyond mere physical contact. With these considerations in mind, I suggest that through its haptic sensibilities, *R.S.V.P.* invites audiences to feel with their bodies, engaging both the physical and affective dimensions of perception. Explaining her desire for emotive

---

[110] The emphasis of vision over other senses in the experience of art emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. Prior to this time museological objects and artifacts were engaged through a variety of sensory faculties, including touch. Classen and Hoes elaborate, "Touch […] was generally believed to provide a necessary supplement to sight, which sense was understood to be limited to surface appearances. Solely viewing a collection was considered a superficial means of apprehending it. Taking the time to touch artifacts, to turn them over in one's hands, showed a more profound interest. Touch, furthermore, was believed to have access to interior truths of which sight was unaware." The authors continue to explain, "the more that Europeans emphasized the distinction between the 'noble' sense of sight and the 'base' proximity senses, the less the latter were deemed suitable for the appreciation and understanding of art and artifacts." Classen and Howes, "The Museum as Sensescape," 202, 207.

[111] Fisher, "Relational Sense," 6.

[112] Fisher, "Relational Sense," 6. This recalls Laura U. Marks' assertion that "in haptic *visuality*, the eyes themselves function like organs of touch." Laura U. Marks, "Video haptics and erotics," *Screen* 39.4 (1998): 332.

responses, Nengudi explains, "I want people to have a visceral experience with my work. I want them to feel. If they do that then the work can begin to develop a conversation."[113] *R.S.V.P* importantly aims to generate different sensorial relationships to artworks, prompting viewers to experience the artwork emotionally and affectively. This establishes a dynamic relationship that continues to resonate even as materials shift over time. As Fisher suggests, "the haptic defines the affective charge,"[114] and, I argue, that this quality persists in the work, imbuing it with power in contemporary collections. *R.S.V.P.* creates and calls for a haptic encounter.

Nylon: Memory and Corporeal Connection

Invented in 1938, nylon was the first fully synthetic textile and radically revolutionized the world of chemically made materials.[115] Responsible for its creation was the DuPont Company, a US-based chemical fabricator that played a pivotal role in the development of human-manufactured fibres in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Prior to their advancements in textile technologies, the DuPont company manufactured explosives, supplying substantial amounts of gunpowder and TNT during World War I. The invention of nylon significantly altered the chemical, textile, and fashion manufacturing industries, while simultaneously allowing DuPont to rebrand itself from a chemical giant into an innovator of modern materials. Nylon's transformative impact lied in the pliability, mutability, and durability of the material, making its possible uses across numerous industries boundless. These qualities of flexibility and strength

[113] Senga Nengudi interviewed by Allie Tepper.
[114] Fisher, "Relational Sense," 6.
[115] The invention of nylon was preceded by the advent of semi-synthetic fibres like rayon, which are "chemically reconstructed fibre[s], that [are] made from a natural organic cellulose form." Susannah Handley, *Nylon: The Story of a Fashion Revolution: A Celebration of Design from Art Silk to Nylon and Thinking Fibres* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 28. Such materials which would replace silks and other natural fabrics, precipitating this radical alteration of multiple industries.

are also what drew Nengudi to use the material. With DuPont's rebranding, the company significantly invested in the manufacturing of women's hosiery products, marketing a new kind of stocking that would quickly become a global sensation. The company's venture in the manufacturing of undergarments—specifically those associated with traditional feminine ideals, which symbolize the restriction and sexualization of women's bodies—aligns DuPont's history with both the advancement of military power and the reinforcement of patriarchal values.[116] I recount this very brief history of the advent of nylon to illustrate the loaded meanings enmeshed within the material that inevitably penetrate aspects of *R.S.V.P.*, which Nengudi subverts through recontextualization.

Many artists, like Nengudi, have turned to pantyhose as an artistic material for its memetic relation to the body. Hosiery, for example, is utilised by both Marianne Berenhaut, notably in her *Poupées Poubelles (Garbage Dolls)* (1971-80) (fig. 10), and Sarah Lucas, in works like *Pauline Bunny* (1997) (fig. 11), where pantyhose are engorged with various materials to create humanoid forms. Positioned in ways that suggest human postures, often propped up or seated in chairs, these critical intimations of the feminine body are more explicit in Berenhaut and Lucas' artworks than in Nengudi's. In works such as *Synapse* (2019) and *Tension* (2019) (figs. 12-13), artist María Ezcurra intertwines and stretches pantyhose across the gallery to consider the relation between space and the body, and how identity is constructed through personal, cultural, and political spaces. The installation, tautness, and suspension of the nylons recall *R.S.V.P.*'s compositional forms and resituate the pantyhose away from traditional

[116] The company's alliance with military efforts continued during World War II when it suspended the production of hosiery, redirecting all nylon manufacturing toward the production of war supplies. The durability, versatility, and mildew resistance of nylon made it an invaluable resource in the making of military goods and garments. The radical impact of nylon on the effectiveness of military equipment continues to extend far beyond WWII.

associations of femininity. These artists extend the material's lexicon to redefine the political meanings embedded in such garments.[117]

When analysing the materiality of pantyhose, I stress that its connection and metonymic relation to skin cannot be overlooked. In a literal sense, the function of the garment is to act as a second skin, concealing imperfections and refashioning the surface of its wearer's body to be unmarked. In a more metaphorical sense, skin chronicles personal and collective histories.[118] In studying Nengudi's work, several scholars have importantly considered the racial codification of pantyhose.[119] Cowan addresses the problematic terminology and misnomer of the term nude employed by the hosiery industry "to refer to tones associated with racial whiteness since at least the early twentieth century."[120] This fallacious definition of neutrality exemplifies the centrality of white femininity within the industry and symbolized by the pantyhose, despite the variety of tonal offerings of nylon on the mass consumer market. Nengudi's use of pantyhose challenges

---

[117] This is by no means an exhaustive analysis of artists using pantyhose; however, I draw on these examples to briefly illustrate the numerous ways the material has been wielded and repurposed in artworks. For more on each artist and artwork see: "Marianne Berenhaut," Dvir Gallery, accessed February 1, 2024, https://dvirgallery.com/artists/70-marianne-berenhaut/; "Marianne Berenhaut," AWARE: Archives of Women Artists, Research & Exhibitions, accessed February 1, 2024, https://awarewomenartists.com/en/artiste/marianne-berenhaut/; Dominique Heyse-Moore and Amy Emmerson Martin, "Exhibition Guide: Sara Lucas: Happy Gas," Tate Britain, accessed February 1, 2024, https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/sarah-lucas/exhibition-guide; "Tension," Maria Ezcurra, accessed February 1, 2024, https://mariaezcurra.com/tension-en; and "Synapse," Maria Ezcurra, accessed February 1, 2024, https://mariaezcurra.com/synapse-en.

[118] Jackie Stacy and Sara Ahmed affirm this position in their recapitulation of Jay Posser's chapter for their book *Thinking Through The Skin*, stating "skin remembers: skin surfaces record our personal biographies, however imperfectly." Ahmed and Stacey, "Introduction: Dermographies," 2. For these authors skin is not merely a physical site or bodily organ, but also a repository for memory.

[119] Carroll further complicates the gendered dichotomy between the "feminine" and "masculine" uses of nylon in fashion and military histories, described previously, to consider its intersection with racialized labour. What Carroll's analysis illustrates is not only that nylon has gendered implications and connections with US military endeavors, but that the material's history is representative of the mechanisms through which power is built. Particularly through the exploitation of Black women's labour. For Carroll, "Nengudi's used nylon stockings uncork a heady vapor of meanings connected to skin color and race, the fetishization of gendered body parts, and the commodification of Black women." Carroll, "Remains to Be Seen,"48. Ultimately she argues that Nengudi's use of nylon subverts conventional narratives around pantyhose by recontextualizing the racially charged material within her own Black feminist logics (those that are not confined to dominant disciplines) and through her evocations rather than figurative depictions of the (Black, sometimes female) body, she is offering an aesthetic critique on disposability and violence. For more on Carroll's deft material analysis see: Carroll, "Remains to Be Seen," 47-70.

[120] Cowan, "To Touch Time," 12.

dominant discourses that impose a singular, homogenous notion of Black identity. By incorporating various colours of pantyhose, as in *R.S.V.P Revisited - Underwire* (1977/2004) (fig. 14), she refutes the idea of a "Black same," a concept of racial uniformity that sociologist Shirley Tate critiques as a product of white-dominated narratives. Tate argues for "Blackness as being more than a skin colour, but as being reduced to skin because of the policing of the borders of Blackness by individuals operating within essentialist notions of who is Black."[121] The reference to skin through the pantyhose in *R.S.V.P.* becomes a site of resistance and negotiation.

Further, observations on the relationship between flesh and body are recurrent in discourses on the use of pantyhose in *R.S.V.P.* and its connection to the Black body. In her important text "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Hortense Spillers—examining the un-gendering of the Black captive body and practices of dehumanising naming—pronounces that under the violent conditions of the Middle Passage, stolen bodies were reduced to flesh. Spillers makes a crucial distinction between body and flesh, where body is subject/person and where flesh is an object/non-person, establishing this difference as the key divide between the captive and liberated subject.[122] The intimate relation to, and being of, the Black body connects *R.S.V.P.* to these histories. Conversing with Spillers' text in "Transferred Flesh: Reflections on Senga Nengudi's *R.S.V.P.*," Rizvana Bradley argues that the actions performed primarily by Black dancers and artists sensorially engaging with *R.S.V.P.*'s material forms "re-activates [the] symbolic rupture between body and flesh," and in doing so re-frames the understanding of the Black body away from "over-determined representations."[123] During the performance, the exchange between body (the performer) and flesh (the material form) is how,

---

[121] Tate, "'That is my Star of David,'" 210.
[122] Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 67.
[123] Bradley, "Transferred Flesh," 165.

Bradley maintains,

> These fleshy sculptural forms activated by figures in motion, direct us to flesh as a special site of material recovery. The material force and "radical presence" of the flesh has to do with its generativity, its capacity to persist as a site for staging a retrieval, a recovery, and a reclamation of a certain worth and dignity that has been lost.[124]

Thus, with *R.S.V.P.,* Nengudi returns flesh to the body. In considering the pantyhose as skin, I suggest that in *R.S.V.P.* notions of flesh and skin meet, and skin—as the container which carries and cares for the body—becomes a site for possibility and reclamation.[125] The artist resituates the material and its histories, using nylon's elastic properties to signal strength, resiliency, and future imaginaries in relation to Black women's bodies, rather than rehearsing narratives of violence, entrapment, and loss. It is an assertion of Black life through artistic invention.[126]

Sand: Metaphor and Intrusion

Though a less studied material within Nengudi's work, sand is an integral component of *R.S.V.P.*, and like the pantyhose, it is a physical conduit that metaphorically connects the work to broader histories and memories.[127] I draw on scholar Vanessa Agard-Jones' research to consider the role that sand plays within the work. In her text "What the Sands Remember," Agard-Jones explores

---

[124] Bradley, "Transferred Flesh," 165.
[125] Considering skin's temporality, Ahmed and Stacy contend that "the skin is not simply in the present […] it has multiple histories and unimaginable futures." Ahmed and Stacy, "Introduction: Dermographies," 2. With this framework we can begin to understand skin's connective force across time, through the past, present and future.
[126] I draw on the notion of artistic invention from McKittrick, who posits that the event and resulting state of the "Middle Passage terror produced the conditions to reinvent and reorder black life," and as a result engendered Black creative invention as a tool for survival. McKittrick, "I Got Life / Rebellion Invention Groove," *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020): 157.
[127] I also note that Nengudi's interest in and use of sand extends past *R.S.V.P.*. It also materialises in other works like the performance entitled *Sweep* and large-scale installations, such as *Sandmining B* (fig. 15), which incidentally makes use of bodily forms, found objects, and pantyhose. This demonstrates Nengudi's long-standing investments in her material usages, which she has continued to explore throughout her career. The same can be said for her use of pantyhose, appearing in numerous performative and sculptural/installation artworks, as well as her incorporation of remains or found objects. For more on *Sweep* see: Jones, "The World According to Z," 60, and for more on *Sandmining B* see: "Senga Nengudi's "Sandmining B,'" Philadelphia Museum of Art, accessed January 10, 2025, https://philamuseum.org/resources/senga-nengudis-sandmining-b.

the metaphoric possibilities of sand, positioning it as a powerful agent of memory for Black communities. Sand is offered as an alternative to the often theorized oceanic or watery metaphors prevalent in Caribbean and African diasporic studies to contend with the dispossessing histories of the Middle Passage. Agard-Jones posits, "Sand is the less embraced referent that returns us to the body's messy realities […] sand gets inside our bodies, our things, in ways at once inconvenient and intrusive. It smoothes rough edges but also irritates, sticking to our bodies' folds and fissures."[128] Importantly, she continues "Each grain possesses a geological lineage that links sand to a place and to its history, and each grain also carries a symbolic association that indexes that history as well," making sand an attendant witness to the past.[129] Drawing on these considerations, I suggest that considering sand as metaphor opens up avenues for deeper exploration of its role in *R.S.V.P.*

Encased within the pantyhose, sand serves as a referential tool for Black bodies, tethering communities affected by colonial violence across multiple temporalities. Sand becomes bodily, engorging and shaping the otherwise formless nylons. Considering the relationship between sand, pantyhose, and metaphoric possibility, Tani observes,

> Nylon pantyhose has a gendered social function to preserve the idealised feminine body through elasticity and translucency, preserving the body's modesty while contouring its figure. But when filled with sand, its weight connotes an earthbound, mortal fate and constitutes a counterforce to nylon's elasticity. The particulate quality of sand becomes a metaphor for the accumulated memories, traumas, and responsibilities that can burden as

---

[128] Agard-Jones, "What the Sands Remember," 325-326.

[129] Agard-Jones, "What the Sands Remember," 326. Reflecting on the role of metaphor in these areas of study, scholar Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, argues for the importance of metaphor as a materially tethered theoretical tool and methodology for Black survival. Through Frantz Fanon, Tinsley writes, "metaphors provide conceptual bridges between the lived and the possible that use language queerly to map other roads of becoming. My point is never that we should strip theory of watery metaphors but that we should return to the materiality of water to make its metaphors mean more complexly, shaking off settling into frozen figures." Omise'eke Natasha Tinsely, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 2-3 (2008): 212. Tinsely is by no means the only scholar to consider the use of metaphor, however, I draw on her text here as a clear analysis and implementation of metaphoric theory. I similarly argue for the importance of considering the material quality of sand with its metaphoric capacities in *R.S.V.P.*

much as balance.[130]

R.S.V.P. refuses the rendering of the Black body to a mere fleshiness, venturing instead to the suggestively abstract where the visual weight created by the sand carries the load of memory.

Nengudi inserts Black presences in the museum through the use of sand, and while it is mostly contained within the pantyhose—under visible strain—they risk erupting. My interest in sand also extends beyond its metaphoric signification to its intrusion into sterile museum settings. Considering the invasive nature of sand, I argue that Nengudi's use of the material in *R.S.V.P.* is rebellious in that it threatens to contaminate the museum environment.[131] Kate Moomaw-Taylor, Senior Conservator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Denver Art Museum (DAM)—which holds Nengudi's *A.C.Q. I* (2016-17) (fig. 16) in its collection—confirms the potential of the sand seeping. She shares that despite efforts to contain the innumerable granules during the packing/unpacking, installing/uninstalling, and preparing the work for exhibition, some will inevitably escape.[132]

Agard-Jones suggests that "turning to sand as a metaphor for the repository of memory may help our analyses engage with more fine-grained and ephemeral presences than our usual

---

[130] Tani, "'Really African, and Really Kabuki Too,'" 178.

[131] Documentation of a *R.S.V.P.* performance at the Henry Art Gallery, Seattle in 2016 reveals the realities of this potential. The images depict two performers interacting with Nengudi's forms, where sand covers the floor beneath them (fig. 17). The performers appear to use their hands and the bulbous nylon forms to spread and streak the grains around the floor. No further information on this event has been found to confirm whether the sand occupied the floor only for the duration of the performance, whether it was left residue of the activation, or whether it erupted from the pantyhose during the engagement. These documentary images, though an elusive trace, are a testament to the potential of sand to spread and intrude.

[132] During a conversation Moomaw-Taylor offered insights into DAM's processes surrounding the handling of *A.C.Q. I* (2016-17). Though this piece is a more recently fabricated work in the *R.S.V.P.* series, it retains the primary nylon and sand elements with the addition of refrigerator and air conditioner unit parts. In describing the processes of filling the pantyhose with sand Moomaw-Taylor confirms that it is a messy endeavor. Further, insight was provided on the methods used to manage the sand and ensure the pantyhose do not snag in the storage of the work by isolating each element. With this, she articulated that "keeping it contained is a positive in a museum environment, but it does, it does filter out." Kate Moomaw-Taylor (Senior Conservator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Denver Art Museum) in discussion with the author, Zoom (Denver, Colorado and Montreal, Quebec), October 2024, 18:10.

archives would allow."[133] Considering the role of intangible presences as carriers of meaning, I reflect on how, by refusing to be fully encased, the sand in *R.S.V.P.* might become ingrained in the museum. The granules seeping out are impossible to contain, encrusting themselves within the museum architectures they reside in. Through their own volition, they escape their nylon containers into the recesses of galleries and vaults. The lasting presence of the sand is a persistent insistence on not being subsumed by the sanitized operations of museum practices. Further, the metaphoric presence of the Black body—one historically excluded or marginally represented in the museum—carried by the sand infiltrates and cannot be dispelled from the institution.

Nengudi's use of abstraction in *R.S.V.P.* is a powerful protective measure against the historical representation of Black life, identity, and communities in museums, making affective gestures to past lives while envisioning future possibilities. The re-contextualizing *R.S.V.P.*'s materials and the creation of a work oriented around tactility and movement makes it an assertion of active presence, refusing traditional museological definition. Thus, as is examined in the following section, museums must consider their role and the methods used in the conservation and care of *R.S.V.P.*

[133] Agard-Jones, "What the Sands Remember," 340.

Section III: Conservation, Rebellion and Care

Section III delves into the conservation of *R.S.V.P.* Drawing on contemporary conservation frameworks and methods, this section examines how museums grapple with the preservation of art that is transient, ephemeral, performative, or constituent.[134] These properties are encapsulated in *R.S.V.P.* through its roving materials—vulnerable to degradation—as well as the performative aspects of the work which appear to subside in the museum. The in-depth analysis of materiality presented in Section II provides the framework through which this section considers how Nengudi's artworks presently reside in museological collections and their relationship to conservation. Arguing for *R.S.V.P.* as an unruly and rebellious artwork that has the agency to challenge conventional conservation practices, this section calls for the need to enact an ethics of care when attending to Nengudi's work.

Conservation Frameworks and an Ethics of Care

Within this research, I explore the question of how to *attend* to *R.S.V.P.*, rather than simply how to preserve or restore these artworks.[135] Attending considers how all aspects of the work—material, social, sensorial, and historical—can be meaningfully and responsibly accounted for

[134] I draw the idea of constituencies from Rubio to refer to artworks like *R.S.V.P.*, which are made of multiple parts and materials, that resist being easily organized and categorized. He explains: "The first task when acquiring an artwork is to transform the complex constituencies in which they are inserted into legible, manageable, and unified 'objects of knowledge.'" Rubio, "Preserving the unpreservable," 628. Thus, complex artworks containing many constituencies complicate the classificatory systems and processes the museums utilise to manage objects. Hölling echoes Rubio's postulations and locates such artworks within a particular time period articulating "Artworks produced since the 1960s exist in relations, as systems of ingredients, parts, and fixings." Hölling, *Object-Event-Performance*, 26.

[135] I use the terminology of preservation and restoration to refer to the more technical, scientific and practical aspects of the interventions made into artwork to manage or restore their material state. Attending signifies a practice rooted in care.

within a museological system.[136] The framework of attentiveness embraces what art historian and material matter studies scholar Hanna B. Hölling describes as humanistic conservation, which "distances itself from traditional notions of material authenticity and instead views artworks and artifacts as processes evolving and changing in time."[137] Hölling's perspective aligns with broader tendencies in conservation scholarship that insist on a fundamental reconceptualising of preservation practices that move away from dominant Western paradigms rooted in scientific knowledge. Rather there is an increasing advocacy for interdisciplinary approaches that centralize care and relationality. These reorientations challenge object-centered conservation models originating in colonial and imperial museological practices and move towards active, responsive methods where artworks and humans together shape conservation processes. Such considerations acknowledge that conservation is not neutral; it is impacted by all participants who interact with the artwork and therefore can be understood as a creative "knowledge-generating activity."[138]

To ethically attend to *R.S.V.P.* in their collections, museums and their staff must adopt new methods and practices of conservation that account for the work's changing states. The complexity of *R.S.V.P.*—as artworks that are compendiums of different forms, materials, histories, and actions—denies a singular conservation approach. Therefore, I draw upon several contemporary conservation frameworks and methodologies to inform potential strategies for attending to *R.S.V.P.* Questioning the centrality of authenticity within preservation, Hölling argues instead for embracing changeability. She explains, "Changeability—the capacity of an

---

[136] On this subject, Hölling argues conservation "is now seen as an engagement with materiality rather than material, contending with many specific factors that determine how an object's identity and meaning are entangled with time and space, the environment, values, politics, economics, conventions, and culture." Hölling, *Object-Event-Performance,* 14.
[137] Hölling, *Object-Event-Performance*, 16.
[138] Hölling, *Object-Event-Performance*, 3.

artwork to change or to be changed as one of its fundamental characteristics—is an index of time."[139] Change is an intrinsic facet of all artworks making them temporal entities. Therefore, she argues that it is crucial to enact care through the acceptance of change, which in turn, will ensure an artwork's integrity is retained. With these considerations in mind, I understand change as an integral constituent of *R.S.V.P.*: the nylons will stretch, sag, and require replacement to counter this distension; the sand necessitates replenishment as it dissipates into the architectures of the museum; the iterative nature of the work gives into shifting compositional forms. By understanding *R.S.V.P.* as a changeable artwork, conceding to its material fluctuations and alterations over time, does not eradicate its past lives (even if the bodily residues inscribed into the museum are discharged). The work enters a new life, wherein new materials and events will accumulate to become part of its being and history.

In her text, "Becoming Difference: On the Ethics of Conserving the In-Between," conservation scholar Hélia Marçal examines the complex politics and ethics of conservation practices in museums. Central to her analysis is the concept of liminality, wherein she suggests that objects exist in transitional or in-between states that, like changeability, challenge traditional preservation approaches centered on stability and permanence.[140] Marçal critiques the notion that artworks possess a singular material existence, considering instead how the material status of an artwork calls into question traditional notions of authenticity. Alongside liminality, she also presents the notion of difference to argue that there are no fixed frameworks or singular methods for conserving artworks. Rather institutions and conservators need to account for differences in

---

[139] Hölling, *Object-Event-Performance*, 9.

[140] Within her research, Marçal, like many conservation scholars, argues that traditional restoration imposes a modernist framework rooted in colonial and imperialist ideologies that prioritize stability and the object's physical status over its contextual and conceptual dimensions. She is critical of traditional methods, particularly in the context of contemporary art, where they often fall short in accommodating the temporal qualities of artworks. Marçal, "Becoming Difference."

objects; both in how their physical properties act and in the consideration of their conceptual conceits. For Marçal, a more equitable approach to preservation—one that acknowledges the dynamic interplay between objects, their materiality, and their broader socio-political contexts—can be achieved by embracing liminality and difference. Within both of these theories, Marçal importantly advocates for reflexive conservationist practices, which account for the role of the conservator, insisting they are not passive agents, but actively shape meaning through their interventions. I suggest that the frameworks of liminality, difference, and changeability are ones within which Nengudi's work can be situated to be ethically attended to in museological collections. These scholars advocate for practices that engage with the multiplicity and fluidity of artworks, rather than those that aim to stabilize artworks to fit into long-established preservation practices.

In the acquisition and conservation of *R.S.V.P.,* museums must address the meanings contained in the work, particularly those related to race, the body, and Black life. As such, an ethics of care is critical in attending to *R.S.V.P.* in a museological context. Within this thesis, I define an ethics of care as a method of attending to artwork that is responsive, relational, and attentive. It centralizes the artist's intentions, as well as the historical, cultural, and metaphorical contexts embedded within the work over the preservation or restoration of material objects to their original state. Prioritizing restoration imposes the practices of the museum onto the artwork rather than remaining responsive. An approach rooted in care is crucial in the context of white, mainstream museum frameworks, which have excluded or tokenized artists of colour, and continue to have fraught relations with representation, both within collections and staffing.[141]

[141] For a critical examination in issues of racial disparities and the systemic exclusion of Black artists and cultural workers in mainstream US art museums see: Tiffany Li, "An Incomplete History of Exclusion: Modern and Contemporary Black Art and the U.S. Art Museum," *Southern California Interdisciplinary Law Journal* 30, no. 3 (2021): 795-826. In this text, Li studies museums broadly, from permanent collections and temporary exhibitions to

Despite increasing trends in diversity, equity, and inclusivity initiatives, the sector continues to grapple with enacting meaningful reform by, as museum studies scholar Katy Bunning states, "fail[ing] to undo the traditional power relations, originally shaped by colonialist systems."[142] This extends to all levels of museum operations, including conservation, as is affirmed by critical race and curatorial studies scholar Kelli Morgan. She asserts that "major Western collections exist as repositories of white colonization."[143] The museum—responsible for ensuring the lasting presence of the material and physical object—performs a significant role in re/defining artworks and the conditions under which they continue to exist. Thus, the failure to meaningfully engage with all dimensions of works like *R.S.V.P.* enables museums' hegemonic operational modes to continue governing the treatment of artworks. Incorporating an ethics of care challenges traditional conservation methods and makes room for Black livingness in the museum. Importantly, as Morgan maintains, artworks made by Black artists can exist in museums while rejecting the white, patriarchal structures that dominate them.[144] Working through an ethics of

---

economic drivers, visitor and staffing demographics, as well as administrative systems, taking all levels of operation into account as an interrelated network of systems rather than distinct frameworks.

[142] Katy Bunning, *Negotiating Race*, 6. In *Negotiating Race and Rights in the Museum* Bunning examines how racial ideas both shape and upend museum practices by centering notions of whiteness as a mode of governing, critiquing the prevailing and superficial tokenizing diversity initiatives developed in museums for white self-interests. While these issues are ever present, I do not ignore the important work that Black curators, artists, scholars, and cultural workers have and continue to undertake to address and resist the conditions of the museum. The ongoing resignation of Black curators from leadership roles in the recent past, however, is a wry testament to the unchanging systems of governance within museums that are ill equipped to properly support Black practitioners. For examples and further discussion see: "A Letter from the Black Curators Forum to Contemporary Art Institutions and Organization Across This Land Called Canada," *Canadian Art*, September 14, 2020, https://canadianart.ca/features/a-letter-from-the-black-curators-forum-to-contemporary-art-institutions-and-organizations-across-this-land-called-canada/; Lise Ragbir, "I Was a Museum's Black Lives Matter Hire," *Hyperallergic*, March 2, 2023; Lise Ragbir, "In the Past Two Years, Museums Have Finally Started Hiring Black Women for Top Jobs. Why Are So Many Already Leaving?," *Artnet*, March 17, 2022; and Li, "An Incomplete History of Exclusion."

[143] Morgan, "Peeling the paint," 189. This belief is echoed in much research around conservation, including Brian Castorina and Claire Walsh's contribution to *Performance* wherein they contend that "the process of taking any artwork into a collection happens always already in the shadow of the museum's historical connections to imperialism and colonialism, and the innumerable acts of violence enacted in the name of collecting and care that haunt and echo through our current practices." Brian Castriota and Claire Walsh, "In the shadow of the state," in *Performance: The Ethics and The Politics of Conservation and Care, Volume I*, ed. Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman and Emilie Magnin (Oxon: Routledge, 2023), 160.

[144] Morgan, "Peeling the paint," 193.

care ensures *R.S.V.P.* continues to contain its affective and sensorial capacities—particularly those tied to the body through the metaphorical referents of the sand and nylon forms—and sustains the embodied knowledge held within the work. If the knowledge embodied in the artwork is not erased through the stabilizing paradigms of traditional preservationist practice, it has the power to participate in propelling change within institutions. Within an ethics of care, which encapsulates a humanistic conservation, highlighting the presence and power of conservation, curatorial, and other museum staff who interface with the artwork is crucial.

Unruly Rebellions: Catalysing Institutional Change

Works entering museum collections play a pivotal role in challenging traditional conservation practices and urging them to reconceptualise these systems. I suggest *R.S.V.P.* is one such work, and with this, I return to McKittrick's notion of rebellion to argue that it is unruly in a museological context. For McKittrick, through Sylvia Wynter, rebellions are "acts that undermined the dominant colonial ways of knowing."[145] It is precisely this that *R.S.V.P.* does within the sometimes constricting framework of the museum. The rebelliousness of Nengudi's methodologies and work is manifold and central to *R.S.V.P.*'s disruptive quality is its unruly material condition. Rubio presents the idea of unruliness within artworks by arguing that "not every artwork lends itself equally to these processes of stabilization, preservation, and objectification […] Some artworks behave as […]'unruly objects,' that is, as artworks that cannot be easily stabilized and transformed into timeless 'objects' of formal delectation."[146] Rubio's notion of unruliness is positioned in relation to what he defines as docile objects, which more

[145] McKittrick, "I Got Life," 157 (n20).
[146] Rubio, "Preserving the unpreservable," 622.

readily conform to conventional preservation efforts, upholding mainstream museological standards. Conversely, unruly objects resist easy classification and preservation, challenging museums to reshape their approaches to conservation, organization, and display. Importantly, Rubio emphasises that an artwork's docility or unruliness is not an inherent or fixed position. Instead, it is a relational material behaviour that is contingent on the spatial occupation of the object. As such the work's status can vacillate in response to the architectures it resides in. Artworks are therefore not inherently unruly, instead, their active material agency enables the production of cultural and social relations and meanings.

Rubio suggests unruly artworks become catalysts for institutional change in museums, necessitating creative adaptations and new conservation methodologies. They challenge established hierarchies and classification systems, impelling museums to reconsider their intrinsic ways of operating, subject positions (that is the roles of and power dynamics between curators and conservators), and how meaning is made. By understanding unruliness in this way, I contend that *R.S.V.P.* behaves as an unruly object in the museum by refusing a stable object condition. It resists museological classification, definition, and organizational logic utilised by arts institutions.[147] How the work is defined and understood by the museum impacts how it is cared for by the institutions that contain it. Therefore, museums must take seriously the artwork's behaviours and active material conditions to meaningfully attend to it.

Within *R.S.V.P.*, I consider sand's unruly behaviour as a central mode of rebellion in that it threatens to disrupt the sanitized space of the museum, as I have examined in Section II. Sand counteracts the clean operations of the gallery in its refusal to be easily contained. Its messy granules obtrude the controlled environments they encrust themselves in, whether invisibly in the

[147] As is discussed previously, the ungraspability of the artwork and the difficulty in situating it within a clear medium or material state is how it resists such taxonomies.

inner architectures of the museum or visibly in the site of the gallery. The perceptibility of the uncontained sand is a demonstration of defiance and can be seen in some artworks like *R.S.V.P. Reverie O* (2015) (fig. 18). The waistband of a pair of pantyhose is filled with sand, invoking a soft pelvic shape, which rests weightily on the gallery floor atop an accumulation of the same particulate matter contained within the nylon. The sand, which appears to have oozed from the bulbous nylon form, exposes this disruptive quality. The pantyhose, conversely, propound another challenge for museums because of their impermanent nature and their inevitable degradation precipitated by the strained conditions of display they exist in. The deterioration of the fragile nylon necessitates repeated replacement. As I will elucidate through the conservation methods undertaken in *R.S.V.P. X* and *A.C.Q. I*, Nengudi's refusal to make the original pantyhose more permanent means the museum will continuously have to grapple with the maintenance and sourcing of the material. Attempting to force the material into a fixed condition would render it static and thus endanger its haptic, affective, and sensory capacities. *R.S.V.P.*'s unruly behaviours urge museums to consider how to attend to such materials, creating fissures into the innately assumed restorative practices of the museum.

A Brief Overview of Conservation Strategies for *R.S.V.P.*

To situate my discussion on the conservation of *R.S.V.P.*, I turn to several examples that illustrate current methods used to conserve the work in museum collections. In her text "Considerations in the acquisition of contemporary art: Refabrication as a preservation strategy," Gwynne Ryan—previously Head of Conservation and Sculpture Conservator at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington DC—sheds light on the conservation strategies and processes for

R.S.V.P. X (1976/2014) (fig. 19), acquired by the museum in 2015.[148] Installed in a corner of the gallery, *R.S.V.P. X* is composed of two sets of brown pantyhose, knotted at the waistband with their extremities extending outwards from the central midpoint. One pair, filled with sand and resting on the ground, draws the sculpture downward; the other anchored to the wall, elongates the upward reach of the material. Intertwined at the centre, the nylons pull away from each other, while simultaneously depending on one another to maintain the dynamic and tensile composition they create. The intense strain the nylon endures is evident, revealing the material's fragility. Ryan reports that as the pantyhose tear, conservators are instructed by the artist to suture the material together until the degradation is too great to do so anymore. If such a circumstance presents itself, Nengudi has authorized the work's refabrication, whereby the pantyhose are substituted with replacements she provides.[149] As expressed in Ryan's text, refabrication can entail full replacements or reparative intervention into artworks. When the object is restored, it is marked with new dates indicating the original year of production and the year of intervention. This acknowledges and highlights the conservationist intercessions, rather than merely creating a duplicate.[150] Due to the recent resurgence of *R.S.V.P.,* while many works in the series have

---

[148] Gwynne Ryan, "Considerations in the acquisition of contemporary art: Refabrication as a preservation strategy," *Studies in Conservation* 61, no.2 (2016): 198-202.

[149] Ryan, "Refabrication," 200-201.

[150] These processes are undertaken through Nengudi's instructions, which are documented and recorded to remain accessible to future conservators absent at the time of acquisition. Importantly, this process of refabrication is distinguished from the making of exhibition copies. The work is not remade as a facsimile whereby the original artwork is retained from view to preserve its historical materials, rather, the original artwork is repaired, and components are replaced as needed. This process challenges notions of authenticity central to traditional conservation, as is discussed later in this section. In considering processes of refabrication, Ryan also discusses the conservationist approach taken for *Dangerous Logic of Wooing* (2002) (fig. 20), an artwork by Ernesto Neto collected by the Hirshhorn, wherein he creates large, bulbous synthetic textile forms filled with polyurethane suspended from the ceiling. Beyond this artwork, Neto has recurringly pantyhose filled with various matter, including spices in *Just like drops in time, nothing* (2002) (fig. 21). Such artworks recall material and compositional aspects of *R.S.V.P.* For *Dangerous Logic*, Ryan explains the process of making exhibitions copies each time the work is displayed. Through this process, she reveals how the work continuously shifts, as such even the first iteration of the work is considered an exhibition copy, meaning there is no original. Ryan, "Refabrication," 199-200. Lisa Catt, assistant curator of international art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, reveals that a similar refabrication in the creation of duplicates is undertaken for *Just like drops*. For more on this see: Lisa Catt, "Stockings and spice," Art Gallery NSW, accessed February 10, 2025, https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/art/watchlistenread/read/stockings

undergone preservation, only two dates (1976/2014, for example) are marked. I suggest that as the works continue to undergo refabrication, the dates of these actions should continue to accrue—1976/2014/2048…—reflecting the ongoing interventions.[151] These subtle yet important gestures connect the works to their past lives and uphold the artist's original intentions. They are acts of refusal to be subsumed by standard processes of preservation. Beyond illustrating the conservation strategies employed for the caring of *R.S.V.P. X*, Ryan critically evaluates the role of refabrication as a conservation strategy more broadly, while acknowledging that it is not a new methodology in the field. She argues these practices should not be regimented, rather methods of refabrication should be artwork-specific and continually reevaluated to remain responsive to the changing conditions of artworks and museums. Importantly, Ryan emphasises that this work should be conducted with care and criticality.

In discussion with DAM conservator Kate Moomaw-Taylor, she reveals similar strategies used to care for *A.C.Q. I* (2016-17) (fig. 16), previously introduced in Section II. While this work differs in form from *R.S.V.P. X*—including the addition of found objects, technology, and movement—there are overlapping conservational approaches undertaken across both institutions. In *A.C.Q. I*, several components of air conditioning and fan units are intertwined with nylon sand forms. Moomaw-Taylor offers nuanced insights into conversations with Nengudi in considering the work's longevity in the museum. For the artist, it is important that the degradation of the pantyhose—runs and piling—must not be visible.[152] When inevitable damage does occur, the

---

-and-spice/. Much like *R.S.V.P. X*, Neto's sculptural installations push the bounds of authenticity, questioning how common processes exhibition copies function.

[151] Hölling notes, "When conservation is no longer focused on improving a precious painting's material condition, then conservation's material investment in the work becomes a visible intervention that is not limited to concealing or compensating for its deterioration but extends to the creative and authorial interpretation of the modified work." Hölling, *Object-Event-Performance*, 13. The making visible of conservationist action is a gesture of transparency that acknowledges the shifting condition and life of the artwork, while not neglecting the histories its past material condition holds.

[152] Kate Moomaw-Taylor in discussion with the author.

nylons are replaced with specifications delineated regarding brand, colour, and size.[153] The specificity of instruction for the visual construction of the piece extends to the precise amount of sand in the nylons and the visual tautness of the material, whereas flexibility is allowed in terms of the overall compositional form. In other words, the configuration of each element is open-ended, whereby some components may be shown separately from one another.[154] The use of consumer products as art materials produces a challenge for the museum in facing the inevitable obsolescence of such goods. Thus, the museum will have to continuously navigate how to attend to the work's unruly materiality while adhering to Nengudi's parameters of display.

In considering the processes at the Hirshhorn and DAM, I acknowledge the limitations in my inability to address conservation practices across all institutions that collect *R.S.V.P.* What these examples illustrate, however, are some of the overlapping and nuanced approaches museums undertake to care for Nengudi's work. Rather than developing fixed strategies for attending to *R.S.V.P.*, the complexity of each artwork calls for a unique, caring, and responsive approach. To meaningfully attend to the artwork's material life and conceptual integrity, conservators must develop a relationship with the work and artist, when possible. As Hölling articulates, "Conservation is never impartial, objective, and general but rather relational, establishing connections between objects and subjects."[155] Here, Hölling highlights the necessity for museum staff to develop continuously evolving methods for attending to artworks.

Through the examples presented, I have elucidated how the material sculptural forms of *R.S.V.P.* may be attended to and how the conservation approach they necessitate exceeds the

---

[153] Additionally, the piece contains a pair of pantyhose draped over a moving fan. To ensure that they move fluidly, Nengudi wears the pantyhose in advance to loosen the fibres, and has provided DAM with several replacements, anticipating that they will be more susceptible to damage due to the movement within the work.
[154] Kate Moomaw-Taylor in discussion with the author, 37:10.
[155] Hölling, *Object-Event-Performance*, 3.

scope of traditional methods. I acknowledge that these case studies do not address the performative capacities of *R.S.V.P.*, as neither *R.S.V.P. X* nor *A.C.Q I* are currently activated in the museum.[156] As articulated in Section II, for this research, I consider how vestigial forms of once-performed artworks carry the histories or energies of their past actions. Therefore, I argue that museums must actively consider the role of sensorial encounters in their collections to value the haptic and affective elements retained within *R.S.V.P.*, as these non-physical aspects can continue to exist within the museum space. Howes and Classen insist on the necessity of museums seriously accounting for artworks' sensory faculties to disrupt the ocular-centricity that is central to their operations. This is especially important in objects, like Nengudi's, wherein there is a significant cultural, historical, or sensorial element. Howes and Classen argue, "The sensory values of an artifact […] do not reside in the artifact alone but in its social use and environmental context. This dynamic web of sensuous and social meaning is broken when an artifact is removed from its cultural setting and inserted within the visual symbol system of the museum."[157] While I do not negate the truth of their statement in the removal of sacred cultural materials—which are sterilized to enter the museum—in the context of contemporary artwork, I aim to complicate the idea that meaning is wholly ruptured. Rather I suggest an artwork's

---

[156] Within a museum context, Nengudi's photographic *Performance Piece*, is the most direct way *R.S.V.P.*'s performative actions are documented. As Peggy Phelan famously notes in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, a performance is a temporal happening that only exists in the moment of its action. Therefore, documentation is another entity entirely; it is a representation and record. Nengudi's *Performance Piece* functions as a window or insight into the activation, but cannot archive the performance itself. Peggy Phelan, "The ontology of performance: representation without reproduction," in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993): 146-166. Thus, I argue the ongoing presence and existence of the once-performed forms are a record of the work's activation; the sculptures themselves carry the histories of their past actions. Considering the ephemerality of performance, Uri McMillan suggest that "if we cannot, and should not, seek to fully know all the details of Nengudi's performance and sculptural work, we should also take note of that which evades the archive precisely because of its intangibility, housed in the elusive corners of memory." McMillan, "Sand, Nylon, and Dirt," 112. McMillan underscores the significance of the impermanent in Nengudi's work and the importance of acquiescing to its elusive and immaterial aspects, rather than attempting to palpably record and archive these fleeting gestures. Within that refusal, the forms, whether active or in quietude, can continue to exist as propositions for future performances.

[157] Classen and Howes, "The Museum as Sensescape," 200.

functioning and identity shifts within the museum, while some of its meaning is retained through the sensorial and metaphoric elements of the work. If these aspects are meaningfully regarded, *R.S.V.P.* can continue to resist the confines of traditional and categorical museum practices that risk reducing artworks to a fixed state. Through this discussion, I also highlight the artwork's agency to argue that change in preservationist practice and museological processes also resides in the urging of the artworks themselves.

Re/creation as a Form of Generative Refusal

In revisiting the *R.S.V.P.* works in the 2000s, Nengudi began making a new sub-series, referred to as reveries, to address the impossibility of remaking many of the original sculptural installations. As Nengudi explains,

> When I first started the *R.S.V.P.* series, I used a lot of found materials. When I decided to begin re-creating the works, there were certain pieces I could not duplicate because of that. So, I started to think about the newer pieces as "reveries," dream-like reflections on the original works. With these works, I discovered a new means of expression through materials that was compelling and revealing.[158]

These new works are referential rather than duplications of the original artworks from the 1970s. As such, the reverie works are differentiated from the two previously discussed examples. I consider the reveries as re/creations, as opposed to refabrications like *R.S.V.P. X* or new inceptions that introduce novel components such as *A.C.Q. I*. Re/creation, I suggest, can be understood not as the act of copying but as the making of memetic forms that allude to the past, while drawing the work into the present and future. The reveries serve as conduits to remembering. While these works are not replications, in many instances they recall the formal elements of the earlier sculptures, as in *R.S.V.P. Reverie D* (2014) (fig. 22), which echoes the

[158] Senga Nengudi interviewed by Osei Bonsu.

compositional form of *R.S.V.P. X*. In *R.S.V.P. Reverie D*, two pairs of pantyhose are stretched in a v-like formation with the waistbands oriented downward in the centre, anchored to a flush wall by way of the hosiery's feet. A knotted nylon mass protrudes from the centre, much like the small balloon-like form adhered to the waistband in *R.S.V.P. X.* In both sculptural installations, another pair of pantyhose, connected to those on the wall, are stretched to the floor by the weight of the sand filling them. Though these similarities may be incidental—and explained simply by the inevitability of recurring forms because of the considerable quantity of *R.S.V.P.* works—they function to honour both the installations that continue to exist in museum collections and those that have receded through time.[159] The memetic qualities of the reveries, gesture towards the past, while also nodding towards futurity, creating new forms and spaces for ideas to exist. I also ruminate on the future possibility of the reverie works undergoing refabrication, whereby they enter a conservationist cycle—much like the original pieces—that continuously propels museums to consider how to meaningfully care for these artworks. The act of re/creation can be understood as a means to grapple with the ethics of conservation and as an act of generative refusal of the often-static state of collections.

Re/creation and refabrication are gestures that acknowledge the inaptitude of conserving *R.S.V.P.* through traditional means that prioritize the stabilizing of artworks and retention of original materials to achieve an authentic state. Hölling critically calls for a distancing "from material authenticity, originality, and uniqueness that for decades have been associated with traditional conservation and from the idea that an object must persist in a single, defined material form."[160] Though Section II I examined the importance of the residues embedded within *R.S.V.P.*,

[159] I acknowledge that not all reverie works may have such close resemblances with originals.
[160] Hölling, *Object-Event-Performance*, 11.

ethically attending to these works requires following the materials and the desires of the artist.[161] This means yielding to the shifting and replenishment of the materials, allowing the works to exist in a new state in the museum space. On this tension between authenticity and integrity, Hölling asserts:

> Acknowledging the creative aspects of conservation entails no obligation to remove traces of the life the object has already lived or to recreate the work in an idealized version. Conservation creatively and participatively renders the past present by extending its duration into the present. Rather than isolating the past from the present, conservation shifts the focus from the physical artifact to its signification, its embeddedness in discourse and intertextuality.[162]

Within this discussion, she highlights how the permissibility of change in conservation involves the active and creative participation of the conservator.[163] Importantly, Hölling also maintains that material change does not rebuke the historical significance of the work but rather connects and highlights these temporalities within contemporary museum artworks. In examining the conservation of performance, Marçal, through the theories of performance studies scholar Rebecca Schneider, discusses how re-enactments in performance are a means of survival and of keeping performative artworks alive in the museum.[164] I parallel the notion of re-enactment to

---

[161] Here, I recall Lange-Berndt's proposition to *follow the materials*, presented in Section II. This approach affirms the need to be responsive to the shifting nature of artworks and caring for them in ways that maintain their form, integrity and meaning.

[162] Hölling, *Object-Event-Performance*, 19.

[163] As Hölling argues, "every actualization of an artwork—its reenactment, reinstallation, or reinstantiation—necessarily involves, but above all also legitimizes, creative gestures." Hölling, Object-Event-Performance, 18. I connect this idea to Marçal's discussion on the expansion of people involved in the re-activation of performance as a method for conserving the non-material aspects of artwork: the cultural, sensorial, and emotional. She articulates, "In re-enacting practices and diversifying the involved agents, including, for example, communities and practitioners outside of the conservation and museum sphere, it is further possible not only to amplify different perspectives on the conservation object, but also to renovate the intangible memories and affects that are essential in effectively preserve cultural manifestations to the future." Marçal, "Becoming Difference," 35-36. Marçal advocates for relationality between the artworks and other participants in the preservation of an artwork beyond the material properties. Though the expanded considerations of community participation in conservation exceed the scope of this research (nor have I been able to conclude whether such an approach falls within the wishes of the artist) I believe it is an important consideration.

[164] Hélia Marçal, "Vitality and the conservation of performance," *Performance: The Ethics and The Politics of Conservation and Care, Volume I*, ed. Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman and Emilie Magnin (Oxon: Routledge, 2023), 72-73. Marçal refers to the continuance of the materialisation of a performative artwork as *liveness*.

re/creation and refabrication, contending that they are caring methods that safeguard *R.S.V.P.*'s active and sensorial existence in museological spaces. The continuity of the artworks is an assertion of presence that ensures the works are not rendered static, defined by limiting museum frameworks, and do not fall into obscurity.

As artworks governed by their ephemeral, sensorial, and haptic qualities, and defined by their original histories, the Black body, and metaphoric aspects, the *R.S.V.P.* series necessitates a relational, ethical conservation approach. One that responds to its shifting material and conceptual conditions, adapting to its unruly, rebellious nature in the museum context. This is demonstrated through the ongoing acts of re/creation and refabrication that fall outside standardized conservation and restoration approaches as methods of attending to *R.S.V.P.*

Conclusion

In 1988-89, curators Lowery Stokes Sims and Leslie-King Hammond mounted the exhibition *Art as a Verb: The Evolving Continuum*: *Installations, Performances, and Videos by 13 African-American Artists* at the Maryland Institute College of Art, and subsequently across two sites in New York at the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Metropolitan Life Gallery. This exhibition featured the work of thirteen artists, including Senga Nengudi's *R.S.V.P. I* (1977/2003).[165] The provocative exhibition aimed to bring the work of excluded and overlooked Black artists into institutions, decentering and reorienting the Eurocentric art historical canon by championing experimental artistic forms. In the decades since this exhibition was mounted, it has been recreated at various institutions, most recently at the MoMA from May 8, 2021 to June 3, 2023.[166] Preceding this exhibition, in 1978 curator Linda Goode Bryant presented *Contextures* at Just Above Midtown Gallery in New York with an accompanying eponymous catalogue edited with Marcy S. Phillips. It featured many of Nengudi's early *R.S.V.P.* works, alongside the work of twenty-five Black artists working through abstract forms and ideas.[167] Like Sims and King-Hammond's exhibition ten years later, *Contextures* aimed to resituate the registers through which Black artists and artwork were understood and disseminated. In 2024 the catalogue was

---

[165] The artists included in *Art as a Verb* are Charles Abramson, David Hammons, Maren Hassinger, Candace Hill, Martha Jackson-Jarvis, Senga Nengudi, Loraine O'Grady, Howardena Pindell, Adrian Piper, Faith Ringgold, Betye Saar, Joyce Scott, and Kaylynn Sullivan. For more on the exhibition see: Leslie King-Hammond and Lowery Stokes Sims, *Art as a Verb: The Evolving Continuum Installations, Performances, and Videos by 13 African-American Artists: November 21, 1988-January 8, 1989* (Maryland Institute, College of Art Baltimore: 1988), exhibition catalogue; Emily, Gaines Buchler, "The Way Maker," *Johns Hopkins Magazine*, Summer 2024. https://hub.jhu.edu/magazine/2024/summer/leslie-king-hammond-art-curator/; "Collections 1980s-Present: 203 Art as a Verb," MoMA, accessed January 8, 2025, https://www.moma.org/calendar/galleries/5323.

[166] Other sites include Spelman College, Atlanta and Reed College, Portland.

[167] The artists included in *Contextures* are Banerjee, Frank Bowling, Donna Byars, Ed Clark, Houston Conwill, John Dowell, Mel Edwards, Wendy Ward Ehlers, Fred Eversley, Susan Fitzsimmons, Sam Gilliam, Gini Hamilton, David Hammons, Manuel Hughes, Suzanne Jackson, Noah Jemison, James Little, Al Loving, Senga Nengudi, Howardena Pindell, Betye Saar, Raymond Saunders, Sharon Sutton, Randy Williams, and William T. Williams.

reproduced and released in facsimile form, as described by the publishers.[168]

The resurfacing of historical exhibitions echoes the continued making and remaking of the *R.S.V.P.* works. These repetitive gestures are acts of re/creation and refabrication that re-materialise past forms and moments, standing as refusals to be forgotten by the systems that historically omitted or erased these practices. This re-emergence of artworks and ephemera surrounding and including Nengudi's practice is a testament to the continued relevance and importance of such historically overlooked work. It is a persistent assertion of Black feminist perspectives and voices in the site of the museum, reifying their significance and the necessity to consider how they continue to exist today.

R.S.V.P. challenges the museum to consider how to ethically preserve artworks that resist conservationist conventions in ways that continue to centralize the voice and presence of the Black body on its own material terms. The works, even if interceded persist as material presences of the metaphorical traces of their own histories, and those of their original inhabitants. McKittrick writes, "black embodied knowledge is valued as a site of resistance. Black embodied knowledge radically overturns the normalizing workings of white supremacy by enunciating, demanding, and asserting black agency and humanity."[169] With this consideration, this thesis has argued that *R.S.V.P.* is a site of embodied knowledge and in turn resistance. Nengudi's evocation but withholding of the figurative body and its embeddedness in the work's materiality is a rebellious assertion of Black livingness in the present-day museum. Working against how Black life, cultures, and bodies were historically entered into the museum, Nengudi developed her own unruly material language to attend to Black artistic practice and life. Existing as complex

---

[168] "Contextures," Primary Information, accessed January 8, 2025, https://primaryinformation.org/product/contextures/.

[169] McKittrick, "(Zong) Bad Made Measure," *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 127.

artworks, made through a compendium of materials loaded with historical and cultural significance, *R.S.V.P.* persistently defies the preservational tendencies of the museum by refusing to be contained by traditional museological systems and practices. Through re/creation and refabrication, the works persist today, intruding upon the institutional collections they reside in and challenging traditional preservationist methods.

Figures

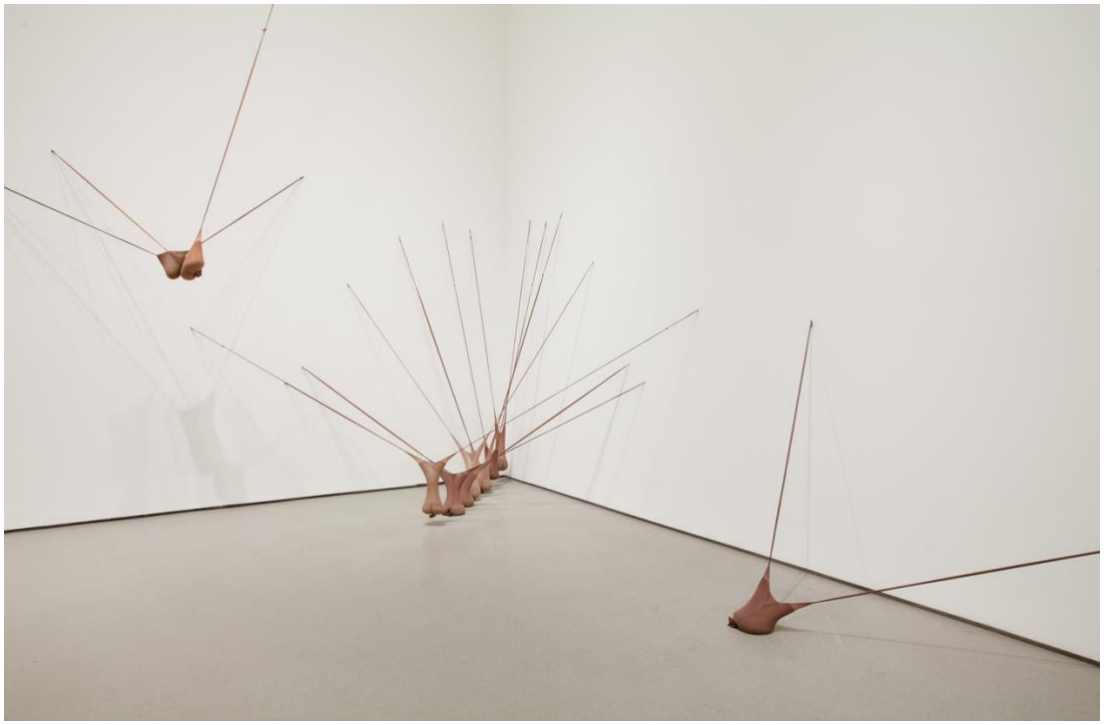

Figure 1. Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P. I*, 1977/2004. Pantyhose and sand, 10 pieces. Overall dimensions variable. Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, NY, committee on Painting and Sculpture Funds, and The Friends of Education of MoMA. Image Source: MoMA, accessed January 9, 2025, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/151035?artist_id=40531&page=1&sov_referrer=artist.

Figure 2. Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P. VI*, 1976. Nylon mesh and sand. 16 x 41 x 34 1/2 in. (40.6 x 104.1 x 87.6 cm). Historical installation view, location unidentified. Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, recreated in 2021. Image source: Thomas Erben Gallery Website, accessed February 20, 2025, https://www.thomaserben.com/bodies_of_work/nylon-mesh/.

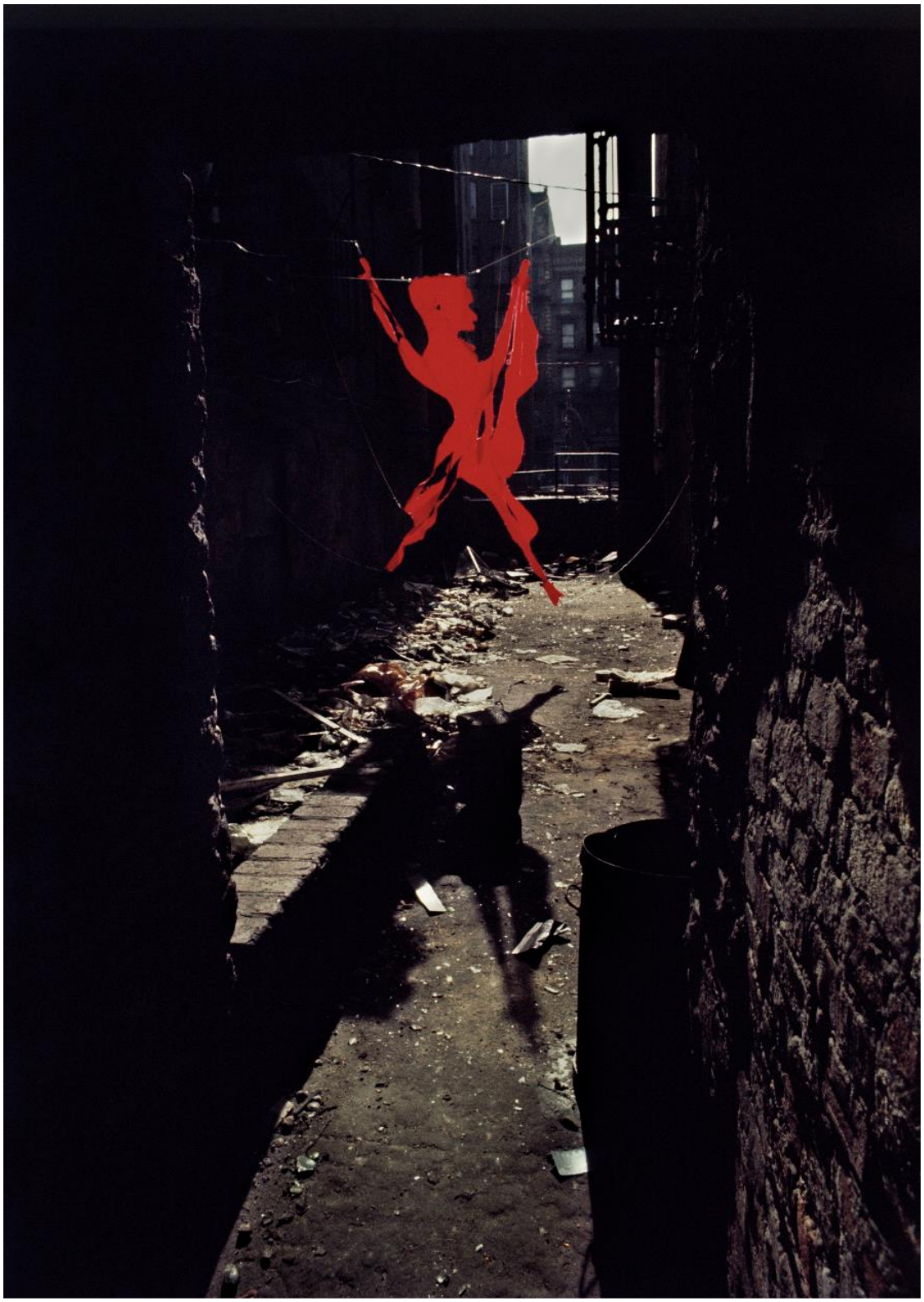

Figure 3. Senga Nengudi, Red Devil (soul 2), 1972. Cibachrome print. 41 1/2 x 27 7/8 x 2 in. (105.4 x 70.8 x 4.8 cm) Photo: Doug Harris. Image Source: Sprüth Magers website, accessed January 9, 2025. Image Source: Sprüth Magers, accessed January 9, 2025, https://spruethmagers.com/exhibitions/senga-nengudi-new-york/

Figure 4. Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P. V*, 1976. Nylon, mesh, and sand. 48 x 36 x 2 in. (121.9 x 91.4 x 5.1 cm). Installation view, left: fall 1976, location unidentified; installation view, right: *Répondez s'il vous plait*, 2003, Thomas Erben Gallery, NY. Collection of the Studio Museum in Harlem. Image source: Thomas Erben Gallery Website, accessed February 20, 2025, https://www.thomaserben.com/bodies_of_work/nylon-mesh/.

Figure 5. Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P.*, 1975. Nylon mesh and sand. 82 1/2 x 113 1/2 x 4 1/2 in. (209.5 x 288.3 x 11.4 cm). Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, purchased with funds provided by the Acquisition and Collection Committee. Image Source: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, accessed January 9, 2025, https://www.moca.org/collection/work/rsvp.

Figure 6. Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P. XI*, 1977/2013. Nylon mesh, rubber, and sand. 90 x 24 x 7 1/2 in. (228.6 x 70 x 19 cm). Installation view, left: winter 1977, location unidentified; installation view, right: *Répondez s'il vous plait*, 2003, Thomas Erben Gallery, NY. Collection of the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. Image source: Thomas Erben Gallery Website, accessed February 20, 2025, https://www.thomaserben.com/bodies_of_work/nylon-mesh/.

Figure 7. Senga Nengudi, *Performance Piece,* 1978. Silver gelatin print, triptych, 31.5 x 40 in, edition of 5 (+1 AP). Activated by Maren Hassinger at Pearl C. Woods Gallery, LA, 1977. Photo: Harmon Outlaw. Image Source: Thomas Erben Gallery, accessed February 20, 2025, https://www.thomaserben.com/bodies_of_work/performancephotographs/.

Figure 8. Senga Nengudi, *Water Composition III*, 1970/2018. Vinyl, water, and rope. 45 1/2 x 48 x 27 1/2 in. (115.6 x 121.9 x 69.8 cm). Installation view, *Senga Nengudi*, long-term view, Dia Beacon. Dia Art Foundation. Photo: Thomas Barratt. Image source: Dia Art Foundation, accessed February 10, 2025, https://www.diaart.org/exhibition/exhibitions-projects/senga-nengudi-exhibition-296

Figure 9. Betye Saar, *Bitter Sweet (Bessie's Song)*, 1974. Mixed media assemblage in wood box. 14 7/8 x 20 1/8 x 2 in. (37.8 x 51.1 x 5 cm). Collection of halley k harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld, New York; Courtesy of the Artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles. Image courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY. Image Source: Sarah Louise Cowan, "To Touch Time: U.S. Black Feminist Modernist Sculpture in the 1970s and 80s," *Arts* 13:21 (2024): 15.

Figure 10. Marianne Berenhaut, *Poupées Poubelles: Pharmacie* (Garbage Dolls: Pharmacy), 1971-80. Mixed media, unique. Copyright The Artist Image Source: Dvir Gallery, accessed February 10, 2025, https://dvirgallery.com/exhibitions/10/works/artworks-4912-marianneberenhaut-poupees-poubelles-pharmacie-1971-1980/.

Figure 11. Sarah Lucas, *Pauline Bunny*, 1997. Wooden chair, vinyl seat, tights, kapok, metal wire, stockings and metal clamp. 37 3/8 x 25 x 35 3/8 (95 x 64 x 90 cm). Collection of the Tate, London, presented by the Patrons of New Art (Special Purchase Fund) through the Tate Gallery Foundation, 1998. Image Source: Tate Images.

Figure 12. Maria Ezcurra, *Synapse*, 2019. Nylon stockings and stones. Installation view: Gallery of the Notre-Dame-de-Grâce Cultural Centre, Montreal, Quebec. Photo: Freddy Arciniegas. Image Source: Artist website, accessed February 10, 2025, https://mariaezcurra.com/synapse-en.

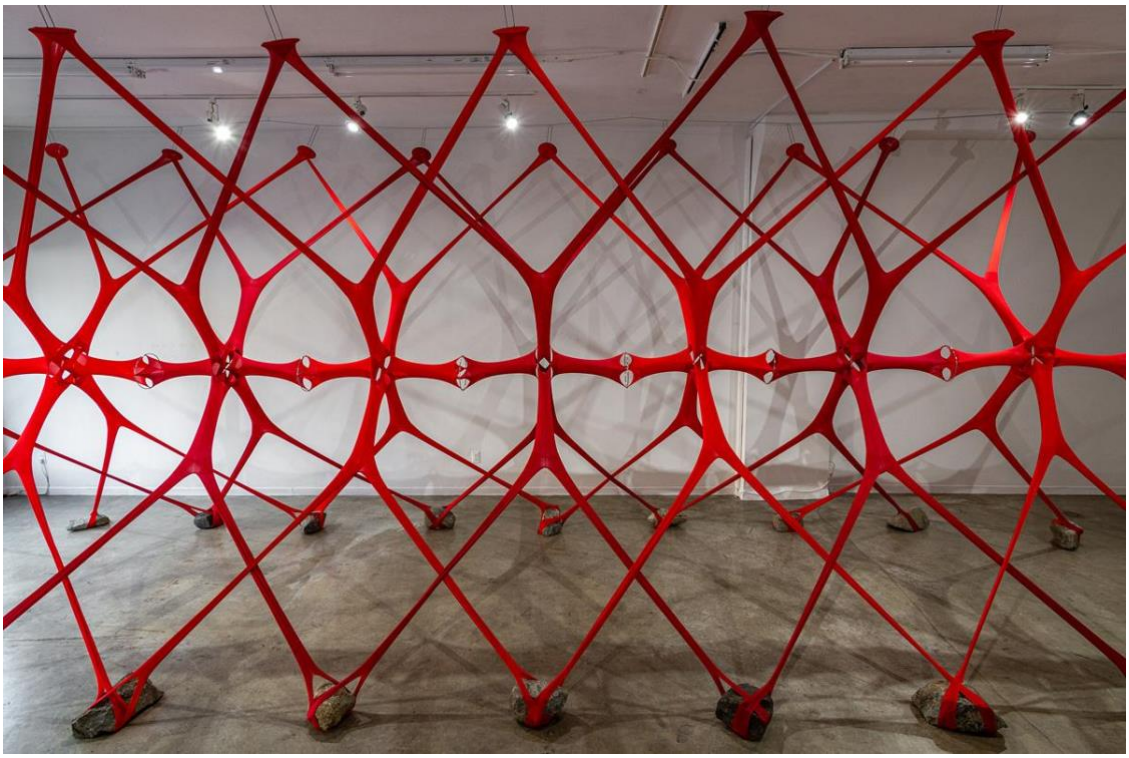

Figure 13. Maria Ezcurra, *Tensión*, 2019. Red nylon stockings, metal hoops and rocks. Installation view: La Centrale Powerhouse Gallery, Montreal, Quebec. Photo: Freddy Arciniegas. Image Source: Artist website, accessed February 10, 2025, https://mariaezcurra.com/tension-en.

Figure 14. Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P Revisited – Underwire*, 1977/2004. Nylon mesh, metal springs, sand. 22 1/2 x 15 x 6 in, (57.15 x 38.1 x 15.24 cm). Image Source: Thomas Erben Gallery, accessed January 9, 2025. https://www.thomaserben.com/bodies_of_work/nylon-mesh/.

Figure 15. Senga Nengudi, *Sandmining B*, 1970/2018. Sand, pigment, steel, nylon mesh, and digital sound file. 105 x 312 x 235 in. (266.7 x 792.5 x 596.9 cm). Installation view, *Senga Nengudi*, long-term view, Dia Beacon. Dia Art Foundation. Photo: Thomas Barratt. Image source: Dia Art Foundation, accessed February 10, 2025, https://www.diaart.org/collection/collection/nengudi-senga-sandmining-b-2020-2022-018.

Figure 16. Senga Nengudi, *A.C.Q. I*, Refrigerator and air conditioner parts, fan, nylon pantyhose, sand. 78 3/4 x 178 x 126 in. (200.025 x 452.12 x 320.04 cm). Collection of the Denver Art Museum, purchased with funds from the Contemporary Collectors' Circle with additional support from Vicki and Kent Logan, Catherine Dews Edwards and Philip Edwards, Craig Ponzio, and Ellen and Morris Susman, 2020.566.1-3. Image Source: DAM website, accessed January 9, 2025, https://www.denverartmuseum.org/en/exhibitions/senga-nengudi.

Figure 17. Senga Nengudi, *Untitled*, 2011. Nylon mesh and sand. 60 x 48 x 30 in. (152.4 x 122 x 76.2 cm). Activated by Joseph Blake and Haruko Crow Nishimura, Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, 2016. Photo: Robert Wade. Image Source: Artist website, accessed January 9, 2025, https://www.sengasenga.com/works/activations?itemId=c6642qn26uaolj7kvqh0evgpm4o1b6.

Figure 18. Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P. Reverie O*, 2015. Nylon mesh, magnets, found objects, and sand. 3 1/2 x 40 x 147 inches (186.7 x 101.6 x 373.4 cm). Collection of the Baltimore Museum of Art, purchase with exchange funds from the Pearlstone Family Fund and partial gift of The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. Image Source: Thomas Erben Gallery, accessed January 9, 2025, https://www.thomaserben.com/bodies_of_work/nylon-mesh-copy/.

Figure 19. Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P. X*, 1976/2014. Nylon, sand, and rose petals. 77 1/4 x 155 x 120 7/8 in. (196.2 x 393.7 x 307 cm). Collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Joseph H. Hirshhorn Purchase Fund, 2016. Image Source: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, accessed January 9, 2025, https://hirshhorn.si.edu/collection/artwork/?edanUrl=edanmdm%3Ahmsg_16.7.

Figure 20. Ernesto Neto, *The Dangerous Logic of Wooing*, 2002. Lycra, styrofoam, and rice. Dimensions variable. Collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Joseph H. Hirshhorn Purchase Fund, 2002. Image Source: Smithsonian, accessed February 10, 2025, https://www.si.edu/object/dangerouslogicwooing%3Ahmsg_02.17?destination=collection/search%3Fpage%3D64%26edan_q%3D%26edan_fq%255B0%255D%3Dtype%253A3d_package%2520OR%2520type%253Aead_collection%2520OR%2520type%253Aead_component%2520OR%2520type%253Aecr%2520OR%2520type%253Aedanmdm%2520OR%2520type%253Aevent%2520OR%2520type%253Alocation%2520OR%2520type%253Aobjectgroup%2520OR%2520type%253Asiunit%26edan_fq%255B1%255D%3Dmetadata_usage%253A%2522Not%2520determined%2522%26edan_fq%255B2%255D%3Dtype%253A3d_package%2520OR%2520type%253Aead_collection%2520OR%2520type%253Aead_component%2520OR%2520type%253Aecr%2520OR%2520type%253Aedanmdm%2520OR%2520type%253Aevent%2520OR%2520type%253Alocation%2520OR%2520type%253Aobjectgroup%2520OR%2520type%253Asi-unit.

Figure 21. Ernesto Neto, *Just like drops in time*, 2002. Polymer stretch fabric, spices. Dimensions variable. Collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, purchased with assistance from Clayton Utz 2002. Image Source: Art Gallery of NSW website, accessed February 10, 2025, https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/276.2002/#exhibitions.

Figure 22. Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P. Reverie D,* 2014. Nylon, sand, copper. 65 x 151 1/2 x 9 in. (165 x 385 x 23 cm). Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München, Sammlung KiCo, © Senga Nengudi. Photo: Ernst Jank. Image Source: Lenbachhaus, accessed January 9, 2025, https://www.lenbachhaus.de/en/digital/collection-online/detail/rsvp-reverie-d-30036603.

Appendix A

Table of *R.S.V.P.* in US Museum Collections

No.	Work Information	Museum	Acquisition Date
1	***R.S.V.P. V***, 1976 Nylon, mesh, and sand 48 x 36 x 2 inches (121.9 × 91.4 × 5.1 cm) The Studio Museum in Harlem; Museum purchase with funds provided by the Acquisition Committee.	The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, New York	2003
2	***R.S.V.P. XI***, 1977/2004 Nylon mesh, rubber, and sand Approximately 90 x 24 x 7 1/2 inches (228.6 x 70 x 19 cm) Nancy and Milton Washington Fund.	Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania	2005
3	***R.S.V.P.***, 1975 Nylon mesh and sand 82 1/2 x 113 1/2 x 4 1/2 inches (209.5 x 288.3 x 11.4 cm) The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles Purchase with funds provided by the Acquisition and Collection Committee.	Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, California	2005
4	***Inside/Outside***, 1977 Nylon, mesh, rubber Approximately 60 x 24 inches (152.4 x 61 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Burt Aaron, the Council for Feminist Art, and the Alfred T. White Fund.	Brooklyn Museum, New York	2011
5	***R.S.V.P. I***, 1977/2003 Pantyhose and sand, 10 pieces Overall dimensions variable Committee on Painting and Sculpture Funds, and The Friends of Education of The Museum of Modern Art.	Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York	2011
6	***Untitled***, 1976 Nylon, pantyhose, sand, and cardboard roll 72 x 53 x 17 inches (182.9 x 134.6 x 43.2 cm) Gift of the Hudgins Family in memory of Brienin Bryant.	Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York	2013
7	***Internal I***, 1977/2014 Nylon hosiery Dimensions variable	Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York	2015

	Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee.		
8	***Swing Low***, 1976/2014 Nylon mesh and sand 54 x 48 3/8 x 5 inches (137.16 x 122.87 x 12.7 cm) Purchased with funds provided by the Director's Discretionary Fund, C. Christine Nichols, the Modern and Contemporary Art Council, and Terri and Michael Smooke.	Los Angeles County Museum, California	2016
9	***R.S.V.P. X*****,** 1976/2014 Nylon, sand, and rose petals 77 1/4 × 155 × 120 7/8 in. (196.2 × 393.7 × 307 cm) Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Joseph H. Hirshhorn Purchase Fund, 2016.	Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC	2016
10	***R.S.V.P. Reverie – "B" Suite***, 1977/2011 Nylon mesh, sand, and pole 60 x 48 x 48 inches (152.4 x 121.9 x 121.9 cm) Jeanne L. Wasserman Fund and General Acquisition Fund. Courtesy of Lévy Gorvy, New York and London; and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York.	Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Massachusetts	2017
11	***R.S.V.P. Reverie-O***, 2015 Nylon mesh, magnets, found objects, and sand 3 1/2 x 40 x 147 inches (186.7 x 101.6 x 373.4 cm) Purchase with exchange funds from the Pearlstone Family Fund and partial gift of The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.	Baltimore Museum of Art, Maryland	2018
12	***R.S.V.P. Reverie "Bow Leg"***, 2014 Nylon stocking, bent iron rod, and brass bell 51 x17 1/2 x 8 3/4 inches (129.5 x 44.5 x 22.2 cm) Museum purchase funded by the Caroline Wiess Law Accessions Endowment Fund.	Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas	2019
13	***A.C.Q. I***, 2016–17. Refrigerator and air conditioner parts, fan, nylon pantyhose, and sand Denver Art Museum: Purchased with funds from the Contemporary Collectors' Circle with additional support from Vicki and Kent Logan, Catherine Dews Edwards and Philip Edwards, Craig Ponzio, and Ellen and Morris Susman, 2020.566.1-3. © Senga Nengudi. Image shown: Installation photography at Sprüth Magers London by Stephen White. Courtesy of Sprüth Magers, Thomas Erben Gallery, and Lévy Gorvy.	Denver Art Museum, Colorado	2020

14	***R.S.V.P. VI***, 1976/2011 Nylon mesh and sand 16 x 41 x 34 1/2 inches (40.6 x 104.1 x 87.6 cm) Purchased with the Contemporary Art Revolving Fund, 2021.	Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania	2021
15	***Untitled R.S.V.P.***, 2013 Nylon, sand, and mixed media Height, 78 inches (198.1 cm) Museum purchase, Fowler McCormick, Class of 1921, Fund.	Princeton University Museum, New Jersey	2021
16	***Swing Low*** (Primary Title), 1977/2014 Nylon mesh and sand 60 x 30 x 5 in. (152.4 x 76.2 x 12.7 cm) Gift of Mrs. Alfred duPont, by exchange and Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment.	Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond	2021
17	***Revery - R***, 2011 Nylon mesh, metal springs, sand 22 1/2 x 15 x 6 inches (57.2 x 38.1 x 15.2 cm) Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Purchase.	Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, California	No date indicated.
18	***R.S.V.P.***, Fall 1976 Nylon mesh, sand, and pins 41 x 19 1/2 x 2 1/2 inches (104.1 x 49.5 x 6.4 cm) Gift of Irving Stenn, Bernard I. Lumpkin and Carmine D. Boccuzzi, and Jackson Tang in honor of Naomi Beckwith.	Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Illinois	No date indicated.

Appendix A. The table was compiled using information provided by Senga Nengudi's representing galleries: Sprüth Magers (Cologne, London, Los Angeles, New York) and Thomas Erben Gallery (New York), including 2023 CVs and biographies available for download on each website. See: Senga Nengudi, Biography. "Senga Nengudi," Sprüth Magers. Accessed January 5, 2025, https://spruethmagers.com/pdf/biography/SNE_Bio_12_2023.pdf and Senga Nengudi, CV "Senga Nengudi," Thomas Erben Gallery. Accessed January 5, 2025, https://www.thomaserben.com/wpcontent/uploads/SNE_CV_2023.pdf. This table excludes *R.S.V.P.* artworks held by museums outside the United States, as well as other artworks by Senga Nengudi, independent of this series.

Bibliography

Agard-Jones, Vanessa. “What the Sands Remembers.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, no. 2 (2012): 325-346. https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1472917.

Ahmed, Sara and Jackie Stacey, eds. *Thinking through the Skin*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

Als, Hilton. “Senga Nengudi’s Journeys Through Air, Water, and Sand.” *The New Yorker*, March 13, 2023. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/03/20/senga-nengudis-journeys-through-air-water-and-sand.

Bouknight-Claybrooks, Ashley. “The Power of Preservation: Black Museology in the Early Twentieth Century.” *The Public Historian* 43, no. 2 (2021): 20-27. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/809546.

Bowles, John P. “SIDE BY SIDE: Friendship as Critical Practice in the Performance Art of Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger.” *Callaloo* 39, no. 2 (2016): 400-418. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24738495.

Bradley, Rizvana. “Transferred Flesh: Reflections on Senga Nengudi’s *R.S.V.P.*” *TDR: The Drama Review* 59, no. 1 (2015): 161-166. muse.jhu.edu/article/575988.

Bunning, Katy. *Negotiating Race and Rights in the Museum*. Oxon: Routledge, 2022.

Cahan, Susan. *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

Carroll, Rachel Jane. “Remains to Be Seen: Black Feminist Art and US Militarism in Asia.” *Social Text* 41, no.154 (2023): 47–70. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-10174968.

Cassel Oliver, Valerie, ed. *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*. Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 2013. Exhibition catalogue.

Classen, Constance, and David Howes. “The Museum as Sensescape: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artifacts.” In *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*, edited by Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden, Ruth Phillips. New York: Berg, 2006. 199–222.

Collins, Lisa Gail, and Margo Natalie Crawford, eds. *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006.

Cooks, Bridget R. *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011.

Corbin, Megan, and Daniela Johannes. “Activating Affect Aura Through Art: Clothing as Witness.” *Angelaki* 27, no. 2 (2022): 44–56. DOI: 10.1080/0969725X.2022.2046363.

Cowan, Sarah Louise. “To Touch Time: U.S. Black Feminist Modernist Sculpture in the 1970s and 80s.” *Arts* 13:21 (2024): 1-18. https://doi.org/10.3390/arts13010021.

Dolan, Alice, and Sally Holloway. “Emotional Textiles: An Introduction.” *Textile* 14, no.2 (2016): 152-59. DOI: 10.1080/14759756.2016.1139369.

Fabius, Roxana and Patricia M. Hernandez. *Dialectics of Entanglement: Do We Exist Together?*, 2018. Published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title, organized by and presented by A.I.R. Gallery, New York, August 2 – September 2, 2018.

Fisher, Jennifer. “Relational Sense: Towards a Haptic Aesthetics.” *Parachute* 87 (July – September 1997): 4-11.

Gaines Buchler, Emily. “The Way Maker.” *Johns Hopkins Magazine*, Summer 2024. https://hub.jhu.edu/magazine/2024/summer/leslie-king-hammond-art-curator/.

Gladstone, Mara, and Janet Catherine Berlo. “The Body in the (White) Box: Corporeal Ethics and Museum Representation.” In *Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics: Redefining Ethics for the Twenty-First Century Museum*, edited by Janet Marstine. Oxon: Routledge, 2011.

Godfrey, Mark, Allie Biswas, Zoé Whitley, and Marion Perkins. *The Soul of a Nation Reader: Writings by and about Black American Artists, 1960-1980*. New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co., 2021.

Goode Bryant, Linda, and Marcy S. Philips. *Contextures*. New York: Just Above Midtown, 1978.

Gyarkye, Lovia. “An Artist’s Continuing Exploration of the Human Form.” *The New York Times*, November 9, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/09/t-magazine/senga-nengudi-art.html.

Handley, Susannah. *Nylon: The Story of a Fashion Revolution: A Celebration of Design from Art Silk to Nylon and Thinking Fibres*. Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

Hölling, Hanna B. *Object-Event-Performance: Art, Materiality, and Continuity Since the 1960s*. New York City: Bard Graduate Center, 2022.

Hölling, Hanna B., Jules Pelta Feldman and Emilie Magnin, eds. *Performance: The Ethics and The Politics of Conservation and Care, Volume I*. Oxon: Routledge, 2023.

Hunt, Carole. “Worn clothes and textiles as archives of memory.” *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty* 5, no. 2 (2014): 207-232. https://doi.org/10.1386/csfb.5.2.207_1.

Jones, Amelia. “LOST BODIES: early 1970s Los Angeles performance art in art history.” In *Live Art in LA: Performance in Southern California, 1970-1983*, edited by Peggy Phelan, 115-184. London: Routledge, 2012.

Jones, Kellie, ed. *Now Dig This! Art & Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980*. Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2011. Exhibition catalogue.

Jones, Kellie. *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

Krasny, Elke, and Lara Perry. “Unsettling, Gender, Sexuality, and Race: ‘Crossing’ the Collection, Classifying and Spectacularising Mechanisms of the Museum*.” Museum International*, 72: 1-2 (2020): 130-139. DOI: 10.1080/13500775.2020.1806595.

Lange-Berndt, Petra, “Introduction//How to Be Complicit with Materials.” In *Materiality*, 12-23. London, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Whitechapel Gallery, The MIT Press, 2015.

Lax, Thomas J., Lilia Rocio Taboada, and Linda Goode-Bryant, eds., *Just Above Midtown: Changing Spaces*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2022.

Li, Tiffany. “An Incomplete History of Exclusion: Modern and Contemporary Black Art and the U.S. Art Museum.” *Southern California Interdisciplinary Law Journal* 30, no. 3 (2021): 795-826.

Marçal, Hélia. “Becoming Difference: On the Ethics of Conserving the In-Between.” *Studies in Conservation* 67, no.1-2 (2022): 30-37, https://doi.org/10.1080/00393630.2021.1947074.

Marçal, Hélia. “Contemporary Art Conservation.” Published as part of *Reshaping the Collective: When Artworks Live in the Museum*, Tate 2019. Accessed August 2024. https://www.tate.org.uk/research/reshaping-the-collectible/research-approach-conservation.

McKittrick, Katherine. *Dear Science and Other Stories*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.

McMillian, Uri. “Sand, Nylon, and Dirt: Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger in Southern California.” In *We Wanted a Revolution Black Radical Women, 1965–85: New Perspectives*, edited by Catherine Morris and Rujeko Hockley, 98-118. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

Mercer, Kobena. “Black Art and the Burden of Representation.” *Third Text* 4, no. 10 (1990): 61-78. doi:10.1080/09528829008576253.

Molesworth, Helen, ed. *Dance/Draw.* Berlin: Hatje Cantz; Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston: 2011. Exhibition catalogue.

Morrill, Rebecca, Louisa Elderton, Catalina Imizcoz, and Jenelle Porter. *Vitamin T: Threads & Textiles in Contemporary Art*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2019. Exhibition catalogue.

Muñoz, José Esteban. “Gesture, Ephemera, and Queer Feeling: Approaching Kevin Aviance” in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 65-81. New York: New York University Press, 2019.

Nengudi, Senga. “Oral history interview with Senga Nengudi.” By Elissa Auther. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. July 9-11, 2013.

Nengudi, Senga. “Senga Nengudi: Black Avant Garde Visual and Performance Artist.” Interview by Bridget R. Cooks and Amanda Tewes. Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, under the auspices of the J. Paul Getty Trust. 2022.

Nengudi, Senga. “‘I Believe Deeply that the Best Kind of Art is Public’: An Interview with Senga Nengudi.” By Osei Bonsu. *Frieze Issue 198*, September 22, 2018.

Nengudi, Senga. “Individual Collective: A Conversation with Senga Nengudi.” Interview by Allie Tepper in *Side by Side: Collaborative Artistic Practices in the United States, 1960s–1980s*, edited by Gwyneth Shanks and Allie Tepper, Vol. III of the Living Collections Catalogue (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2020). https://walkerart.org/collections/publications/side-by-side/individual-collective-a-conversation-with-senga-nengudi.

Odita, Donald O. “The Unseen, Inside Out: The Life and Art of Senga Nengudi.” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* no.6-7 (Summer/Fall 1997): 24-27. muse.jhu.edu/article/422516.

Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. London: Routledge, 1993.

Rubio, Fernando Domínguez and Elizabeth B. Silva. “Materials in the Field: Object-trajectories and Object-positions in the Field of Contemporary Art.” *Cultural Sociology*, 7:2 (2013): 161-178. https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975512473287.

Rubio, Fernando Domínguez. “Preserving the unpreservable: docile and unruly objects at MoMA.” *Theory and Society* 43, no. 6 (2014): 617–45. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-014-9233-4.

Ryan, Gwynne. “Considerations in the acquisition of contemporary art: Refabrication as a preservation strategy.” *Studies in Conservation* 61, no.2 (2016): 198-202. https://doi.org/10.1080/00393630.2016.1204517.

Sims, Lowery Stokes, “Aspects of Performance in the Work of Black American Women Artists.” In *Feminist Art Criticism*, edited by Arlene Raven, Cassandra Langer and Joanna Frueh, 207-225. New York: Routledge, 1988.

Sims, Lowery Stokes. “Subject/Subjectivity and Agency in the Art of African Americans.” *The Art Bulletin* 76, no. 4 (Dec 1994): 587-590.

Scholte, Tatja and Glenn Wharton, ed. *Inside Installations: Theory and Practice in the Care of Complex Artworks*. Amsterdam University Press, 2011.

Souter, Anna. "'Being Born Black in America Is a Political Act': An Interview With Senga Nengudi." *Hyperallergic*, September 26, 2018. https://hyperallergic.com/462256/being-born-black-in-america-is-a-political-act-an-interview-with-senga-nengudi/

Spillers, Hortense. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64–81. https://doi.org/10.2307/464747.

Tani, Ellen Y. "'Really African, and Really Kabuki Too': Afro-Asian Possibility in the Work of Senga Nengudi." In *Transnational Perspectives on Feminism and Art, 1960-1985*, edited by Jen Kennedy, Trista Mallory, Angelique Szymanek, 169-184. London: Routledge, 2021.

Taylor, Joel and Marçal, Hélia. "Conservation in the Performative Turn." *Studies in Conservation*, 67:1(2022): 260-266, DOI: 10.1080/00393630.2022.2067717.

Taylor, Lauren. "Senga Nengudi: Topologies." Review of *Senga Nengudi: Topologien / Topologies* by Matthias Mühling and Stephanie Weber, eds. CAA Reviews, December 9, 2021.

Tinsley, Omise'eke Natasha. "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 2-3 (2008): 191–215. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/241316.

Weber, Stephanie and Matthias Mühling, eds. *Senga Nengudi: Topologien / Topologies*. Munich: Hirmer, 2019. Exhibition catalogue.