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Critical Acts

Transferred Flesh

Reflections on Senga Nengudi's R.S.V.P.

Rizvana Bradley

*Each body has its art, its precious prescribed
Pose, that even in passion's droll contortions,
waltzes,
Or push of pain—or when a grief has stabbed,
Or hatred backed—is its, and nothing else's.*

—Gwendolyn Brooks, “Still do I keep my look,
my identity...” (1944)

When the Performa Institute announced that its 2013 season would include one of Senga Nengudi's performance-based sculptures, it seemed an auspiciously timed re-visitation of the artistic moment in which sculptural form would merge with the uniquely improvisational aspects of black performance art. A collaborative performance of Senga Nengudi's *R.S.V.P.* was featured as part of the larger exhibition *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*, originally organized by Valerie Cassel Oliver for the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston. Part two of the show traveled to the Studio Museum in Harlem, one of the locations to host *Radical Presence* in New York City, the second being New York University's Grey Art Gallery.

The exhibition, which highlighted black performance art over

approximately the past 50 years—from the period of Fluxus events and performances to early conceptualism, from the 1960s to the present day—consisted of more than 100 works by some 36 artists working in a range of mediums like video and photography, as well as photo documentation of performances, performance scores, installations, costumes, and interactive works. Senga Nengudi's *R.S.V.P.*, largely unrecognized until now, is part of the larger “R.S.V.P.” series of objects and performances, begun in 1975. Nengudi's sculptural work has



Figure 1. From left: Regina Rocke, Maren Hassinger, and Marya Wethers. *R.S.V.P.* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 14 November 2013, Performa 13, New York. (© Chani Bockwinkel, courtesy of Performa)

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to be activated by two or three people, and three dancers initiated the movement in the performance at the Studio Museum.

The show that was running concurrently with *Radical Presence* at the Studio Museum in the fall of 2013, titled *The Shadows Took Shape*, explored the representational power of Afrofuturism as both a key moment in the black aesthetic tradition and also an ongoing, emergent aesthetic. Together the two exhibitions constructed a long view of black artistic innovation and poetic inscription across five decades, providing a more textured sense



Figure 2. Marya Wethers. *R.S.V.P.* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 14 November 2013, *Performa 13*, New York. (© Chani Bockwinkel, courtesy of Performa)

of a black aesthetic tradition that has expanded across the literary, visual, plastic, and performance traditions. The continued evolution of this aesthetic tradition continues to inform recent conversations that have been taking place in both the academic and the art worlds, particularly with respect to the overlapping concerns of race, conceptualism, politics, and form. The Studio Museum has consistently traced the diverse historical lineages of black performance, illuminating for us what Amiri Baraka once called “the changing same” ([1968] 1998) in reference to black musical expression. The aesthetic continuity that Baraka insisted could be traced across radically different black cultural aesthetic forms was evident in *Radical Presence*, which considered the political poten-

tiality of blackness as an aesthetic, alongside critical questions of identity, racial aesthetics, and the ongoing evolution of black expressive forms.

Those of us who were present at the Studio Museum in Harlem on that brisk winter night in November in the midst of a flurry of other Performa events happening all around the city, encountered *R.S.V.P.* as a performance full of introspection about the body’s imaginative and physical limits, as well as a visual, embodied disruption that challenged our general perception of how a body moves through space. Most of the spectators, myself included, had just experienced Tameka Norris’s provocative *Untitled* (2012) immediately prior, in which the artist cut and then scrawled with her tongue, dripping with blood and saliva, across the museum’s gallery walls without pausing. After that intensive viewing experience, we collected ourselves and shuffled into an equally small adjacent space on the upper level of the museum’s main gallery area, where a few rows of chairs had been set up, near the top of the stairs. One silver bell had been placed on each of the seats. We cupped the small bells in our hands, until instructed to ring them later in the performance. The expectation of sound led to a heightened degree of visual anticipation, as any slight move from

the audience could potentially trigger a sonic disruption. Some of us managed to sit, while others hovered around the area cleared out for the performance. The intimate and slightly unsettling feel of bodies huddled together in the gallery, bearing witness to the potential for movement in other bodies, resonated with the haptic sensation of Nengudi’s collectively activated performance. The piece discloses an event of passage and movement through sculpture that actively provokes the physical limits of form.

R.S.V.P. is an organic web-like composition of black, tan, and nude nylon women’s pantyhose stretched taut, filled with sand, and attached to a portion of the wall that the

museum had designated for the live sculptural event. There appeared to be little give, if any, to the material, contributing to the web's contradictory texture, its diaphanous quality, and its apparent restrictiveness. The sand-filled stockings looked disturbingly like distended body parts twisted and knotted uncomfortably beyond the threshold of physical possibility. Also miraculous was the endurance of the mesh material and its resistance to compression and weight.

The work was activated by Maren Hassinger, Regina Rocke, and Marya Wethers, all dancers and choreographers. Though Nengudi did not perform that evening, Hassinger and Nengudi are longtime friends and collaborators, and have worked together on a series of pieces, among them, *Flying* (1982), *Spooks Who Sat By The Door* (1983), *Mail Art* and *Long Distance Conceptual Exercises* (1999), *Side by Side* (2006), *Kiss* (2011), and *Walk Tall* (2012). Hassinger has often invoked Eva Hesse as an influence, and her work with Nengudi conveys similar investments in fibrous matter and the affective potentiality of form.

It was perhaps fitting then that Hassinger opened the performance, meticulously working her way through the web-like structure in which she and her accompanying dancers would spend the next 20 minutes entangling and disentangling themselves. All three were dressed entirely in black spandex. Rocke and Wethers, along with Hassinger, would intermittently enter and exit the flexible structure. They performed overlapping solos that looped and folded in and out of each other; their recurrent entrances and exits created their own rhythm. The movements of the dancers were lyrical, almost balletic, and depended upon the continual transference of weight, balance, and emotional expression. Weaving in and out of the web's open structure, bending, dipping, and stretching their arms, legs, and torsos against the currents of fabric, the dancers continued to test their own physicality against the sculptural form. Inhabiting and exiting Nengudi's sculpture, brushing up against it and each other, their bodies would briefly coalesce, and sometimes embrace, before passing through to the next danced phrase.

In this particular work, Senga Nengudi sustains a delicate pas de deux between sculpture and performance, in order to see what a collusion of these different forms, or approaches to form, might bring to bear. This work performs an investigation into the scientific conditions of possibility for modernist sculpture and contemporary dance. *R.S.V.P.* requires the dancers who inhabit its structure to experiment with the mechanics of tension and suspension as they move—to test the limits of sculpture against the rules of gravity and physics. As the artist Robert Morris said, writing about the sculptor Claes Oldenburg's strategic manipulation of materials: "The focus on matter and gravity as means results in forms that were not projected in advance [...] Disengagement with preconceived enduring forms is a positive assertion. It is part of the work's refusal to continue estheticizing the form by dealing with it as a prescribed end" (1993:46). The permutation of form as unprescribed end that breaks away from form's aestheticization proliferates in Nengudi's open work.

The art critic Rosalind Krauss once argued that having lost its proper "site" or "place" in the second half of the 20th century, sculpture passed through a series of "structural transformations" (1979:43). If we include performance in Krauss's list of structural transformations, *R.S.V.P.* exemplifies sculpture's transition by employing formalist and minimalist approaches to art, but also departs from these approaches by integrating aesthetic production with performance. Here we encounter the combined sensuality of making, doing, and enacting as a means of resisting the practice of formal aesthetic making. The collective activation of sculpture by figures in motion facilitates a reevaluation of the relationships between the sculptor, the audience, and the performing ensemble, at the same time that it interrogates the very fabric of sculptural practice in a fundamental way.

R.S.V.P. can be situated within the revitalized genre of postmodern sculpture, which Krauss insists should be grasped through its expressive negativity; as "not-landscape" and "not architecture," sculpture continues to situate itself within what Krauss famously termed



Figure 3. Marya Wethers moves out into the audience. *R.S.V.P.* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 14 November 2013, Performa 13, New York. (© Chani Bockwinkel, courtesy of Performa)

“the expanded field,” which “provides an expanded but finite set of related positions for a given artist to occupy and explore” (1979:44). Apropos Krauss, we might understand Nengudi’s practice as “not defined in relation to a given medium—sculpture—but rather in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms, for which any medium—photography, books, lines on walls, mirrors, or sculpture itself—might be used.” Krauss writes that “whatever the medium employed, the possibility explored in this category is a process of mapping the axiomatic features of the architectural experience—the abstract conditions of openness and closure—onto the reality of a given space” (41). But if dance and choreography can be identified here as central to the logical operations that expand the domain of sculpture, *R.S.V.P.* pursues practiced techniques of corporeal expression and revelation that have emerged in the wake of a long history of bodily deprivation.

Nengudi’s sculptural practice touches upon the difficult embodied aspects of black life, history, and culture. In this respect, black performance practices might be said to offer a corrective to Krauss. The “axiomatic features” that supply those “abstract conditions of openness and closure” that structure a given space are not universally prescriptive. Those who have been historically and culturally barred from the “lived body” that figures so centrally in the conceptualization and experience of architectural space, must work out another line

of “axiomatic features”—alternative compositions of space, weight, depth, and physicality. *R.S.V.P.* actively interrogates the spatio-temporal dimensions black bodies have passed through and been barred from, illuminating figures that move through and occupy space differently. By negotiating the physical parameters of depth, space, and time, Hassinger, Rocke, and Wethers rupture and unsettle this expanded field. Within the confines of the gallery, we witness the making of what José Gil calls “the space of the body,” a “secretion” of space, or “corporification of space,” an abstract process of exchange in which the body and space become one another (2006:25–27). Gil’s statement illuminates the abstract imperative of *R.S.V.P.* as a sculptural performance that requires moving bodies to “respond” to its materiality by merging with the sensual figurations of space they themselves secrete or create.

Nengudi and Hassinger initially performed *R.S.V.P.* in the 1970s, and its recent reproduction in some way signifies a committed return to an earlier feminist artistic practice that evidenced the overworked female body through a strategic manipulation of materials. Nengudi’s sand-filled nylons look like bulbous compositions of flesh. Sand mimics the weight of the human body and also marks its uncanny disfigurement. The over-stretched nylons resemble deformed droplets, or bulging lumps, semi-transparent globules. *R.S.V.P.* presents us with an abstract exploration of a body reduced to parts and limbs, fragmented, stretched and dispersed, weighed down—figurations of flesh under duress. But the abstract material forms that circulate within *R.S.V.P.* also query the representational status of the “black body” in contemporary performance.

Nengudi’s disassembling of the body in *R.S.V.P.* correlates with the deconstructive force bodies bear in Hortense Spillers’s critical examination of the violent history of black bodily subjection. Explaining how the violent exposure of flesh was made possible by the historical devaluation of racialized and feminized bodies, in her pivotal essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987:67–81), Spillers maintains a crucial distinction between *body* and *flesh* in order

to get at what she calls the historical “ungendering” of the black female body. According to Spillers, the historical violence exacted upon the black female body evidences the material precession of the flesh in relation to the body: “Before the body there is flesh, that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse” (67). In other words, the body can signify; the grammar of the body is gendered. The flesh however, resists discourse and precedes any gendered bodily economy.

Arguing that this distinction between body and flesh “must be imposed upon captive and liberated subject positions,” Spillers’s larger claim is that the violent reduction of the black body to mere flesh caused an epistemic rupture in the normative economy of black subjectivity. *R.S.V.P.* re-activates this symbolic rupture between body and flesh in its metaphorical and physical reengagement with the body’s raw material. Nengudi retraces the black body as a sort of open archive, underscoring an effort to wrest the black body from a set of overdetermined representations, in order to “rehistoricize black flesh” (Brooks 2006:335) as a quintessential abstract gesture of experimental black aesthetics. *R.S.V.P.* suggests that the materiality of this historically ungendered flesh continues to structure, organize, and inflect performances of blackness in the present.

The performative valences of flesh that circulated within *R.S.V.P.* uncovered and recovered this “ungendered” flesh as a resource for an alternative mode of sensuality, of corporeal inhabitation and experience. Nengudi’s work provokes the sensual registers of the flesh; her ensemble massaged delicate skeins of nylon mesh between fingers, toes, and over shoulders. These irregular part-objects were passed and shared within the trio’s loosely comprised dance circle, as Hassinger, Rocke, and Wethers glided them along their backs, hands, and feet. Together they tested the body’s physical and conceptual limits within performance, and



Figure 4. Regina Rocke and Maren Hassinger lean into each other. *R.S.V.P.* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 14 November 2013, Performa 13, New York. (© Chani Bockwinkel, courtesy of Performa)

worked their way toward an open and extended corporeality.

The three women then passed the sand-filled stockings over unassuming audience members. Carried through in these final gestures was a plea to the audience to “respond,” and an invitation to bear witness to this process of bodily divestiture as an act of transference. Where the body once entered, a motional, improvisational, and fleshy figure exits. In the gradual slide from body to figure to flesh, something is not lost, but exchanged, and the collective inhabitation of flesh on a gallery floor draws us close.

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. In these last moments, we cupped our silver bells and rang them in unison, becoming part of a larger, commemorative choreographic desire. We were now a part of the transference, the arrangement, the score of *R.S.V.P.* We were musically knit together in Senga Nengudi’s rhythmic return to flesh.

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Disability Performance in the Streets

Art Actions in Post-Quake Christchurch

Petra Kuppers

I am in Christchurch, Aotearoa/New Zealand, visiting and collaborating with performance friends. On 22 February 2014, the three-year anniversary of the big Christchurch quake, I became part of a walk organized by the City Mission—a Christian organization with a Missioner at the helm. Not my usual companions. But a friend's partner, a Quaker, was the organizer of the walk, which incorporated many people with histories of mental health difference, in an active relationship to substance abuse, or in recovery. It is a disability culture scene, and I am staying in the organizer's home, so of course I come along, steering my yellow power wheelchair.

Taking you on a walk through the streets makes deep sense as a performance scene in this city of fallen down buildings and gaps. With many theatres in Christchurch seriously damaged by the September 2010 and February 2011 quakes, a lot of performance actions in the city took to the streets. Some of the most

well known of these, like Gap Filler, emerged as a social practice/performance series that specifically dealt with the changed and shaken scene. As Sharon Mazer writes:

For many artists and activists (and artist-activists)—notably Gap Filler and Arts Voice—the collapse of the city's buildings has opened up a liminal space for ongoing experimentation with and debate about the potential of theatre and performance to create new ideas about community and citizenship. (Mazer et al. 2013:70)

So I am walking in this Christchurch pilgrimage as a performance scholar thinking bodily about community and citizenship.

A vaguely penitentiary, sacrificial quality infused my participation in the walk, as it reminded me of my own Catholic background, of long, forced, childhood pilgrimages to Kevelaer, Germany's Chapel of Grace,

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