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Historiography of Writings on Senga Nengudi: 1977 to the Present

Introduction

(Authors Chose to Analyze Through Media, Art Movement and/or Message)

Senga Nengudi is most known for her nylon stocking installations which are activated by the dance performances of herself and friends. Her work calls upon personal experiences as a black woman living in a time charged with racial tensions and feminism of the 1970s and 80s. Since her first solo show in 1978, scholars have analyzed her work and have taken great effort to navigate through its complex identity as that of sculpture, installation, collaboration and performance. Equally daunting has been the task of placing her work in the broader realm of Art History. As you will see, some place her in Postminimalism, others reference her work as Conceptual while another even went so far as to coin the new term Contextualism, in 1978, in order to encompass the unique work of Nengudi and some of her contemporaries.

Furthermore, Nengudi's messages are often sorted into one or more categories including feminism, racial identity and more broadly, the human bodily experience. This paper will examine the methods in which select scholars and art critics have chosen to label, consider, and theorize on the work of Senga Nengudi from 1977 to the present. In doing so, I will illustrate

how their analyses evolve and indicate how, at times, the authors influence one another in that evolution. You will find however that scholars limit their research to a select few series of works by Nengudi. Apart from the 1978 group exhibition catalogue titled “Contextures”, I have chosen to focus on literature written solely on Nengudi.

Background

(Influences and Identity)

In 1967, Nengudi graduated from California State University-Los Angeles with a major in art and a minor in dance. After spending a year at Waseda University in Tokyo, Japan, where she studied under the Avant-garde artist-collective Gutai, Nengudi returned to CSULA and attended graduate level courses in sculpture. Despite living, working and exhibiting in both Los Angeles and New York, it wasn't until 1974, when she gave birth to her first son, where Nengudi found a focus for her work that seemed to attract the attention it deserved. The experiences of pregnancy and the delivery of her son is what inspired Nengudi towards a focus on the human body, specifically that of the black female, and to explore the natural ways in which the body holds the capacity to stretch and return to form. Here, she began the creation of her famous nylon sculpture series, *R.S.V.P.* and finds that filling them with sand and other found objects replicated the form, stretch and durability of the human body. As you will see, much of the literature on Nengudi will take a focus on her *R.S.V.P.* sculpture series and aspects of performance in her work.

Contextures by Linda Goode-Bryant and Marcy S. Phillips – 1978

(Identity and Black Experience through Obscure Context)

I begin my research on the writings on Nengudi in 1978 with her inclusion in a group exhibition titled *The Concept as Art* at Just Above Midtown Gallery in New York. Linda Goode-Bryant and Marcy S. Phillips write about Nengudi's work in the show's catalogue titled *Contextures*.

Contextures is a term invented and coined specifically for this exhibition as a means to describe what Goode-Bryant and Phillips deemed a new movement in art following that of the conceptual art movement of the 1970s. According to the authors, "The purpose of this book is two-fold: to provide a stylistic discussion on American abstract art since the mid 1940s, placing Afro-American artists working in this tradition within its context; and to discuss, for the first time, a style that has been developing since the early 1970s which we have termed contextures."¹

The book begins with a fairly deep art historical analysis of the movements in American Art in the chapter "Abstract American Art: 1945-1978". Starting with Abstract Expressionism and moving through Conceptual Art, a hefty one-third of the catalogue is designated to this mission. The subsequent text is encompassed under the chapter "Contextures". It is here where we delve into the purpose of the exhibition and subsequent catalogue.

In a very wordy and theoretically written chapter, the authors here attempt to describe Contexturalism. They state that contextural artists separate themselves from previous

¹ Linda Goode-Bryant, Marcy S. Phillips, *Contextures*, New York, Just Above Midtown Gallery, 1978, 9.

movements by allowing the “artist (to) act as a medium in which the properties and conditions of reality are synthesized. Through this synthesis, the context whole of a given reality is presented.”² They argue that contextures is “a radical departure from (Abstraction Art)” and that “the artists involved in this movement, after determining and clarifying the inherent properties of art, go outside its margin in order to incorporate it within the context of external phenomena.” They state that this new movement can be defined by the “role and position of art to reality, the role and position of the artists, and the process and the use of ‘remains’ as the material in which the art objects are made...The artists’ interest in the viewer and broader public becomes subordinate to their objective to define themselves, and to determine their own relative and context positions to reality.”³ They argue that to qualify as a Contextualism, the art must have four elements, all equal to one another – content, context, concept and definition. Changing the context may alter the perceived meaning of the piece, but not the physical characteristics. To summarize, the authors define contextual art as that which contains aspects of the artist’s own identity and experienced realities in order to express those identities and that this expression is the first, the main and possibly the only objective of the artist. The ability for the viewer to experience and relate to the message is secondary and almost of no importance. In addition, the incorporation of ‘remains’ or found objects often play a role in the creation of these works due to the object’s ability to encompass a sense of identity and experience for the artist. The chapter later goes on to add that in addition to the use of ‘remains’ as a medium, the inclusion of some textural aspect as well as music, dance and the

² Linda Goode-Bryant, Marcy S. Philips, *Contextures*, New York, Just Above Midtown Gallery, 1978, 39.

³ *Ibid.*

spiritual are often utilized to further express and represent the identities and experiences of these artists.

Nengudi is the second of twelve artists that Goode-Bryant and Phillips analyze and place into this movement. She follows only David Hammons who is a known friend and colleague of Nengudi. The authors position Nengudi's work within the parameters of Contextualism by discussing her use of five newly introduced elements - tension, environment, architecture, atmosphere and emotion. They describe her work as encompassing "sensuous and sensual emotive forms" and call them "anthropomorphic structures".⁴ Three separate series of her works are addressed. First, the authors briefly consider her 1960's and early 1970's water filled vinyl forms. They describe the plastic folds of these pieces as being filled with tension and flexibility. They then quickly discuss her early 1970's rope and flag works, considering how these pieces incorporate the unpredictable and the natural with outdoor placement, to utilize the wind and other earthly elements. The connection of these works to Contextualism is vague and almost an afterthought. Discussing her later 1975 nylon works, however, took on more breadth and depth.

The authors expound that Nengudi's nylon work is most concerned with the immediate impact of an emotional experience rather than an intellectual one. They argue that her background in dance influences her work with the pairing of choreographed performances with her sculptural installations. They describe these pieces as "lyrical movements (that are) embodied within the stretched and pulled linear extensions and appendages of the object's

⁴ Linda Goode-Bryant, Marcy S. Philips, *Contextures*, New York, Just Above Midtown Gallery, 1978, 43.

central axis.”⁵ The examples of her work incorporate contextual ‘remains’ in the employment of used nylons, sand and other found objects to suggest the human form, organs, and skin. References to these objects are further suggested through the use of color, texture and a symbolism found in the overall structure and shape of the sculptures.

The authors continue with a quote from Nengudi stating

“I am working with nylon mesh because it relates to the elasticity of the human body. From tender, tight beginnings to sagging ... 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 upon 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.”⁶

This is the closest that this review of her work gets to discussing her work in the context of feminism or the black experience and immediately precedes to further contextualize her nylon sculptures as encompassing the use of tension and strain and discuss Nengudi’s application of environmental space. They explain that “with the increased number of attachments to the wall in her later pieces, there is a sense of architecture by creating “arcs, corners and crevices.”⁷

⁵ Linda Goode-Bryant, Marcy S. Philips, *Contextures*, New York, Just Above Midtown Gallery, 1978, 45.

⁶, *Ibid* 46.

⁷ *Ibid*, 47.

Overall, I found this review quite daunting. Not only was the theoretical description of the term *contextures* extremely vague and unstructured, but the application to the given artist's works scattered. As shown, additional defining criteria was often added throughout the readings. Lucky for us, this term does not reappear until 2015.

The Unseen, Inside Out: The Life and Art of Senga Nengudi by O. Donald Odita – 1997

(Consciousness, Spirituality and African Americanness)

Although Nengudi continues creating art, the public's interest doesn't seem to catch hold until later in her career. This next article helps to understand a hiatus in written material on her art by explaining that from 1978 throughout the 1980s, Nengudi focused primarily on performance art and that in 1989, in her move to Colorado, she dedicated her career to art education.

Almost twenty years after the exhibition catalogue *Contextures*, Donald Odita approaches Nengudi's work through a different lens in his 1997 article "The Unseen, Inside Out: The Life and Art of Senga Nengudi". His approach to her art focuses on the human consciousness and spiritual experience. Odita begins by giving a background of the artist's life and influences. He talks first of her exposure to what he calls "Eastern ways of life" influenced by her studies in Japan under the avant-garde Gutai Group. He then briefly discusses the sense of community and ethnically based concepts of art that she was exposed to and embraced through her time in California. Odita describes Nengudi's time in New York as one where her art develops into something independent of the two movements there - that of the Afrocentric "Uptown Art" and the more formal and mainstream "Downtown Art". He states that the group of artists in New York that Nengudi most related to were those that were connected to the Studio Museum in Harlem. He elaborates that her art differed slightly by encompassing a "transcendence in

African philosophy” and goes on to state “They tried to express for themselves what they found Africa to be as it merged with their American experiences.”⁸ Oditia touches on other messages of friendship and the female body, but focuses mostly on a connection of her work to the “Transformative Self where growth and change become paramount in the development of the human consciousness.”⁹

Although Oditia does mention two more recent works of Nengudi’s, done in 1993 and 1995, it is unclear as to what brought on this review. Oditia does not follow any of the foundations laid in *Contextures* and although Nengudi did have an exhibition the year previous, his review of her work does not include any mention of it or the works exhibited.

Senga Nengudi at Thomas Erben by Stephanie Cash – 2004

(Presenting the Cosmic Body and Human Existence-Not Feminism)

In 2004, Stephanie Cash writes about Nengudi’s 2003 solo show *R.S.V.P.*, hosted at the Thomas Erben Gallery, and highlights Nengudi’s work as a reflection of the human body. Cash explains that one of the reasons that Nengudi remains “relatively unknown” is due to her work’s ephemeral qualities in performance and temporary installation. She explains that this solo show is a recreation of earlier versions shown at Just Above Midtown gallery from the 70’s. She expounds that the pieces continue to evolve and grow over time because each installation

⁸ O. Donald Oditia, “Article Title,” *Journal of Contemporary African Art*, Summer/Fall 1997, 2.

⁹ *Ibid*, 3.

varies slightly due to its location, and the fact that each impromptu and spontaneous performance will inevitably be slightly different as well.

Cash compares Nengudi's *R.S.V.P.* sculptures to "withered testicles", "sagging breasts" and "flayed specimens".¹⁰ Although the review is brief, Cash separates her analysis from any other before or after hers with a direct refusal of a feminist interpretation. Cash states "Though Nengudi created these works at the height of the feminist movement, her use of pantyhose doesn't seem intended as a commentary of the oppression of the female sex. Instead, she made materially engaging works that transcend political commentary and passing art-world trends."

Cash here is receiving Nengudi's work as something that transcends the politics, statements and art movements of its time. She argues that the pieces are timeless and that although they incorporate some influences, they go beyond to a dimension of almost cosmic existence in their references to the body and human existence.

***Senga Nengudi: Warp Trance* by Molly Purnell - 2007**

(Viewer Experience in the Ritual and Sensorial Components of Textile Production_Not Body)

Seven years later Nengudi jumps to creating and exhibiting a whole new kind of work presented in her 2007 solo exhibition titled *Warp Trance* which was hosted at The Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia. Molly Purnell's exhibition review, *Senga Nengudi: Warp Trance* from

¹⁰ Stephanie Cash, "Senga Nengudi at Thomas Erben," *Art in America*, March, 2004, 123.

2007, makes sure to distinguish this body of new work from that of the *R.S.V.P.* series. Purnell charges that although Nengudi's previous work was evanescent and concerned with the body, "Warp Trance, on the other hand, is a meditation on ritual and the sensorial components of textile production...The installation is a collaboration between the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, and the textile mills in Pennsylvania and New York."¹¹ She continues by explaining that this body of work differs from past work with the incorporation of space, sound, ritual, film and dance in a way that "the body of the viewer becomes a part of the phenomenological experience rather than simply being a spectator."¹²

Like Cash, Purnell chooses to analyze Nengudi's pieces as speaking on a much greater whole of the shared human existence, however, while Cash argues that Nengudi is presenting a display of her personal human experiences through her installations and performances for others to witness, Purnell argues that Nengudi's new work differs by offering the viewer the opportunity to embrace their own experiences and interact directly with the works.

***Senga Nengudi: Performances 1976–81* by Holland Cotter – 2013**

(Performances Staying Relevant Through Documentation)

In 2013, Nengudi was presented with a solo exhibition at the Thomas Erben Gallery in New York titled *Performances 1976-81*, which inspired Holland Cotter to write this short review of her work in an article for the *New York Times*. Cotter highlights that contrary to her stationary

¹¹ Molly Purnell, "Exhibition Review Senga Nengudi: Warp Trance," *Textile*, Volume 6, Issue 2, 2007, 188-191, 1.

¹² *Ibid*,2.

sculptural work; the performance aspect of Nengudi's work specifically exists only through documentation which this exhibition highlights as the main attraction. Although Cotter briefly discusses Nengudi's hinted messages in feminism and the "mingling of cultures", his main argument here seems to be that through documentation, Nengudi's work maintains its relevance and a level of permanence. He ends by stating "from the mid-1970s to 2005, the old work looks as freshly minted as the new."¹³

Senga Nengudi: New York at Thomas Erben by Anne Doran – 2013

(Feminism and Issues of Gender in Performances 1976–81)

Although Anne Doran also discusses the exhibition *Performances 1976-81*, she instead focuses specifically on the documentation aspect of the exhibition, laments on Nengudi's statements in gender and feminism and highlights the use of a mild delivery of her political messages, in contrast to the work of her contemporaries. Doran explains that Nengudi's pieces instead "evoked fragility and resilience, both bodily and psychic."¹⁴ She states that this exhibition shows how her pieces "incorporated a clear feminist message at a time when the feminist movement was overwhelmingly white..." and that Nengudi's "...primary focus is on social structures (that were) equally damaging to men and to women (in the black community)."¹⁵

¹³ Holland Cotter, "Senga Nengudi," *New York Times*, February 15, 2013, C31.

¹⁴ Anne Doran, "Senga Nengudi", *Art in America*,", April 29, 2013, 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid*,1.

***Senga Nengudi: She Twists, Knots and Pulls to Near Breaking What Other Women Fear Will Get Snagged and Run* by Gylbert Coker – 2014**

(Presenting her Unique Blackness through Various Works, Mediums & Participation)

The title of Gylbert Coker's article *Senga Nengudi: She Twists, Knots and Pulls to Near Breaking What Other Women Fear Will Get Snagged and Run* is somewhat misleading as this essay is more than just a nod to her nylon series. Although this review contains a biography, a list of influences and a wider breakdown of the diverse series of works by Nengudi, the article subtly highlights its purpose to present Nengudi as an African American artist looking for innovated ways to express her existence and experiences. Coker states "These artists looked at black musicians to understand how they were using European instruments as tools to develop new and creative sounds from standard songs that evolved, over time, into a specific African American sound; they wanted that to happen with their art."¹⁶

Coker attributes the inspiration of this analysis to Nengudi's dual retrospectives in Denver of that year – one titled *Nengudi: The Material Body* at the Museum of Contemporary Art and the other *Senga Nengudi: The Performing Body* hosted at Redline. Beginning with Nengudi's birth in 1943, the article gives a record of the life of Nengudi and breaks down how her lived experiences in California, Japan, New York and Colorado have influenced her art. Coker goes on to highlight the specific influences of Japanese ritual, the Guadi Art Association of Japan, different employments in arts education, her pregnancies, the Avant-garde Musician Run Ra and her relationships to other active artists and community friends. Coker begins

¹⁶ Gylbert Coker, "Senga Nengudi: She Twists, Knots and Pulls to Near Breaking What Other Women Fear Will Get Snagged and Run", *International Review of African American Art*, 2014, 1.

analyzing Nengudi's work by equally discussing several different series dating back to the beginning of her career and details how each of these works individually tie into the previously noted influences.

Beginning with the ritualistic *Ceremony for Freeway Fets* of 1978, Coker notes, similar to Doran, that this work aimed to unite genders and address gender issues in the black community. He attributes the inspiration of these message to Nengudi's own relationships and relates aspects of the outdoor performances to things that she learned from studying the artist Sun Ra. He also states that Nengudi here applied her understanding of African and Japanese ritual into these dance and performance pieces.

Secondly, Coker details Nengudi's textural, 1977 nylon mesh series, *R.S.V.P.* He states that these works present messages in the maturing female body. He draws reflection on Nengudi's experiences during the birth of her first son and states that she "was inspired by her pregnancy to view her art work in terms of body transitions and body movement."¹⁷

Coker continues his essay by analyzing Nengudi's series, *Love U* of 2012, which encompasses video, sound and photo installations of the performances executed by herself and her friends. Coker explains here that Nengudi's connections with dance, music and community influence these works and asked for viewer participation during their enactments. She states "As with all her art, the intention is to share the experiences of the core group with the general public so that everyone become a participant."¹⁸

¹⁷ Gylbert Coker, "Senga Nengudi: She Twists, Knots and Pulls to Near Breaking What Other Women Fear Will Get Snagged and Run", *International Review of African American Art*, 2014, 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 3.

This interest in the public's participation rolls over into the next series that Coker analyzes. *Walk a Mile in My Shoes* was a current running project in 2014 when this article was written. Here Nengudi requests community engagement by sending shoes to participants, asking them to walk, move or dance while wearing them and then to document the event. Once completed, Nengudi requests the participants forward the shoes onto the next person. Coker explains that this piece is inspired by a Japanese folktale, which aims to teach people the value of their own unique abilities to handle their life's problems and to acknowledge that we are each individually tailored to handle them while unfit to handle those of others.

I found Coker's equal handling of the various scopes of Nengudi's works both refreshing and authentic, however a focus on her nylon works and performances continues to persevere.

***The Improvised Body: The Reemergence of Senga Nengudi* by Noel Black – 2014**

(Improvised Performance and Contemporary Relevance)

Similar to Coker, Noel Black is also inspired by the shows in Denver and begins his essay by giving a biography on Nengudi with detailed influences on her work. While Coker aimed to highlight the ways in which this exhibition showed Nengudi's ability to express her identity in unique ways, Black here mirrors Cotter somewhat in his aim to stress Nengudi's relevance in today's society and political climate, but here presents that her relevance is through her performances.

Black begins by presenting brief descriptions of the shows at the MCA and Redline and points out that these retrospectives are missing some of Nengudi's lesser known works done under various pseudonyms. He explains that Nengudi's more clandestine works were executed

in photography, poetry and painting and states that these lesser known works were carried out in order to “investigate the boundaries of race and identity.”¹⁹

After quite a bit of history on the artist and influential foundations, Black takes more of a focus on the work at Redline in the show *Senga Nengudi: The Performing Body*. Through an exhibition review he discusses the documentation of the four performance series represented which include *R.S.V.P.*, *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*, *Rapunzel* and *Warp Trance*.

In his section on *R.S.V.P.*, Black ties connections to the female body and relates the symbolism in these pieces to that of “bondage, weaving, lynching, sex, birth, and jazz”.²⁰ In addition, Black parallels connections between these pieces to the work of Eva Hess. He then talks about the “disregarded public spaces”²¹ utilized for the performance pieces of *Ceremony for Freeway Fets* and *Rapunzel* and highlights the ritualistic connections while drawing comparisons to the sound suits of Nick Cave.²² *Warp Trance* from 2007 is mentioned here as well and is included as a to a video installation, documenting the original series. Similar to Purnell’s review in 2007, Black presents the relevance of this series and states that through the use of “sounds, rhythms, patterns and the movements of workers in the textile mills (you can) explore the unconscious dance and ceremony involved in labor.”²³

¹⁹ Noel Black, “The Improvised Body: The Reemergence of Senga Nengudi”, *Hyperallergic*, 2014, 2.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 6.

²¹ *Ibid*, 7.

²² *Ibid*, 7.

²³ *Ibid*, 8.

In all four of these installations, Black denotes their performance qualities and states that her “improvised rituals” speak to the issues of our current climate. He includes the following quote from Nengudi that she gave after hearing of the Michael Brown shooting:

“When we were kicked off the boat, improvisation was the survival tool: to act in the moment, to figure something out that hadn’t been done before; to live. And the tradition goes through Jazz. Jazz is the perfect manifestation of constant improvisation. It has to be in place at all times. Constant adjustment in a hostile environment, you have to figure something out right away...Being born black in America is still a political event. We’re in an odd time where we have a black president and all these things are happening, but there are these weird things that prove that we haven’t flushed out the issue of race.”

***Senga Nengudi: White Cube, London, UK* by Amy Sherlock – February 2015**

(R.S.V.P Representing the Sexualized Black Female and a Broader Need for Touch)

Amy Sherlock’s exhibition review of *Senga Nengudi*, hosted at the White Cube gallery in London, paints a picture of the sexualized black female. A quote from Nengudi is incorporated here stating that she liked the idea of being able to take a whole show and fit it into her purse. Sherlock relates this idea to Sigmund Freud who “In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900)... suggests that the purse, or handbag, is a symbol for the female genitalia”²⁴ Sherlock draws comparisons to the black Mammy character from the Tom and Jerry 1940’s cartoon series who

²⁴ Amy Sherlock, “Senga Nengudi: White Cube, London, UK”, Frieze Editorial, February 2015, 2.

was not represented as a full character, but rather reduced to an idea of “motherliness” and “servitude” through the limited depictions of her stockinged feet alone.²⁵

Sherlock similarly draws connections of Nengudi’s nylon works to that of the dehumanized tragedy of Saartjie Baartman and the sexual abuse and humiliation that she endured through kidnapping and enslavement, imprisonment and ultimate mummification to be put on display as a “freak of nature”. Sherlock states “The tension between the sexualized forms of Nengudi’s soft-heavy stocking sculptures and their evocation of the maternal body relates to the specific, historical injustices that female bodies of color have suffered including enslaved women and wet nurses.”²⁶

Although Sherlock draws parallels to heavy topics of female sexual injustices, she also draws comparisons to a more playful side of women’s sexuality by drawing connections to ballet dancers, cancan girls, and even describing one image of Maren Hassinger interacting with an *R.S.V.P.* installation as looking as if she were entangled in a “web of her own secretion”.²⁷

Above all the sexual symbolism that Sherlock sees here, she leaves us with a broader interpretation of Nengudi’s message, stating “*R.S.V.P.* extends an invitation (respond, please): a cry for interaction and a – very human – request not to be alone.” ...“bodies are inseparable from the thinking, feeling people that inhabit them.”²⁸

²⁵ Amy Sherlock, “Senga Nengudi: White Cube, London, UK”, *Frieze* Editorial, February 2015, 3.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 3.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 4.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 5.

***Transferred Flesh: Reflections on Senga Nengudi's R.S.V.P.* by Rizvana Bradley – 2015**

(R.S.V.P as Black Performance and the Ungendered Flesh)

In her essay *Transferred Flesh: Reflections on Senga Nengudi's R.S.V.P.*, Bradley takes an opposing reflection on Nengudi's *R.S.V.P* sculptures by focusing on her work as Black Performance Art and specifically interprets these sculptures as statements of ungendered flesh and their neutrality. Instead of reviewing the current London show at White Cube, Bradley takes into review for her argument two exhibitions from 2013 - *Radical Presence* and *The Shadows Took Shape*. She also takes the opportunity to expand on her personal memory of a performance during a visit to *Radical Presence*. Bradley expounds that "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."²⁹

SENGA NENGUDI exhibition catalogue, edited by Begum Yasar – 2015

It is here that I would like to take the opportunity to analyze the book SENG A NENGUDI, which was published and released in 2015 in coordination with the exhibition SENG A NENGUIDI. This show was the inaugural exhibition of Dominique Levy Gallery's project space, The Back Room. Because this book has a preface, a forward and three essays, all written by different authors, I will break them down here accordingly.

²⁹ Rizvana Bradley, "Transferred Flesh: Reflections on Senga Nengudi's R.S.V.P.," *Critical Acts*, TDR (Cambridge, Mass.), v. 59, no. 1, 2015 Spring, 165.

Preface - by Dominique Levy
(Postminimalism, Social and Political)

Dominique Levy begins by describing Nengudi's work as social and political. She states "the opening of the human body...the female body and the black body...through ritualistic and choreographic movement in space is as radical a subject today as it was when Nengudi first presented her series of interactive nylon mesh sculptures, *R.S.V.P.*, in 1976.." ³⁰ She describes the exhibition stating "It includes a group of works that illuminate the principle themes of Nengudi's oeuvre, presenting moments from 1970s performances captured in photographs, which are works in their own right, as well as nylon mesh sculptures spanning her career." ³¹ She goes on to call Nengudi "a key practitioner of Postminimalism", ³² but states that she has yet to be as recognized for her role as she should and states that they hope this book and exhibition will play a role in the education and promotion of her art.

Forward –by Begum Yasar,

(Explains that this book will offer a "glimpse into her work- not outline her career")

In the Forward, Begum Yasar, Director of the Dominique Levy Gallery, also places Nengudi's work in the context of Postminimalism performance and installation art with a foundation in the black female body. She further contextualizes Nengudi's work by placing its inception in the 1960's Civil Rights Movements, but explains that Nengudi's work was often overlooked and not viewed as "Black Art" during its inception despite its foundations in ritualism and cultural traditions.

³⁰ Begum Yasar. *SENGA NENGUDI*, (New York: Dominique Levy The Back Room, 2015), 11.

³¹ *Ibid*, 11.

³² *Ibid*, 11.

Yasar goes on to describe the upcoming essay by Ellen Tani “What You Missed: Senga Nengudi’s Performed Objects”. She explains that Nengudi’s performance pieces, although documented in photographs, can never be fully understood out of the context of the experienced community engagement in the moment. It is here where Yasar brings back our long-lost term Contextualism and explains that “Contextualism (is) a term developed ... to describe a particular brand of Postminimalism employed by African American artists, in which the previously “contextualized” object-in reality, the remains of an object-seeks a new relationship with the world and viewer, and in this way, is reborn again and again.”³³

Yasar also takes this opportunity to contextualize Nengudi’s work, stating that it honed its focus on representations of the black female body after the birth of her son; again, keeping to the trend of focusing on her nylon series. She concludes her essay by stating “This book, then, does not seek to be a comprehensive outline of Nengudi’s career or a strict record of the exhibitions. Instead, it seeks to function as a critical companion to Nengudi’s work, a platform by which to present select glimpses in to her practice.”³⁴

“What You Missed: Senga Nengudi’s Performed Objects” – Written by Ellen Tani

(Postminimalism, lesser known, sculpture and performance)

In the following chapter “What You Missed: Senga Nengudi’s Performed Objects”, Ellen Tani defines Postminimalism art as “a reaction against the closed forms of Minimalism...forged in the context of transformative world events like space exploration, international decolonization,

³³ Begum Yasar. *SENGA NENGUDI*, (New York: Dominique Levy The Back Room, 2015), 14.

³⁴ Ibid, 15.

the women's liberation movement and the Vietnam war."³⁵ She explains that Nengudi's work adds an additional element to this movement by embracing a foundation in the public and reflecting social tensions through dance and interaction. Tani states "Nengudi's performed objects interrogate the relationship between agent and work of art, between the self and its public mediation, and between active and passive forces. As such, environmental context and human interaction are inseparable from the meaning of the work, and Nengudi's choice of materials."³⁶ She explains that there is however a sense of loss in the interaction and the expressions of the performances that photos and videos can only attempt to mirror. It is here, in this loss, rebuilding and contemporary evolution that Tani finds the foundations of Contextualism and in the dual abilities of Nengudi's work to encompass both object and action. Here Tani quotes and references many of our previously mentioned authors to help define and describe Nengudi's artwork while supporting her claim in validating the term Contextualism.

"Senga Nengudi: Of Gravity and Grace" – by Jessica Bell Brown

(Gravity as Existing in Dualities and the Grace of Friendship)

Jessica Bell Brown's essay *Senga Nengudi: Of Gravity and Grace* begins by suggesting Nengudi's sculptures encompass a quality of in-betweenness by situating themselves in the middle of multiple dualities such as a "threshold between free fall and weightlessness" and that of "collaboration and collectivity".³⁷ When discussing *Air Propo* – 1981, Brown states "Musicality,

³⁵ Begum Yasar. *SENGA NENGUDI*, (New York: Dominique Levy The Back Room, 2015), 18.

³⁶ Ibid, 20.

³⁷ Ibid, 24.

materiality, and physicality, though eclipsed in the documentation, are activated through each performer's relation to objects and the built environment. What completes the circuit of logic, however, is the "still" image of the dancing body. We recognize the phenomenon of gravity as an inviolable force exerting itself on mass through the sensation of our own bodies' subjection to this force. Everything eventually falls to the earth."³⁸ She continues "From *Air Propo* to *Swing Low*, Nengudi alludes to a subtle tension between elevation and groundedness, between air and ground, between flight and death."³⁹

From here, Brown turns her argument to an analysis of Nengudi's application of community and friendship in her performance works and states "Grace, in Nengudi's collaborative performance work, operates as an extension of friendship mediated and expressed in relation to body, dance movement, and objects."⁴⁰ Once again drawing a parallel between her art as both object and action.

"Stretched Infinity"- Written by Rizvana Bradley

[\(Black Experimental Art and Ungendered Black Existence\)](#)

In the final essay of this book we revisit a familiar author, Rizvana Bradley with her essay *Stretched Infinity*. If you recall Bradley's article earlier this same year, she analyzed Nengudi's *R.S.V.P.* works in the context of Black performance art and correlated her sculptures to ungendered flesh, speaking to a broader existence. Here, Bradley elaborates on this same viewpoint stating "Her work could be said to reflect upon the broken grammar the black

³⁸ Begum Yasar. *SENGA NENGUDI*, (New York: Dominique Levy The Back Room, 2015), 26.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 28.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 29.

woman's body has painfully borne and afforded the annals of history. However, her sculptural manipulations are also labored variations on form that force us in to a confrontation with what Hortense Spillers has theorized as the gendered/"ungendered" complexity of black bodily existence."⁴¹

Bradley continues to explore deeper meaning to Nengudi's nylon sculptures in terms of biomorphic expressions and explains that these sculptures are representations of a greater existence of spiritual being in human form and attempts to explore how we may relate to experience and existence. She states "Stuffed pantyhose (are) contorted to resemble the softness of full breasts, but also flaccid penises, dangle disturbingly from the gallery walls. These radically biomorphic works compound body parts and organs. Offering us something resembling a breast-penis."⁴²

Summary of "Senga Nengudi":

While difficult to follow and interpret, the book "Senga Nengudi" held some common themes throughout by highlighting Nengudi's under-valued status and by elevating her art to a statement of higher existence. Although the analyses of her work vary on themes of Blackness, Performance, Feminism and political messages, one thing that all of the authors seem to agree upon is the inability to pigeonhole her work into one category and gives multiple reference to the term Contextualism, giving it credence in labeling this vaguely Post minimalist work.

⁴¹ Begum Yasar. *SENGA NENGUDI*, (New York: Dominique Levy The Back Room, 2015), 72.

⁴² *Ibid*, 73.

Side by Side: Friendship as Critical Practice in the Performance Art of Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger by John P. Bowles – 2016

(Importance of Friendship in the Performances of Nengudi and Hassinger)

Finally, I will conclude with three reviews written in 2018. While the book “Senga Nengudi” was meant to be a glimpse into varying interpretations of Nengudi’s work, John P. Bowles’s article here is focused on one aspect. His essay *Side by Side: Friendship as Critical Practice in the Performance Art of Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger* analyzes the works of these two artists through the lens of friendship and collaboration.

While Maren has been mentioned in prior readings on Nengudi regarding her performance roles in activating Nengudi’s art, a focused acknowledgement had yet to be done. Bowles expresses that his interest was sparked by the creation of *Side by Side*, a 2006 commemoration video highlighting the collaboration work of the two spanning their 30-year friendship.

The performances presented in *Side by Side* include numerous works by both artists. Bowles argues that together, these two friends provided one another with an empathetic and supportive community and audience in a time when their art was not black enough, feminist enough, nor political enough to be recognized by the main stream.

In contrast to Goode-Bryant’s and Phillip’s book *Contextures*, Bowles argues that Nengudi’s sculptures were not merely “symbolic imagery” that aim to invoke an emotional experience over an intellectual one, but rather explains that Nengudi’s sculptures yearn for participation and engagement in order to fulfill their purpose as performance pieces and states that their

friendship was the conduit for this. He explains that “Together, Nengudi and Hassinger perform a critique of the historical objectification that confined and restrained black women’s agency.”⁴³

Bowles concludes his article by going into depth on the work of *Ceremony Freeway Fets* and explains that this complex performance piece speaks not only to Nengudi and Hassinger’s layered friendship and shared experiences with one another, but is also a statement to other community artists and complexities of the society at the time.

***How Senga Nengudi’s ‘Performance Objects’ Stretched Sculpture Into New Forms – and How She’s Still Pressing the Limits Today* by Colony Little – 2018**

(Experimental Black Art)

The final two reviews included in this historiography of Nengudi’s work are writings on the 2018 exhibition *Head Back and High* hosted at Art + Practice in Los Angeles. In her review, *How Senga Nengudi’s ‘Performance Objects’ Stretched Sculpture Into New Forms – and How She’s Still Pressing the Limits Today*, Colony Little contextualizes Nengudi’s art in terms of experimental black art. She explains that Nengudi focuses on process and collaboration by pushing boundaries and exploring the parameters of conceptual art in the realm of black art and expression. She states that this show is comprised of what Nengudi terms “stationary performance pieces” in the form of photo, sculptural and video installations. Little states that many of these works had lives beyond what we are able to see her. She elaborates that many of these pieces first began in David Hammon’s studio “laboratory” where Nengudi and other

⁴³ John P. Bowles, *Side by Side: Friendship as Critical Practice in the Performance Art of Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger*, (DC: Callaloo, Volume 39, Number 2, Spring 2016), 409.

community artist went to test concepts. Following this test phase, they would then perform these pieces in spontaneous sites around the city. She explains that the pieces that we see within these gallery walls had multiple previous lives. If you recall, this concept of Nengudi's art growing and evolving is something we previously heard Black discuss in 2014.

Little explains that because Nengudi's performance pieces hold the dual artistic "modes" of Performance Art as well as Site-Specific Sculpture, they evolve and maintain contemporary relevance. An example of this is given with the reinstallation of Nengudi's *Scales of Injustice* following the horrific 2017 drowning death of a Gambian migrant in a Venetian canal where video showed onlookers mocking him as he struggled for help. She concludes "its genius in how the sculptures can be both so intimately connected with the moment of their making and so wonderfully open, letting her viewers reactivate them in their imagination in new ways, carrying their energy beyond their moment and into their own lives."

Review: In 'Head Back and High: Senga Nengudi' at Art + Practice, two standout works by Christopher Knight – 2018

(Simple Description of Two Works)

In contrast to Little's thorough analysis and interpretation of Nengudi's work at the Art + Practice's exhibition, Christopher Knight chooses to write his review of the same show as a direct description of two works of art included – *A.C.Q.I.* and *R.S.V.P. X*. By limiting his review, Knight gives the reader a small taste of what is to come upon entering the show and leaves the analysis and interpretation up in the air for the potential visitor to sort out on their own.

Conclusion

The aim of this historiography on the writings of Senga Nengudi is to examine varied interpretations of her artwork and highlight trends and influences. It is through this analyses that I find myself wanting a more in depth review of Nengudi's work outside the scope of her nylon sculptures and performances. As you have seen, scholar's limit their research to a select few series of works by Nengudi. I propose that examination on her work expand and include not only her lesser reviewed sculptures and performances but also the poetry, paintings photography in which Nengudi executed under her known pseudonyms.

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