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INTERVIEW

Senga Nengudi by Jessica Lanay

Friendship as artistic collaboration.

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Installation view of *Las Vegas Ikebana: Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi*, 2025–26. Columbus Museum of Art at The Pizzuti, Las Vegas. Photo by Matthew Pevear. Courtesy of Columbus Museum of Art.

In a group conversation including Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger in the catalogue for their Columbus Museum of Art exhibition, *Las Vegas Ikebana: Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger*, Hassinger makes a statement based on their testimonies about communal support: "You can do anything as long as somebody is caring about you." In a joint retrospective exhibition focused on Nengudi's and Hassinger's more-than-forty-year friendship and artistic partnership, the Columbus Museum of Art's walls are covered in letters, journals of creative concepts, art projects of playful simplicity, and private notes of struggle mailed back and forth that form a spiritual and intellectual umbilical cord between the two women. Their service to one another was to keep doing art. And indeed, the exhibition combines Nengudi's sensually explosive and dynamic installations with Hassinger's purposeful and profoundly graceful treatment of space through performance and sculpture. Nengudi and Hassinger's partnership provides a model for radical community-making and growth. Their sharing of their personal and artistic lives shows us how critical vulnerability is to shifting reality for the better and surviving the in-between times.

Jessica Lanay
My first question is about intimacy and the tactile. How has your idea of intimacy changed over your career?

Senga Nengudi
That's a big question. In a sense, it hasn't changed. I always want someone to either have an experience with my work or experience themselves through my work. I was reading your email, and you use the words *intimacy* and *coalition*. When you mentioned intimacy, the first thought I had was Victoria's Secret or that kind of thing. And intimacy with oneself is quite interesting. When I'm doing these performances, that's what I'm hoping will come across. And not only will the experience of the performance come across to the audience, but it'll also come across what I want them to do for themselves.

JL
There's vulnerability too.

SN
I think particularly with my *R.S.V.P.* (1977/2003) series, it has to do with being vulnerable, with letting people see my inner self and what their inner self is, too, in terms of body image and body shaming. All of that leaves me vulnerable.

JL
That brings me into your partnership with Maren. This is forty-plus years of letters, projects, and vulnerability. In one interview, she called you her "partner." I think that lots of people lose the value of a platonic partnership. And I think it's so important.

SN
Especially because we saw each other through thick and thin. We knew each other before. Well, I had kids, but Maren didn't have any children at the time. But on her side, we went through . . . my goodness. Maren went through a divorce and having to be on her own raising her children and make a living for them. She had to go through caring for her mom with Alzheimer's. Then on my side, I was caring for my mom. And there are other things that happened along the way. With all of that, we committed to each other that we wanted to stay focused on our art. After the beginning of our friendship, Maren moved to New York City, and I moved to Colorado Springs. So there's that huge difference in mileage and space. How do you maintain a friendship? How do you maintain a collaborative practice under those circumstances? We were very kind to ourselves. Maybe it would just be a mark on a piece of paper that we committed to for a month. It was a lot of head time, a lot of conceptual thinking. Because of our circumstances, we couldn't always do elaborate stuff. And when things were tight, and Maren was at the Maryland Institute College of Art, she'd invite me to be an artist in residence or a visiting artist. We just did things for each other to keep us going.

JL
How much of Senga wouldn't be Senga—personally and as an artist—without Maren?

SN
Well, I guess this is a curious thing. It's sort of like the buddy system. When you go swimming or if you go hiking, you should always have a person with you for safety. That's how it's been; she's always had my back, and I've always had hers. She gets some of these little quirky concepts I have, and she's able to put it into some of the performances that I've asked her to do. Curiously enough, even though we both love dance, I didn't think either one of us would have been considered in the dance canon, but some of the things she's done and I've done have put us in there. It's allowed me to do my choreography; it's allowed her to do hers. It's allowed me to

place things on her body without even having to be very specific about what I wanted, but she somehow knew.

JL
What did it take for you and Maren to sustain? Was there competitiveness? In some interviews, Maren speaks to a conviction that, probably up until 2015, she felt unacknowledged by the art world.

SN
As far as I'm concerned, it was never competitive. I know that's how she perceives her career in terms of being unacknowledged, but I also think that she is very gracious and still there for me in terms of whatever I wanted to do. And of course, I was there too. But I understand what you're saying. I always wanted to be a part of the canon, historically speaking, and I think she does too. It was important to me that there was someone like me that younger artists could say, Oh, okay, she did that. I can do it too.

JL
What was planning for *Las Vegas Ikebana* like? What was the most challenging aspect of working on this, and the most lovely?

SN
The most lovely was seeing it all laid out with stuff that we just were having fun with over the years and just trying to keep ourselves pumped up. "Las Vegas Ikebana" was one of those quirky concepts that we came up with, and we really loved the idea of pizzazz, jazz, and glitter, and then the gracefulness that is Ikebana. We liked seeing those two things together, so that's how that concept came about. And we looked at ourselves and we said, Boy, we've been doing this a long time. We were trying to think of equivalents, and we really couldn't. To our knowledge, there have not been any women pairings like ourselves that have been at it so long. I mean, there are group collectives like the Guerrilla Girls, but in terms of just two artists trying to keep art alive, shall we say, there haven't been any that have lasted as long as we have.

JL
It's like two African American women that have managed to carve the ravine through which the river of American art flows.

SN
I like that. (*laughter*) I can't really explain our longevity. I'm just happy that it's so. Our feelings about art kind of remain the same. And this is a powerful thing: both of us were able to maintain our separate practices. We didn't have to lean into each other's practices. With the performances, we could weave in our different ways. And we didn't have to change our outlook. I'm a body person; she's a nature person. It adds to the layered richness of our collaborations.

JL
What are some comparisons between how you observe the art world now and when you were first starting out?

SN
I think things are so dramatically different now. It's not even funny. Before, it was so difficult, and there was no respect. So to see them grappling or grabbing at us to do this show and that show is wonderful. But (*laughter*) David Hammons used to say there was a time in the '80s when they were really paying attention to Black art. He says, Oh, well, it's going to go down. They'll forget about us. And then in twenty years, they'll come back up, and we'll be the newest thing. He was

fairly jaded about it. But in a sense, it's true. There was a time when Chicano art had its glory, and then that faded. And then Asian art—dah, dah, dah. It is always kind of pigeonholed, in a sense. In most museums now, they do have a wonderful collection of artists of color without saying that. For everybody's betterment, there has been a change where there's an openness to a full breadth of work and a full breadth of different approaches and thoughts.

JL
Does that perspective shift in light of the Smithsonian Institution right now?

SN
(*laughter*) The message is way clear: "We don't want you here." These are old messages too. And the Smithsonian. It's devastating when they're attacking every form of institution that is trying to give a full story as opposed to a singular story. Instead of being paralyzed by these things that are happening and saying, Oh, my God, how can this happen?, I think we need to get in front of it with new thought and new ways of doing that counter all of this stuff.