

## Working Together: Maren Hassinger's *Monument (Pyramid)*

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Installed during the 2024–25 academic year, *Monument (Pyramid)* (2022) by Maren Hassinger (born 1947) made easy neighbors with other modern and contemporary sculptures in the Yale University Art Gallery's Margaret and Angus Wurtele Sculpture Garden, joining works by Louise Bourgeois, Alexander Calder, David Smith, and Scott Burton, as well as with the High Modernist forms of Louis Kahn's 1953 museum building (fig. 1). A ten-foot-tall pyramid made of thin, tightly woven tree branches, it is formally striking, with clean lines delineating its outline and a dense tangle of horizontal rows. Its classic appearance, echoing sculpture traditions as wide-reaching as ancient Egypt and 1960s Minimalism, lends itself to assessment in traditional terms: those of form, materials, and placement in space.

Appealing though it may be to assess this classically informed sculpture in formalist terms, such an interpretation misses the true significance of *Monument (Pyramid)*, which centers on the process of its making. According to Hassinger's instructions, the sculpture should be built collectively. It does not require special skills or tools, and the

construction technique is simple. Bringing people together is one of the artist's driving concerns, and this late-career piece builds on Hassinger's lifelong interests in dance and collaboration, which have informed her approach to sculpture over a fifty-year career and emerged periodically in projects that revolve around communal experiences. The seeds for the formal, material, and processual terms of *Monument (Pyramid)* were planted in the first decade of Hassinger's artistic trajectory and have remained productive paths of inquiry over several decades.

Hassinger is well known for her sculptural practice, which has featured frequent experimentation and innovation. In the late 1960s she attended Bennington College, then still a women's college, where she had wanted to study dance. Denied entry to that program, she majored in sculpture. Her training was shaped by the Modernist influences of midcentury, including David Smith, who had taught at Bennington in the 1950s, and Clement Greenberg, the most influential critic of American art at the time and who served as visiting critic for Hassinger's graduation exhibition. She later recalled her work for that show as "these large sculptures that were abstract and architectonic and that were kind of what was happening in 1969,"<sup>1</sup> and they demonstrated her early grasp on monumental form. Following a short stay

Fig. 1. Maren Hassinger, *Monument (Pyramid)*, 2022, installed 2024. Wood and metal, 128 × 180 × 180 in. (325.1 × 457.2 × 457.2 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund, 2024.6.1

in New York after graduation, Hassinger returned to Los Angeles, where she had grown up, to start graduate school at the University of California, Los Angeles, in search of “a release from the establishment [i.e., East Coast] mentality.”<sup>2</sup>

As at Bennington, Hassinger encountered an initial rejection at UCLA. Rather than her first choice of sculpture, she was admitted into the fiber structure program. It was freeing, lacking the weight and expectations of tradition and offering instead an experimental atmosphere that proved transformative. Midway through, around 1972, while looking for inspiration in the junkyards of Los Angeles, she discovered wire rope, a material that would allow her to experiment with woven, abstract, and minimal forms, as well as with ideas about the changing relationship between people and the environment.

Hassinger’s interest in nature, and in what she has long perceived as a threat to people’s connections to it, also traces back to some of her earliest works. She has described the pull of nostalgia, of “wanting a time and a place where you can sit under a tree and enjoy it. Or you can walk by a stream or be in a field of grass. It’s recalling a time when there was just a meadow here and there weren’t these buildings . . . something that’s past that we just can’t have anymore.”<sup>3</sup> In her first important exhibition, a two-person show with the painter William Mahan at ARCO Center for Visual Art, Los Angeles, in 1976, she showed works made of both industrial and natural materials, in which the distinction between the two began to blur.<sup>4</sup> Large-scale sculptures created from thick lengths of wire rope, unraveled at its ends like wiry shrubs, occupied the center of the room, while smaller works hung on the wall. *Dry/Flow* (1976) was one example of the latter: a small, forked branch that hung above two pieces of similarly sized wire rope, an early juxtaposition of the two categories of materials that would occupy Hassinger for decades to come.

The ARCO exhibition was also the setting for one of Hassinger’s early collaborative performances, *High Noon* (1976). Based

on the 1952 Western of the same name, the thirty-minute dance performed to a soundtrack of the flamenco guitar player Manitas de Plata took place at noon. A photograph (fig. 2) shows Hassinger with five others, smiling and dancing together, using pieces of their clothing as props in and among her sculptures. Hassinger later described the event as “a transgressive, confrontational improvised performance.”<sup>5</sup>

A year later, Hassinger’s play with wire rope and tree branch combinations continued in works such as *Pas de Deux* (1977), a sculpture installed on the floor in which the rope curved and threaded through much larger branches. Hassinger had herself photographed dancing with this piece that same year. In a journal entry from the time, she described the way she applied a light touch to arranging her materials and extended this idea to consider her work with other people: “I take something and make nothing. I use the fewest tools—the most expedient processes. . . . I do as little to the material as possible. . . . The use of *actual* bodies in a pseudo-dance situation is interesting in this regard. Bodies (w/ minds and habits) certainly more resistant than cable. . . . The relation is the idea—is the container for the idea.”<sup>6</sup>

A 1978–79 grant from the Black-owned Brockman Gallery Productions, in partnership with the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), Paulsen Wire Rope Company, and the California Arts Council, led to one of Hassinger’s early and significant projects on the subject of threats to the natural world.<sup>7</sup> A pair of works, *Twelve Trees #1* (1978) and *Twelve Trees #2* (1979), were installed alongside two freeways in Los Angeles: the Hollywood Freeway and the San Diego Freeway, respectively. Made of thin columns of wire rope, each tree was ten feet tall, its branches made by unweaving the top ends of the steel cords. Hassinger recalled later, “I was talking about the industrialization of nature.”<sup>8</sup>

*Monument (Pyramid)* belongs to a series of works that Hassinger made in response to an invitation from the Studio Museum in Harlem for a solo exhibition. It was part of



Fig. 2. Maren Hassinger, *Dry/Flow* and *High Noon*, 1976. Performance at ARCO Center for Visual Art, Los Angeles, during the exhibition *Maren Hassinger: Sculpture/William Mahan: Wall Pieces*, August 10–September 18, 1976

the museum’s “inHarlem” programming in nearby Marcus Garvey Park, organized while the museum was closed for the construction of a new building, and marked the initiation of the *Monuments* series. Hassinger designed eight sculptures for the exhibition, each of which responded to a different area of the park, with forms including hard edged (a cube, a rectangle, and a triangle), curved (a wreath twenty-two feet in diameter), and organic. She devised a construction method that built on her early projects with branches while scaling up significantly in size. Six truckloads of tree branches were collected from Central Park (by the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation) and transported to the park, where the sculptures were built in community by members of the Studio Museum’s Teen Leadership Council and participants in its “Expanding the Walls” program for high school students.

Hassinger had been interested in questions of both public space and engagement since the early 1980s. In 1982 she carried out two outdoor projects in places where they would be encountered by local community members and passersby. In the South Los Angeles neighborhood of Lynwood, Hassinger made *Pink Paths*, for which she

painted hot-pink pathways through a Black neighborhood that had been depopulated in anticipation of a new freeway that was never built. On the opposite coast, *Pink Trash* was a solo performance sited across three parks in New York City. In locations in Central Park in Manhattan, Van Cortland Park in the Bronx, and Prospect Park in Brooklyn, Hassinger picked up pieces of litter, replacing them with pink things—crumpled scraps of paper, plastic cutlery and paper plates, and cigarettes and beer cans painted to match. She carried them all in a pink bag while wearing a pink leotard and pants. She was pleased, as she recalled later, to hear the response of one observer of her performance in Central Park, who exclaimed that “it look[ed] like fallen leaves,” which affirmed Hassinger’s intention of drawing attention to the relationship we have to nature.<sup>9</sup> In both cases, Hassinger described her interest in playing with color theory, and how the pink and green reverberated visually as complementary colors. But



Fig. 3. Maren Hassinger, *Women's Work*, 2006/14. Performance at Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, in conjunction with the exhibition *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*, July 24, 2014–January 4, 2015

her framing of the pieces demonstrated that she was also sensitive to the social and political circumstances of the invitations. As she put it in a recent interview, “I’ve always really been interested in the idea that we’re in a vanishing kind of nature and that I could make nature that commented on the decline. . . . It’s a document of the times we live in.”<sup>10</sup>

Hassinger’s incorporation of participatory making into the *Monuments* series also draws on the ideas in *Women's Work* of 2006/14 (fig. 3). First performed in Paris at an event at the Fondation Cartier pour l’Art Contemporain, the piece engaged performers and audience members in the simple labor of twisting strips of *New York Times* newspapers into long strands that were bundled together into what the artist called a “globe.” Hassinger’s choice of a sculpting method that is easy to learn and to do allowed participants to talk with one another as they worked. As

would be the case for the communal building of the *Monuments*, it created a container for bringing together people—often strangers—to get to know one another and to create social bonds.

*Monument (Pyramid)* was commissioned in 2022 for *Sculpture Milwaukee*, a temporary exhibition of public art. Its form was a response to the Milwaukee skyline and the imposing glass tower of the building owned by Northwestern Mutual, next to which the sculpture was sited. Like the original series of *Monuments* made for the exhibition in Harlem, it was designed to be built in community. Before construction, it exists as a simple set of instructions that outline the materials for its underlying metal armature, over which chicken wire is stretched, and the hundreds of wiry branches to be laid and interwoven in thick layers. In the Gallery’s iteration, the limbs of some sixty small, locally sourced buckthorn trees were used. Needing to find a large quantity of branches led to our partnering with the local nonprofit Gather New Haven, which manages a collection of nature preserves in the city, and to collecting materials from the Quinnipiac

Meadows Eugene B. Fargeorge Preserve.<sup>11</sup> With the branches onsite in the museum's sculpture garden, some sixty Yale students in a first-year writing course worked alongside their instructors, Gallery staff members, and Hassinger's studio assistants to assemble the sculpture in shifts over the course of a week in September 2024 (fig. 4).

The installation fell during the first month of classes in their first university year for the students who helped build *Monument (Pyramid)*. It was also less than two months before a deeply divisive election for the U.S. presidency. For participating students and staff who worked on the sculpture together, time at the construction site meant a respite from screens and the news, moments spent together being social, working with their hands, and progressing toward a shared goal. As one student explained, "It was nice to focus on the task at hand and get lost in the work."<sup>12</sup> With its combination of Minimalist form, natural materials, reliance on collaboration, and community building, *Monument (Pyramid)* brings together Hassinger's leading concerns over her long career, the crux of which she concisely articulated in a recent interview: "If people changed their minds about one another, if people decided they could work with each other . . . together we could build a world strong and lasting."<sup>13</sup>

1. Lorraine O'Grady, "Interview of Maren Hassinger, March 12, 1993," *Artist and Influence* 12 (1993): 23.

2. Valerie Cassel Oliver, "In Retrospect: An Interview with Maren Hassinger," *Maren Hassinger . . . Dreaming*, exh. cat. (Atlanta: Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, 2016), 100.

3. Beryl Wright, "Maren Hassinger Interview," *The Appropriate Object*, exh. cat. (Buffalo, N.Y.: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1989), 18.

4. ARCO Center for Visual Art operated from 1976 to 1984 and was funded by the Atlantic Richfield oil company.

5. Lowery Stokes Sims, "An Oral History with Maren Hassinger," *Bomb*, September 25, 2018, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2018/09/25/maren-hassinger-1/>.



Fig. 4. Students in the "Six Pretty Good" writing seminar building *Monument (Pyramid)* in the Margaret and Angus Wurtele Sculpture Garden, September 2024

6. Notebook 1976–77, July, 26, 1977, box 1, folder 8, Maren Hassinger Papers, 1956–2020, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

7. Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2017), 253.

8. Maren Hassinger, "Passing Through," in *Maren Hassinger . . . Dreaming*, 18.

9. Sims, "Oral History."

10. Maren Hassinger, "If Nature Is Vanishing, What Else Is There to Think About?" interview by Jillian Steinhauer, *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 2023.

11. Gather New Haven was formed in 2020 with the joining of New Haven Farms and the New Haven Land Trust.

12. Senuli Peiris, quoted in Mike Cummings, "Assembly Required: A Monument to Community (Built by Students)," *YaleNews*, November 13, 2024, <https://news.yale.edu/2024/11/13/assembly-required-monument-community-built-students>.

13. Elizabeth Carp-Evans, "Outside the Lines: Maren Hassinger on the Importance of Nature," *Cultured*, September 28, 2019, <https://www.culturedmag.com/article/2019/09/28/maren-hassinger/>.