



Deliberate Entanglements: Hand and Place in the Early Work of Maren Hassinger

Elyse Speaks

The real thing about being an artist is [...] the ongoing desire to make something that that tries to explain what it is we have here on earth now. Nobody ever writes about process but the whole thing is process. Everything is the process. Everybody talks about everybody's masterpieces, but that is not the art [...]. The thing that is important is the practice. The product is what's left over, what someone needed at a certain time. The whole thing is living the life and what you make of it day by day.¹ (Maren Hassinger, 2024)

Floorwork and handwork share a mutual humility. Within the framework of western art history, the floor has been associated with the lowness of the daily and the mundane as well as the body at its basest — matter, dirt, dust. Similarly, in the 1970s, too much 'hand' signalled the realm of skill and dexterity — often read as feminine — at the expense of the mind and its intellectual pursuits: the drudgery of sweeping that dirt away, so to speak. As art historian and curator Elissa Auther has articulated, the issues of 'technique', mastery, and physical finish became increasingly aligned with the pursuits of the amateur, the Sunday painter, and the housewife alike.²

This idea was taken up quite literally in the 1960s and 1970s, with artists using that affinity as licence to assert a thorough resistance to modernist aspirations towards transcendence. Artists such as Carl Andre confirmed that resistance through an ostensible allegiance to blue-collar standards of value both in his choice of industrial materials and bricklayer-esque working practices. In this sense, within the framework of minimalism and post-minimalism, the use of the floor as a support for sculpture was validated by a withdrawal of the hand so that the artwork could consort unfettered with the rhetoric and materialism of industry. To declare an alliance with the floor required a break with those art-historical associations that align hand and body; this served as a safeguard against the possibility that the floor would be seen to share too many of the hand's hallmarks. Their affinity could be acknowledged but had to be kept in check through an ostensibly greater allegiance to forms of conceptualism and the mind.

This complementarity of floor and hand was exacerbated — nearly to the point of no return — should any form of fibre be involved in the work.³ Fibre was always already aligned with both the dexterous work of the hand and the mundanity of the everyday. Its natural affinity with the body results from its primary function to clothe, and its principally woven forms readily prompt associations with the rote gestures of technique and skill that appeared to preclude thought. This is likely why (with few exceptions) fibre artists in the 1950s and 1960s rarely placed their work

Detail of Maren Hassinger in her studio with, *On Dangerous Ground*, April 1981 (plate 2).

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I Installation view of the exhibition *Wall Hangings*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 25 February–4 May 1969. Photo: MoMA/Scala/Art Resource.

directly on the floor, choosing to employ low plinths if the sculpture did not hang (plate 1). Additionally, predominant fibre artists such as Lenore Tawney, Claire Zeisler, and Magdalena Abakanowicz found inventive ways to construct fibre architecturally so that it could assert forms of mass, volume, and verticality.

In contrast, beginning in the mid-1960s and within the realm of sculpture proper (still cordoned off from fibre art), such associations between floor and hand increasingly fuelled a terrain of exploration that artists working with hybrid materials, including fibre, would actively exploit.⁴ Some used the floor — at times in conjunction with handwork — to expressly challenge and provoke on the basis of these shared associations. The most well-known case is found in the work of Eva Hesse, whose flippant, brash sculptures inject certain minimalist tenets with a craft paradigm that doubles down on the mutual humility that dogs floor and hand. Other artists such as Claire Falkenstein, Barry Flanagan, Barry LeVa, and Alan Saret also leveraged these associations.

This essay examines another such case, namely the work of US artist Maren Hassinger, who saw the potential to which artists such as Hesse pointed and chose to combine the use of craft and fibre techniques with the dialects of minimalism and post-minimalism in ways that engage with the cultural, social, and political character of the stakes that are presented (at least partly) by the floor. In her work, which mimics the look of fibre but is rendered in various forms of steel cable, Hassinger threads the needle that had firmly demarcated the boundary between fibre art and sculpture (plate 2). As a *Los Angeles Times* critic asserted in a 1979 review, ‘To Maren Hassinger, steel

cable is fiber'.⁵ Hassinger's substitution of metal for fibre thus draws the organicism implicit to fibre into dialogue with the cultural and architectural realms to which steel cable more firmly belongs, while using the floor as an anchor to the mundane.

The ensuing acts of substitution and entanglement of fibre and metal establish a conceptual position akin to minimalist and post-minimalist practices but expand the attendant frames of reference. Where process art and craft (both associated with fibre) are often aligned with insular, medium-based issues, Hassinger's sculptures sustain such conversations while also directing the viewer's focus outward to the larger contexts of the natural world and urban environment. By visually uniting the new, 'undomesticated' ethos of fibre with contemporary sculptural frameworks — including post-minimalism and the post-Watts assemblage of her L.A. peers, as I discuss below — Hassinger's methods and materials yield abstract sculptures and

2 Maren Hassinger in her studio with *On Dangerous Ground*, April 1981. Photo: Museum Associates/LACMA, courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery.



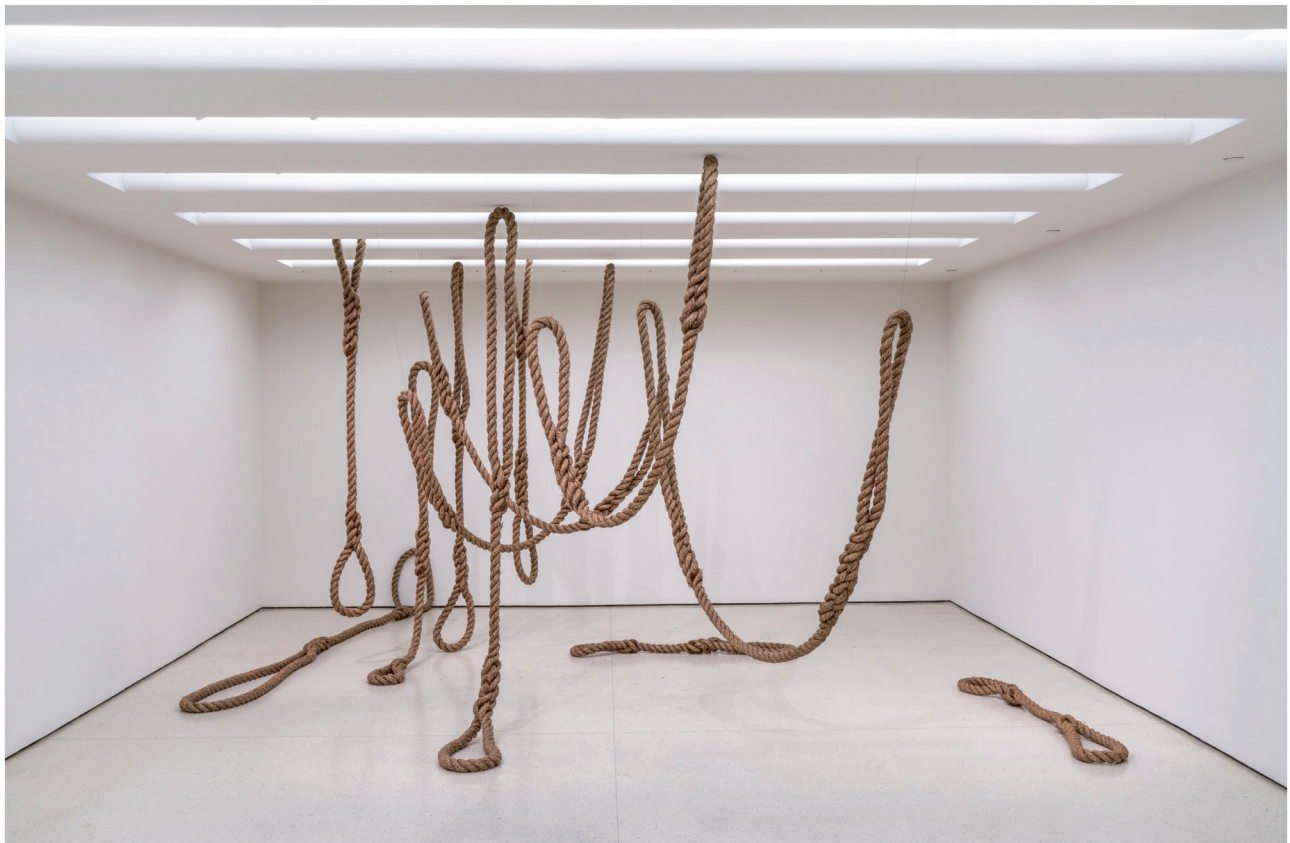
installations that incongruously allude to the visual language of place that is, at once, natural and urban, in ways that feel suggestive but unresolved. The floor/ground aids in this matrix, providing both a connection to context and a naturally humble support that refuses the high stakes that a more monumental form of sculpture might assert. In what follows, I establish substitution as an operative mode in Hassinger's work and argue that it functions, in combination with hand, process, and place, to entangle the terms of nature and culture to generative ends.

Previous scholarship, most significantly that of art historian Kellie Jones in her comprehensive study, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s*, has underscored the significance of 'indeterminacy' in the practice, form, and materiality of Hassinger's work. Jones connects this to 'notions of fragmentation, multiplicity, and layering', ideas that emerge from Hassinger's engagement with dance, performance, and the residual subject that bodies form in the work.⁶ In what follows, I build on Jones's ideas and expand on the crucial connections that Hassinger's sculptures have to both Senga Nengudi and the assemblage scene emerging out of the practice and teaching of Noah Purifoy and other Californian artists of the 1960s. But this article shifts emphasis away from performance and dance and towards Hassinger's sculpture to apply the analytic lenses of hand, substitution, and site to her work of the 1970s and early 1980s. Her early sculptures showcase the hand and its capacity to shape place through repeated acts of substitution; I examine how she moves from the studio floor of post-minimalism towards new forms of sculptural interaction outdoors with place and landscape in ways that bind hand to earth, translating the floor logic of post-minimalism into the public language of site.

Salvaged Substitutions

In 1971, Bernard Kester — ceramist, weaver, and founder of the Fibre Structures Department at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) — curated an exhibition titled *Deliberate Entanglements*, which has since been understood as a touchstone for the development of fibre art in the United States. Bringing a number of artists from Europe to be viewed for the first time in the USA and placing them alongside US artists who had recently emerged as leaders of a new textile movement, the exhibition, as Kester wrote at the time, highlighted 'the move towards architectural scale; the inventive use of weaving and non-woven techniques to create tall, aspiring forms; work that was deliberate, restrained and sure; works that stood firmly in space; and the structural order and poetic worth of the pieces'.⁷ A host of conferences, talks, and symposia across Los Angeles accompanied the exhibition and brought together a number of artists to speak alongside industry experts on such topics as new forms of synthetic fibre. The show received national press; *Life* magazine, for instance, ran a large photo spread featuring works by European and American artists including Neda Al-Hilali, Tadek Beutlich, Jagoda Buić, Olga de Almaral, Françoise Grossen, Sheila Hicks, and Claire Zeisler. As with other characterisations of the exhibition, the emphasis in *Life* was on the shift in scale and the transformation that ensues based on a decided rejection of the 'domestic' in favour of a tenor characterised as potentially threatening, among other things.⁸

Deliberate Entanglements took place while sculptor and performance artist Maren Hassinger was in the midst of coursework to receive her MFA in Fiber Structures from the UCLA department where Kester acted as her primary mentor and it shaped her approach to sculpture in fundamental ways. Shortly after finishing an undergraduate degree in sculpture at Bennington College — a school at which she intended to pursue modern dance but was instead steered towards sculpture — Hassinger returned home to Los Angeles where she planned to continue to study sculpture.



3 Maren Hassinger, *Untitled*, 1972/2020. Rope, dimensions variable. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. © Maren Hassinger. Photo: Courtesy of the artist, the Guggenheim, and Susan Inglett Gallery.

Fresh from one path change, she was denied entry into the graduate programme in sculpture at UCLA. However, Kester, still in the early years of founding the fibre structures department, was looking for students and offered Hassinger a place. She joined the small programme, which she completed in 1973.

While there, Hassinger devised a way to explore those tenets aligned with the all-male sculpture department that most interested her while fulfilling her contractual obligations, so to speak, for a degree in fibre. First, she used actual fibre — industrial hemp rope, mostly — in ways that strongly echo the work in *Deliberate Entanglements*. This resulted in work that allowed Hassinger to explore the structural, even architectural capacities of fibre as in, for example, *Untitled* (plate 3). As indicated by the recent Guggenheim installation of the work in an exhibition alongside Richard Serra's *Belts* (1966–1967), a poured floor work by Lynda Benglis, and Tony Smith's *Wingbone* (1962), Hassinger's earliest uses of fibre engage more directly with the rhetoric of post-minimalism than they do with that of fibre art, though they already exhibit a more explicit bite than either. Her *Untitled* employs found, industrial material — nautical rope salvaged from a shipyard — and cuts and organises it so as to amplify its materiality while using its heft and girth to infringe upon the space of the room. *Untitled* redistributes space and asks the viewer to navigate the sculpture based on its imposing scale. Like the fibre structures in *Deliberate Entanglements*, it addresses the viewer through the scale of the body and affords fibre an authority and autonomy that seem to deny any sense of its historical humility. Hung from the ceiling, it feels threatening; it alternates between an invitation to interact with it as a series of levers and a potential menace, as a kind of torture device of nooses. Placed on the floor, it obstructs and commands attention as a barrier.

It was with *Untitled* along with other earlier forays into fibre structures that Hassinger began to underwrite process-based work with a conceptual framework. River

(plate 4) and *Untitled (Rope)* (plate 5) are two early examples. Using fibre salvaged from junkyards, Hassinger braided and wove massive, cast-off ropes into forms that suggest acts such as hauling and rigging. While at UCLA, in the wake of the generative years of assemblage as practiced by Noah Purifoy, John Outterbridge, and others, Hassinger and her cohort were encouraged to look for salvaged materials in junkyards and scrapyards across the city.⁹ Nautical rope was readily available in L.A. junkyards because it often needed to be replaced to guarantee the integrity of a ship's hauling functions. Taking these compromised, loaded materials, which sustain the scale of industry, Hassinger effectively wove, knotted, and wrapped the sculptures using various approaches to fibre that relate to amateur off-loom techniques such as macramé.

Upon her introduction to fibre in graduate school, Hassinger quickly developed an aversion to the loom and its associations, recently remarking in conversation that,

The loom was like carrying a weight on your back. It was awkward, too much to bear. I like doing stuff away from the loom. Some of these techniques are knotting, or macramé. Sometimes macramé sounds like an arts and crafts technique. But I'm not really interested in 'craft' like 'craft projects.' (Like lanyards...) I'm not interested in that. I'm actually interested in making things that have psychological significance.¹⁰

Hassinger's phrasing acknowledges the pervasive biases of the period. While the shift in scale that she performed aimed to upend the danger run by making allusions

4 Maren Hassinger, *River*, 1972/2011. Mixed-media installation with steel chains and rope, 17.8 × 226.1 × 909.3 cm. New York: Studio Museum in Harlem. © Maren Hassinger. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Susan Inglett Gallery.





5 Maren Hassinger, *Untitled (Rope)*, 1972. Rope, 8 × 96 × 120 inches. © Maren Hassinger. San Francisco: Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Courtesy of the artist, SFMoMA, and Susan Inglett Gallery.

to the kinds of amateur craft projects associated with the lanyard, *Untitled (Rope)* explicitly operates by establishing a repetitive form that overtly features the macramé knot. Yet despite its highlighted position, the knot here refuses to neatly concede to either a structural or decorative function. It introduces the language of culture and manufacture into the work and associates the sculpture with forms of amateur hobbywork that were popular at the time.

Hassinger's materials often provocatively resist the straightforward analogies otherwise courted through her titles, partly by using the language of culture disruptively. This is one way in which she signals the 'psychological' component of the process-based work. For example, *River* does not closely mimic a natural form; it establishes a direct allusion to water through the title but operates as a sort of braided work that weaves together rope and metal chain. The thirty-foot work enacts an environmental scale that initiates a dialogue with the floor and the space of the room and the predominance of the metal introduces an interplay of surfaces and associations that are far-ranging — spanning from those connected with commerce and the river as a trade route to the language of the Middle Passage and the slave trade. Where *Untitled (Rope)* might raise cultural associations with amateur arts and have vaguely threatening references, the socio-historical associations that *River* raises are all the more explicit in their reference to capture and enslavement. The use of metal shifts the work's tone and insinuates nature into the loaded history of passage, (re)producing it as altogether at odds with the romantic associations often attributed to water.



6 Maren Hassinger,
Interlock, 1972. Wire rope,
213.4 × 152.4 × 15.3 cm.
Chicago: Art Institute. © Maren
Hassinger. Photo: Courtesy
of the Art Institute of Chicago
and Susan Inglett Gallery.

After finishing her MFA programme, Hassinger remained in L.A. and switched to metal as the predominant material in the fabrication of her woven structures. She jettisoned fibre almost altogether (for at least the next twenty years) to re-examine floorwork. Experimentation and adaptation could be highlighted while scale and volume became boundless — priorities especially salient for Hassinger, who emphasises her investment in departing from the history of western sculptural practice in tangible ways. She associates her sculptural training with an East Coast ethic, and she saw the decision to discard welding equipment as an important turning point. In an unpublished interview with civil servant-turned-artist Arthur Van Rhyn (c. 1979), for instance, Hassinger elaborated on the narrow framework that she sought to escape. Clement Greenberg's ideas, she explained, dominated the educational model within sculpture, and his thinking was construed as 'following the course of modern art from Cubism...' with 'Post-Painterly Abstraction' as the end game. She understood Greenberg's power as absolute, adding, 'Anything abstract that did not conform to those rules laid down by David Smith and Anthony Caro and a few of the British sculptors at the time, was not valid work'.¹¹ The Smith/Caro legacy was firmly in place at

Bennington College when Hassinger was there, though both had ceased to teach by the time she became a student.¹²

Returning to the West Coast provided Hassinger with a less 'academic' vibe that was 'freer' and fostered her own voice and position.¹³ There she was able to resume the practice of dance and participate in the experimental and interdisciplinary Studio Z group alongside Senga Nengudi, David Hammons, and others as she developed her sculptural practice.¹⁴ That loose coalition of artists sometimes shared studio space and experimented in ways that directly impacted one another's work. The shifts Hassinger took in the 1970s are striking and fairly unique within sculptural practice at the time in that they foregrounded types of metal that had not often been used sculpturally such as found steel cable, which — like nautical rope — was conventionally used for different forms of hauling and lifting. In its entwined configuration, the cable is at once straightforwardly industrial and impersonal and, at the same time, expressly — visually — connected to fibre and its more haptic associations. It also ostensibly resembles the rope with which Hassinger had been working but provides freedom to elicit volume and claim space from a position on the floor. Moreover, it manifests process in ways that align with her post-minimalist contemporaries — a lineage she has mined and continued to pursue through variations over the last fifty years.

As I have suggested, metal cord and cable are materials that mimic fibre but have an overt tensile strength and a commercial grade. Hassinger first acquired some lengths of steel cable from the salvage yard on Alameda Street in Los Angeles. The cable, like the discarded nautical rope in *Untitled* and *River*, ostensibly

retains the mundane, workaday status of the realm from which it is sourced. That openness licences a freedom to play: sometimes ‘weaving’, sometimes fraying and unwinding. One apprehends these effects for example in *Interlock* (plate 6). As the work that initiated many of her techniques, *Interlock* is a wall relief that demonstrates the virtues of the new material while creating a form that feels at once natural and artificial. While making the work, Hassinger remarked, ‘I think the cable was fighting me. I had to do the simplest thing. I bound end to end. Unwrapped (unplied) a few feet on each and did what came to me—weaving, plaiting, braiding, splicing. So, what happened was more of those. Just some kind of adaptation of all of them. This was the beginning of many pieces in the “woven” vein’.¹⁵

From afar, *Interlock* resembles tree branches and recalls sculptures such as Martin Puryear’s wood Ring series (for example, *Noatak* (1979)). But proximity reveals the metal surface and changes the work, initiating the language of substitution that becomes so central. In *Interlock*, what is on view seems like a substitute slated to fulfil a role once occupied by natural forms. The frayed edges — overtly formed by a physical hand wrenching and unravelling the tightly wrapped cord — entangle references to hair and branches with something more malevolent and fraught, and the title *Interlock* aptly conveys the sense of these competing associations and their inextricability in turn.

Nature/Culture, or the Afterlife of Reminders

Steel cable and rope had personal resonances due to the affinity Hassinger developed for fibre while at UCLA. In 1980, she recalled, ‘I knew about weaving and I knew about braiding, and I knew about binding and I knew about things that you do with soft materials, sewing and [things] like that’, so when she began working with metal cord and cable, ‘it seemed natural to put two ends together’.¹⁶ At the same time, nature — and specifically trees — was also always a significant subject for Hassinger, so much so that it has become a commonplace to acknowledge it as one of the primary subjects of her sculptures and installations.¹⁷ She began photographing bare branches as an undergraduate and thinking about their relationship to line not long after. By using the wire cable as an alternative to fibre, Hassinger re-envisioned the language of nature in multiple ways. The pliancy of cable and cord offers the same potential for fluidity but, given its overt manufacture, it adds an immediate degree of distance from organicism. It is hard to read ‘nature’ in the work without sensing an incongruent industrial coldness to the analogy.

What remains underexamined is what that distance is doing. Several important starting points have been offered. Art historian Maureen Megerian aptly remarks that nature serves as a more emotional than overtly eco-political vehicle for Hassinger. Indeed, Hassinger’s sculpture shares in an emotional poignancy that matches the rhetoric of her performances and her dance training. Curator and scholar LeRonn Brooks pushes Megerian’s reading to rightly posit that Hassinger’s work ‘speaks through nature’, even as it is ‘simultaneously strapped to culture’.¹⁸ It is the significance of that entwinement, though, that is crucial and deserves further attention. While in the 1990s Hassinger would embrace the language of environmentalism, in the 1970s and 1980s her work articulated a more ambivalent position that does not resolve into an easy rhetoric of warning or the recollection of a lost Eden. Instead, it pushes the terms of ecology in ways that assert entangled, mutual dependencies. As I go on to suggest, the substitution’s unsettled impact on the landscape initiates a loaded exchange.

7 Documentation photograph of Maren Hassinger, *Twelve Trees #1*, 1978. © Maren Hassinger. Photo: Adam Avila, courtesy of Maren Hassinger, Brockman Gallery Productions, and Susan Inglett Gallery.



Hassinger's outdoor works, which recall vegetation on different scales — from trees and bushes to reeds and branches — exemplify that inextricability most directly. In 1978, she completed her first public commission amidst a host of other group shows, all of which involved tree branches or tree forms. But because *Twelve Trees* (plate 7) and *Twelve Trees #2* (plate 8) appear outdoors, the commissions demonstrate how specific cultural signifiers and resonances work in conjunction with natural forms in her work. *Twelve Trees #1* and *#2*, which were intended to be permanent, public artworks along the San Diego Freeway in Los Angeles (but which were removed after about thirty years for reconstruction purposes), are among a handful of sculptures that Hassinger made in the 1970s that overtly name a natural entity as their subject. Yet like its counterparts, such as *River and Forest* (1980), the work initiates a sharp contrast with the natural form that it designates. In photographs taken before the works were destroyed, one senses the varied landscapes of their contexts. A photograph of *Twelve Trees #1*, taken during installation, reveals a surrounding vegetation that feels lush and prototypically Californian, with the verdancy of the massive palms highlighted by the texture of the surrounding grass and bushes. Hassinger took the trees and surrounding environment directly into account when choosing her subject and its placement; yet her trees stand out baldly against this vegetation, their industrial quality in sharp relief.¹⁹ Their sparseness, scale, overt manufacture, and relative anonymity pair more readily with details in the photograph's background: the telephone pole, stark commercial architecture and populated parking lot.

Rather than attempting to harmonise with the natural foliage, *Twelve Trees #1* operates as a depleted form that resists complete efficacy. The contrast conjures the urban geography of the alternate city implicit in the photograph. Where the real palms pictured might belong to the L.A. of celebrity and the silver screen, *Trees* conjures the language of industry and the street and geographies of South Los Angeles. In this way, the steel cable retains and transforms the humility of the floor and hand that its fibre origins convey with the paucity sensed by this gap. When *Trees #2* was created shortly afterward for a location along the interstate, its infrastructural role feels all the more pronounced. At the time, Hassinger remarked upon the linearity of the site — highway, bridges, and the space itself — and echoed it in her installation such that the trees stand more as a barricade or set of utility poles against the nearby mountains and interstate.²⁰ The bodiliness so vividly pictured in the physical labour of making is here transformed into something stiff and regimented that borders on the martial.

Such substitutions were, by 1979, rampant in the L.A. aesthetic landscape. The sparsity and found aesthetic of the installations — as if they had been made of salvaged metal recovered roadside — resonates with the post-Watts streets of Los Angeles and the junk aesthetic that emerged through the work of sculptors such as John Outterbridge and Noah



8 Maren Hassinger, *Twelve Trees #2*, installed on Mulholland Drive at the San Diego Freeway (northbound), Los Angeles, 1979. Galvanised wire rope, 120 × 1,680 × 60 inches. © Maren Hassinger. Photo: Adam Avila, courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery.

Purifoy. Where the use of fibre-like forms establishes that initial distance from New York welding, the employment of found metal licences a newly straightforward exploration of remains, remainders, and leftovers — junk art that used the residue of life, as historian Daniel Widener suggests that Noah Purifoy did, ‘as a means of fostering collective responsibility and communication’ (plate 9).²¹ Using the very ‘inadequateness of the tools given’, as art historian Kellie Jones has written, artists such as Purifoy were able to transform ‘this notion of lack into something useful, aesthetic, and in the service of good’.²² It was most expressly Purifoy’s promotion and cultivation of assemblage that allowed it to act to ‘liberate the neighborhood from the tired and dominant frameworks imposed upon it’, allowing the everyday to represent something poetic and unseen.²³

While this phenomenon began in relation to the remnants of urban life in the 1960s, it was curator Linda Goode Bryant along with art historian Marcia Phillips, who brought attention to the theoretical role that remainders play in reshaping abstraction. In the important 1978 catalogue and theoretical essay, *Contextures*, Goode Bryant and Phillips lay out a history of twentieth-century abstraction that first connects abstract expressionism to process and conceptual art by virtue of their shared insularity, citing its ‘marginal’ relation to reality. In contrast, ‘contextures’,

a related practice, initiates a bicoastal trajectory largely among artists of colour to work with remainders and found objects that principally assert their reality even in their abstraction, thereby enabling abstract, process-driven art to look outside itself. Whereas ‘a complete separation between the properties which define the art object and the properties which define an external object primarily occurs in abstract styles since Surrealism’, in the work of Black artists and artists of colour on both coasts, a combination of emphasis on process with used remnants newly brings the work into dialogue with the world through matters of place, culture, and experience in dynamic and unstable ways.²⁴ Goode Bryant reads the remainders employed by such artists as David Hammons, Howardena Pindell, and Senga Nengudi as ‘imbued with the afterlife of a generative force’, one produced by the interface between the materials’ origins and their processual transformation.²⁵ For some artists, this has something to do with the use of abject remnants such as grease, mud, and hair in the case of Hammons, hair and string in the case of Pindell, or nylon mesh and sand in the case of Nengudi. In Hassinger’s work, it is through the reference to fibre that the works first engage with a lowness.

Abstraction and Process

Hassinger’s work, which often uses abstract ‘remainders’ largely devoid of found objects, superficially resembles the process-based approach of post-minimalism more so than it does the junk aesthetics of L.A. assemblage. Whether it is found or purchased, steel cable and cord have an aesthetic that dovetails with such an



9 Noah Purifoy, *Watts Uprising Remains*, 1966. Found-object assemblage, 17.78 × 36.83 × 24.13 cm. Los Angeles: LACMA. Photo: Courtesy of Tilton Gallery.

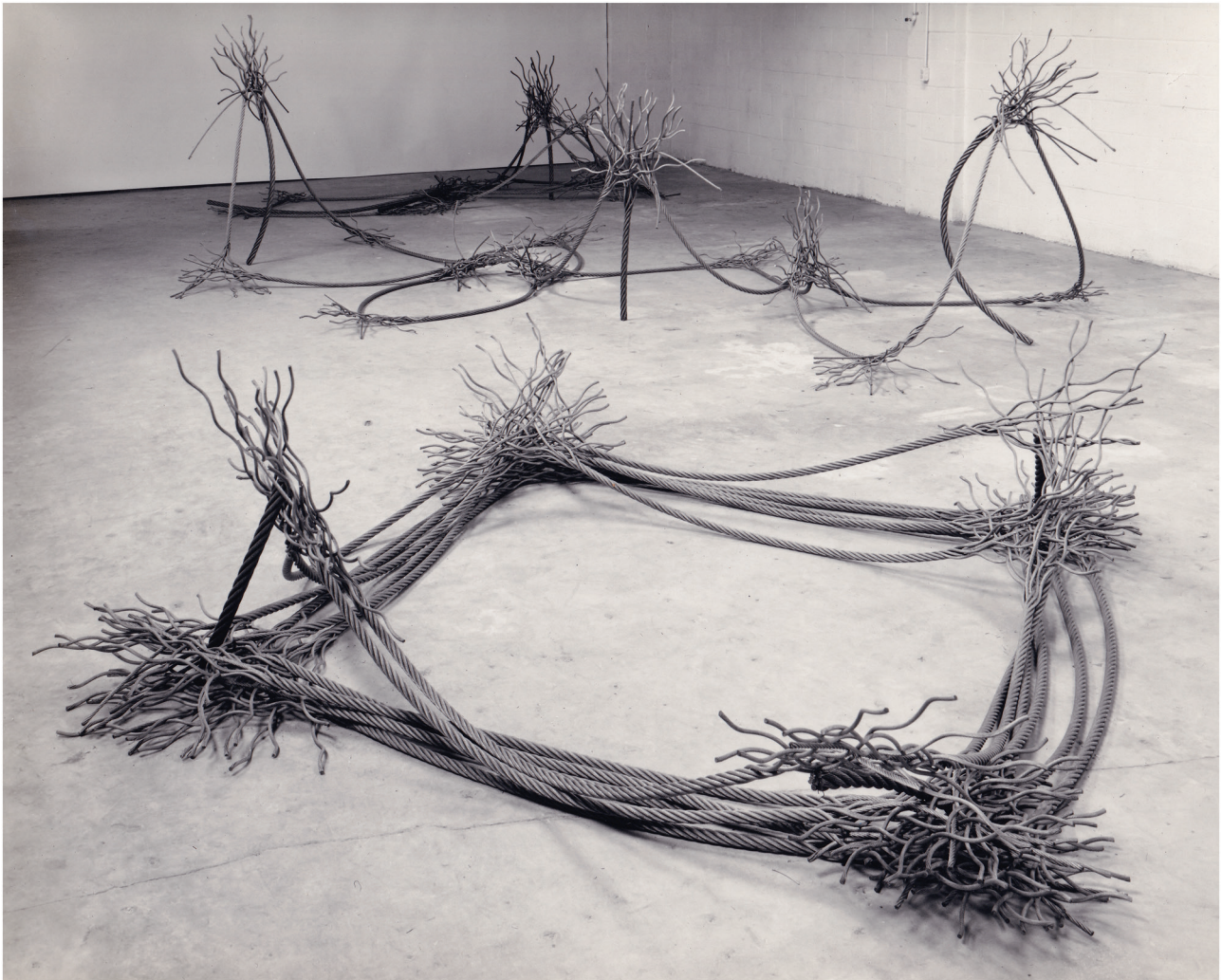
10 Maren Hassinger, *Numbers 1–3*, 1973. Wire rope, dimensions variable. © Maren Hassinger. Photo: Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery.

11 Maren Hassinger, *Number 4*, 1973. Wire rope, 78 × 144 × 48 inches (overall). © Maren Hassinger. Photo: Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery.

ethos. But ultimately, her work operates on principles that echo both the rhetoric of assemblage and post-minimalism while re-routing both directly into dialogue with the landscape or public site.

This is discernible in her first sculptural series that employed salvaged wire rope, *Numbers 1–5* (plate 10, plate 11, and plate 12). The series originates from a preconceived, minimalist framework, but its outcomes point more manifestly to the texture of the environment from which the materials derive. Conceptually, Hassinger took simple, industrial materials and applied a principle from which she fashioned a series of variations. The series began with the construction of regular geometries — either four identically-sized squares or four identically-sized rectangles, depending on the unit — which were then manipulated by hand so that they sit close to the floor or lift partially off of it. The final outcomes range from the simplicity of *Number 3*, which creates a fairly discrete bounded negative space in the shape of a square, to the complexity of *Number 2*, in which the work's height and width transform the squares into actively mobilised units that pull away from or resist geometric order. Movement further infuses the series through the treatment of the wire cable's ends. After physically unplying the tight weave of each (using her hands and occasionally small tools), Hassinger intertwined discrete wire threads to produce complete, self-sustaining units. In this way, the work preserves its initial geometry but becomes something more malleable and dynamic.

Like other process works, Hassinger's early wire-rope sculptures are initially based on attention to the physical time and place in which the work is locationally produced and situated.²⁶ The viewer apprehends the process at play as they take in the work, such that the temporality corresponds to that manifest engendering of making



— the duration of a project, the work of construction, the act of cutting, bending, unplying, interweaving, and so on. Place, similarly, manifests literally, so that the work acts upon and redefines the gallery that it occupies, conferring an altered or enhanced identity through the interaction.

For comparison, take Barry Le Va's 1968 *Eliminating Strips* (plate 13). Like Le Va's *Distribution Piece* from the same year, which graced the cover of *Artforum*, *Strips* conveys the 'evocation of chaos' through its rewriting of the space, as critic Jane Livingston wrote in the accompanying *Artforum* essay on the artist. That chaos was literal rather than metaphoric; the scattered fragments of material blanketing the studio floor felt random and uncontainable. Similarly in critic Emily Wasserman's *Artforum* review of the landmark 1969 *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* exhibition, a hallmark of post-minimalist, process-based work, she stressed that 'a displayed act of execution leaves no room or time for illusionistic effects to intervene', in turn undermining those conventional conditions of sculpture that allow it to extend beyond the specifics of its current situation.²⁷ The

12 Maren Hassinger, Number 5, 1973. Wire rope, 54 × 100 × 72 inches. © Maren Hassinger. Photo: Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery.





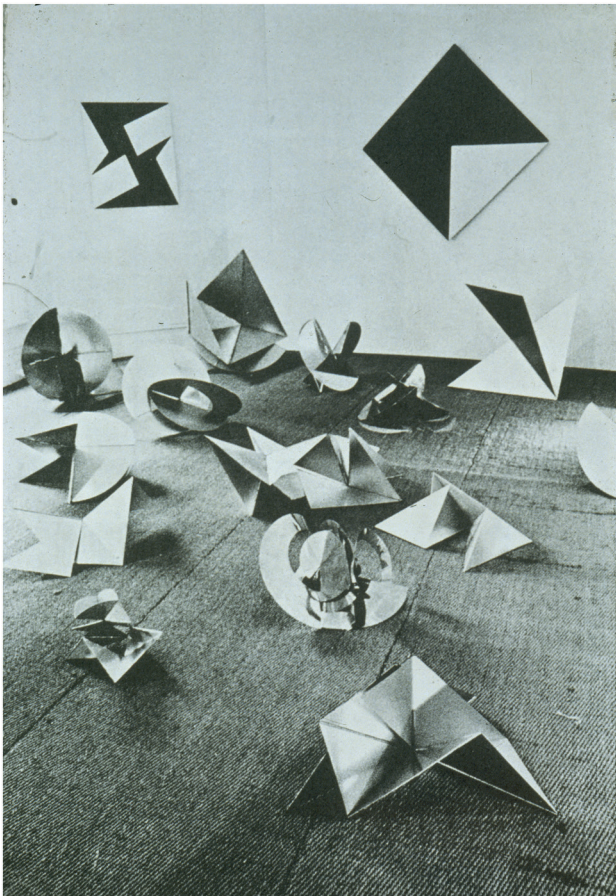
13 Barry Le Va, *Eliminating Strips*, 1968/2020. Grey felt, dimensions variable. Photo: Courtesy of David Nolan Gallery.

use of the floor here leads to the material a stickiness and manifest processual duration, which together impede the sculptural logic that initiates the mental act of imagination.

Hassinger's *Numbers 1–5* undeniably contain a record of process, and the visible scale shifts and volumetric fluctuations together rewrite the gallery as a newly defined and reorganised site. But, crucially, through the materials and emphasis on handwork, time and place are externalised and amplified in less literal ways as well that expand and point outside the gallery. *Numbers 1–5* exerts a force — an aftershock or live wire that still holds a charge — in ways that echo Goode Bryant's notion of the generative afterlife of found materials.²⁸ Abstraction emerges through the explicit and vivid acts of rending and undoing, which are coupled with the manifestation of new moments of entanglement, such that the visceral effects negate stable, static geometries in favour of something seemingly more dynamic. If cable is most expressly aligned in the viewer's mind with the immobilised stability of the suspension bridge, here it accesses and harnesses the floor to flaunt a lack of tautness in favour of a fluidity that renders it newly active and agential. Speaking of making the series, Hassinger recently explained, 'I would say...I think I was thinking about motion...and dance...I still did a lot of it at the time. I think I was thinking about minimal aesthetics. You take one action and you repeat it many times'.²⁹

The results are reminiscent of the ways in which the combination of tactility and floor activate Lygia Clark's *Bichos* (plate 14). But whereas the *Bichos* invite physical or mental engagement from their viewers, Hassinger's series suggests something more threatening and dangerous. Hassinger's *Numbers 1–5* exerts the dance-like power of agency and transformation coupled with the charge of the electrified fence or the exclusionary tactics of barbed wire. Hassinger was trained in dance and continued

14 Lygia Clark, *Bichos* [Animals], 1959. Metal, dimensions variable. Photo: Courtesy of the Bartz Modern Latin American Art Collection, University of Texas.



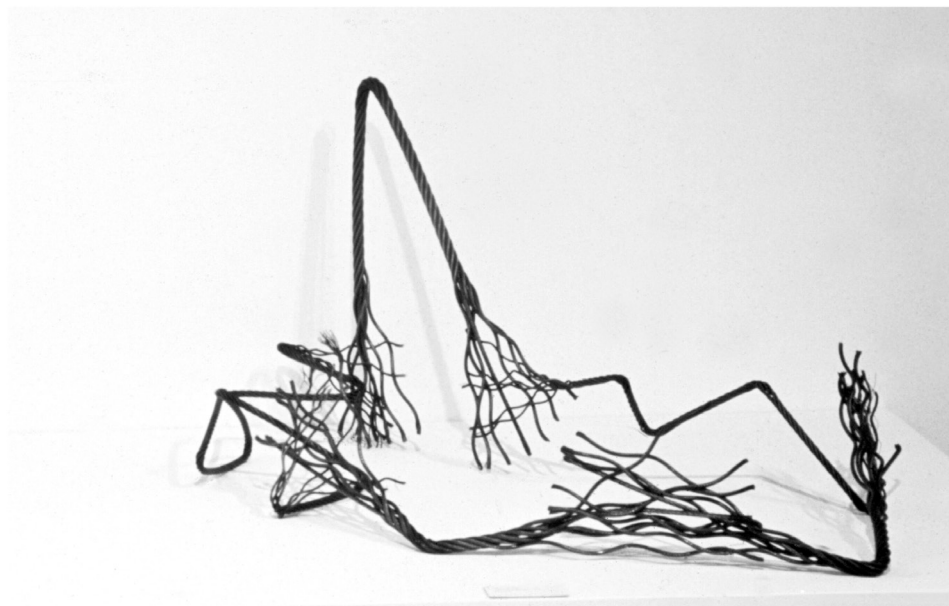
to use dance in her performances throughout the decade, but here that sense of movement loses most of its organicism through its industrial inflection. It makes its claim on space in a way that conveys discomfiting allusions to the urban construction site, as if that site has gained animacy, mobilised, or taken up arms. Industrial remnants, cast-offs, or waste from a destroyed place transform into the rhetoric of protest or other behaviours backed by planning and group effort.

Numbers 1–5 harnesses site-specific power through the viewer's direct engagement in the gallery while channelling the energy of the street. Using the floor, the works invite complications and snares into the anti-illusionistic tenets of minimalism and post-minimalism and their literal relationship to space. Specifically, they invite a host of alternate associations through the entanglement of handwork and artifice. Hassinger has long been cognisant of how the cable itself feeds this layering. In 1979, she suggested, 'Cable is made like a natural thing, although men make it. You start peeling away the layers like an orange or a flower. Y'know how you pick off the petals and you get to the core, and there's more and more in there'.³⁰ Despite the fact that we know that the work is produced of cable, an industrial material used for its tensile strength, the material immediately announces itself as a substitution, sometimes for something organic, sometimes for something absent but less defined. That substitution effects a connection to the hand and handwork while also conveying the sense that something is missing, lost, or otherwise depleted in the swap. In subsequent work, such as *Loci* (Circle Movement) (plate 15), that depletion produces the sculpture to read as the testimony of the salvaged remnant — both to what has occurred and to what is possible. Equally, moreover, the simple gesture of joining contained in the intertwined cable ends yields the sense of new connections,

hope, or forms of rescue; and this constructive tone is one means by which Hassinger's work strikes a chord with the assemblage of her L.A. peers.

By the time Hassinger took on her first public commissions in *Twelve Trees*, she had refined the suspensions and entanglements initiated inside the gallery between hand and machine, nature and culture, loss and regeneration. Much of this was affected through the negotiation of process and labour and their attendant, often gendered, signifiers. Hassinger's labour belonged to a form of blue-collar work anathema to the glamour of the art world and the city of Los Angeles alike. Looking back at the making of *Twelve Trees* pictured above, one can imagine her actions occurring as part of the maintenance of the city-wide communication and electrical systems referenced in the distance. It physicalises the act of making at play, and highlights how that process manifests the complex position these sculptures hold in the landscape they inhabit. In the photograph, Hassinger and an assistant work together to unravel the galvanised wire rope that comprises the singular material constituting both trunk and branches. Knees bent, with a forward lean and outstretched arms, both bodies working in tandem testify to the intensely physical process that underwrites the performative

15 Maren Hassinger,
Loci Circle Movement, 1975.
Welded wire rope, 20 × 34 × 39
inches. © Maren Hassinger.
Photo: Courtesy of Susan
Inglett Gallery.



making of the work. The strain is palpable; as Hassinger herself notes, struggle underwrites the shaping of the work — handwork, but in no way delicate. As she recently remarked in describing the process, ‘You wore gloves—pried it open with a screwdriver—then I used my hands. This makes the work, “hand woven”’, she notes.³¹ The results — something like a hand-woven communication or electrical system — are unusual, contradictory, and symbolically rich.

Hassinger’s specific form of work as pictured shares in the blue-collar aesthetics of the legacy of David Smith. Yet, she expressly does not want to carry the mantle of the proletarian, white, male factory worker, which neatly perpetuates the masculine (she preferred the term ‘macho’) codes that long defined sculpture and architecture of the twentieth century. Instead, the works seem to call back to the oddly crafted reliefs of Lee Bontecou; to Hassinger, as she noted in her notebooks at the time, ‘Weaving = Women’s work’.³² To further carve out a distinctive space, Hassinger, like Bontecou, scrambles typed gendered codes by using the industrial materials associated with the factory and steelyard in ways that assert the feminine terms of textiles. But that framework is accompanied by a counterpulse of resistance asserted within the acts of unweaving routinely sensed or seen. Moreover, while Hassinger’s sculptures reference nature in their forms, these ambiguities refuse the fruitful character of organicism, instead offering a sparser infrastructure for various states — an architecture of precarity, a substitution awaiting definition.

Site and the Character of Landscape

While *Twelve Trees* largely recalls the realm of fibre through the acts of wrenching and unplying, in the following public installation, *Forest* (plate 16), the simple act of substitution itself invites the analogy. *Forest* (1980) is part of a series of public works commissioned by Creative Time’s ‘Art on the Beach’ that were installed in Battery Park, Manhattan, which also included an assemblage by Nancy Rubins and a performance by Bill T. Jones, among other works. In *Forest*, the wire cord was used singularly and repetitively, so that it formed a collection of individual units. Despite its title, it resulted not in a dense thicket of trees but in a series of fibre-weed-remains,



16 Maren Hassinger, *Forest*, an installation for *Creative Time – Art on the Beach*, Battery Park City, New York, 1980. Galvanised wire rope, 72 × 336 × 336 inches. © Maren Hassinger. Photo: Nicki McNeil, courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery.

their slightness at odds with the robust natural concept they invoke. Hassinger's notebooks and sketches reveal that she was thinking at the time about Zen rock gardens, but descriptions and photographs suggest that she also took inspiration from Battery Park itself. Craig Owens, for instance, described the site as it stood in the early 1980s as follows:

Fragmentary evidence of past human presence has accumulated here: oxidized I-beams upended in the sand, what seemed like miles of dilapidated snow fencing. Even the sand underfoot seems to testify to some forgotten disaster—small bits of broken asphalt mix with the gray, sandlike charred remains.³³

While the oxidised I-beams are not visible in installation shots, Owens's description is substantiated by preparatory images for Agnes Denes's well-known *Wheatfield* installation at the site two years later (plate 17). Both photograph and testimony suggest how such industrial leftovers might have served as a source for *Forest*. As with Owens's description, the photo, *Before Planting*, is indicative of the broadly post-apocalyptic feel that abandoned swaths of urban land have when left to transition into a re-naturalised form. Battery Park was an abandoned landfill at the time that acted as a depository for the debris unearthed during the building of the World Trade Center and the adjacent rising neighbourhoods of lower Manhattan. The site of a massive anti-nuclear rally in 1979, it was often used in a way that suggested an illicit reclaiming and an under-the-radar surreptitiousness. It was only towards the end of the decade that the area was developed into the first

iteration of Battery Park City that would come to later contain the more gentrified sites of the luxury condominiums and cultural institutions that characterise the area today.³⁴

In *Forest*, each of the regularly placed galvanised-wire units offers a metal substitute for a slight, somewhat meagre natural form with little connection to the impenetrable density that the titular forest signifies. The installation — which explicitly treats the beach/ground as a site with which to reckon — encompasses the cultural weight entailed in the social and geographic conditions associated with the depleted urban site, particularly as it breaks down along racialised lines. Unlike post-minimalist floorwork placed in the gallery to insist on its facticity in response to the white cube, *Forest* translates a comparable rhetoric into symbolic markers of the kinds of boundaries and divisions that signal a demographic shift among urban neighbourhoods. The neglect of the abandoned lot or semi-demolished building always reads as a telltale sign that one has left the care of the centre for the periphery. In *Forest*, there is enough sparseness and metal to suggest the same. But the angle of the singular cable units complicates the read by suggesting the effects of time and natural forces, as if these remainders had been gently rocked by waves or wind. The angle, along with the weave, sits at odds with the stability of the surrounding verticality and the immensity of scale of the adjacent architecture.

In a way, the natural (and principal) antecedent to the forms in *Forest* is a patch of reeds or grasses, as thin and precarious as the Manhattan skyscraper is secure.³⁵ In the 1970s, Hassinger regularly photographed natural landscapes, presumably as source material. But nearly all of the photographs catalogued in her archives feature relatively nondescript terrain — areas that might be thought of as overgrowth and understood less through their individual properties than through their collective

17 Agnes Denes, *Before Planting, from Wheatfield – A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan*, 1982. Photo: Courtesy of Public Art Fund, NY.





18 Richard Serra, *Wright's Triangle*, 1979. Corten steel, 9 feet (height) × 42 feet, 9 inches (width). Bellingham: Western Gallery, Western Washington University. © Richard Serra/Artists Rights Society. Photo: Rod de Pozo.

interaction with the surrounding environs.³⁶ Forest acts similarly and refuses the specificity of a uniquely defined landscape in favour of something understated and almost invisible. For all its slightness, there is the sense that one could almost hear the work, or, if one were to wait, catch a glimpse as it sways slightly. In this way, it exhibits key phenomenological elements of post-minimalism: it is experientially rather than visually loaded and activates the surrounding space through serialised repetition. But in comparison to other public sculptures made at the same time — such as Nancy Rubins's Battery Park installation or Richard Serra's *Wright's Triangle* (plate 18) — these forms answer their surroundings through the language of antithesis: rebar-like remnants in place of the mass of skyscrapers. Are they the products of a wasteland or the nascent infrastructure of something to come? They feel vulnerable, but in ways that express an ecology of the weed or cockroach — premised upon an unexpected resilience, to paraphrase critic Maurice Berger, such

that they can flourish under the most adverse conditions.³⁷ Where the abandoned lot might conventionally raise the red flag of neglect, the natural forms mimicked in these serialised stalks yield an intermittent expression of growth.

Yet *Forest* does this while divulging a vulnerability and endangerment through its existence as substitute. Initially, it sustains a connection to the individual hand or body rarely seen in outdoor sculpture of the time. The singular cables stand individually, but speak in unison, and through the very insufficiency conveyed by the scale of the external forces to which *Forest* is subject, one senses the whispers of collective action. There is, in this, the undercurrent of an identity to this rewritten landscape that offers it a distinct ‘character’, to use the phrasing of the Martinican literary critic Édouard Glissant. In discussing the relationship between the inhabitants and the land in postcolonial landscapes such as the Caribbean, Glissant articulates the necessity of aesthetically reimagining the connection between humanity and the land, which is how he suggests we understand the notion of a landscape, in our writing of history. He suggests that to understand history, and, crucially, to use it to undo the damage of colonialism, the notion of landscape must be revised. Literature and art have a vital role to play in fomenting that change:

The relationship with the land, one that is even more threatened because the community is alienated from the land, becomes so fundamental in this discourse that landscape in the work [i.e., of art or literature] stops being merely decorative or supportive and emerges as a full character. Describing the landscape is not enough. The individual, the community, the land are inextricable in the process of creating history. Landscape is a character in this process.³⁸

For Glissant, the land is the geographically inscribed substitute for the absence of a recorded, collective history of a people. Defining and preserving that status is an act of record, and recalling and reclaiming that specificity can offer a more fully cognised communal identity.

There are natural affinities between such a reading of the land and the role that craft and weaving came to play in a reassertion of the hand in 1970s material practice. Textiles, too, can have history inscribed into their character, as has been well acknowledged through the analysis of the quilts of Gee’s Bend, for instance, or through the storytelling of Faith Ringgold’s story quilts. Throughout Glissant’s writing, he emphasises the landscape and its role in fashioning the interconnectedness of history and memory as well as its position as a central force in shaping cultural identity. But what he only partly fleshes out is what its aesthetic ‘character’ might look like. The most fruitful framework for which Glissant argues elsewhere is, of course, ‘opacity’ — suggesting that to refuse full comprehension of the environment or land is to acknowledge human limitation and to accept and engender the reality of a relational framework with the land.³⁹

Hassinger’s abstractions, such as *Forest*, speak to both the significance of opacity and the weight of history and memory in the expression of the character of landscape. The individual wire cables assert a braided, woven, or handmade quality — but only in a manner that is once removed. That is, one senses the memory of such work in their industrially produced forms and in their asserted connection to the site, reconfigured as ground, earth, and landscape. Recollection rather than recognition asserts the labour of a hand. When multiplied across the field, *Forest* posits

this collective (yet individualised) handwork as a memory and, in so doing, asserts a relational quality to the landscape that gives form to a liminal space.

It is worth briefly comparing the ‘character’ of *Forest* to a related untitled installation by artist David Hammons (plate 19) that he created a few years prior. In a work that likely spanned the course of a day, Hammons installed wire (straightened clothes hangers) along the shoreline of the Pacific Ocean that he strung with human hair collected from barbershops. Its resonance with *Forest*, which was similarly installed on the coastline of the New York Bay, is notable. Hammons’s *Untitled* shares the unitary shape and phenomenological rhetoric of *Forest*. But it also confers the landscape it occupies with an overtly racialised, somatic character that intervenes upon an otherwise elegiac space in a manner that resonates across his work from this period. As art historian Elena Filipovic proposes about Hammons’s work with found materials — and hair specifically — more broadly, ‘materially, linguistically, spiritually and ideologically, [it is] a testament to the life that his materials had before he claims to have found them’. Here, the ‘(invariably dirty) hair clippings throbbing with people’s spirits’ soften the wire and assert a consonance between body and landscape.⁴⁰ It is hard not to read the work as a form of reclamation — an instance in which the space between land and sea is re-envisioned as a memorial and a testament. If the poetics of elegy are always palpable at the shoreline, then in Hammons’s iteration there is a newly inflected racial and political tenor to that dirge.

The rhetoric of *Forest* is more ambiguous and opaque. As I posit above, the lingering suggestion of the hand yields a tension with the overarching sense of depletion conferred by the industrial materiality so that the installation alternates between the rhetoric of craft and the sculptural morphology of ruin.

19 David Hammons, Venice Beach Hair Garden, 1977.
© David Hammons/Artist Rights Society. Photo: © 1977 Bruce W. Talamon. All rights reserved.





20 Detail of Maren Hassinger, *Paradise Regained*, 2020, installed at the Art Institute of Chicago. Concrete and wire rope, 62 × 168 × 168 inches (144 individual units). © Maren Hassinger. Photo: Author.

Forest's architectural resonances and durable material choice, as is visible in recent installations that reprise the structure of *Forest*, such as *Paradise Regained* (plate 20), moreover, replace Hammons's cattail-like organicism with an urban quality that connects more to skyline than sea. The site/landscape, in turn, feels newly articulated but not necessarily celebrated through the language of elegy. As noted above, in 1980 Battery Park was not what it is today, but read more vividly as the abandoned landfill it in fact was. Hassinger seems to exaggerate this identity and assert it as the character of the place. As she has remarked, her work does not offer the illusion of resolution but suspends viewers in a state of conflict as a way to 'reflect the turmoil of contemporary urban reality....'⁴¹ *Forest* registers this conflict explicitly by articulating its character as a rejection of the integrity, permanence, and stability of the city. It does this while responding with the vocabulary of infrastructure and foundation, as if the sculpture reveals what needs work to move forward.

Hand and Place

Place, in this way, operates analogously to the matter of fibre in Hassinger's work in that both hold a position once removed due to acts of substitution. Frequently, upon examination of her sculptures and installations in the 1970s, landscape and fibre feel present and absent at the same time — there, but in terms that feel equally insufficient. The language of weaving confers upon the landscape a distinctive role both within the rhetoric of her work and within the broader values that it promotes — one that is indicative of 'character', but also labour yet to be performed. It offers an infrastructural place marker asserting the significance of the site through its potential for construction. As Hassinger has recently explained, it is the process that she wants to convey rather than the product; it is in that suspended state that communication occurs.⁴²

Attention to *Forest*'s vulnerability elicits its connection to the individual hand, and the very insufficiency it conveys in the face of the external forces to which it appears



21 Maren Hassinger, *Leaning*, 1980. Wire rope and wire, 16 inches (height, 32 units). New York: Museum of Modern Art. © Maren Hassinger. Photo: Courtesy of the artist, MoMA, and Susan Inglett Gallery.

to be subjected yokes the humility of the hand to qualities emergent from its site. Yet, at the same time, the sculptural repetition that unifies the floor/site/landscape stirs whispers of collective action and announces an emergent counterpoint that posits a germinal capacity: the ecology of weed or cockroach as civic intervention. Hassinger's indoor works, such as *Leaning* (plate 21), share in these humble forms of collectivity. 'I was thinking about ...simple physical realities...the simplest motions we share. I was thinking about how to translate that into wire, so that...I could link things together...without actually using anything but my hands', she recently offered.⁴³ Such ideas continue to mark her practice today with the terms of liveness and community. *Forest* aligns public sculpture with the hand of the individual, and uses forms of post-minimalist abstraction and ambiguity to afford landscape the character of infrastructure. By recalling things like electrical wires, telephone cables, rebar, and other invisible elements that contribute foundationally to urban life, Hassinger intertwines allusions to nature with those of the built world.⁴⁴

By directly connecting landscape to architecture — rather than using sculpture as a foil to reassert a conventionally romantic exchange with the earth — Hassinger manifests a relational quality that answers Glissant's charge to give expression to landscape. Here she does so by asserting its foundational, infrastructural power in a manner that speaks to loss, and loss of the specificity of place, while also affirming the power of the minority, the race and socioeconomics of periphery rather than centre. But Hassinger's lingering associations with fibre render such allusions

and boundaries fluid as well. As artist and curator Neda Al-Hilali said in the fibre exhibition in which Hassinger took part in 1973, fibre, an accretive method of working, always suggests growth, and '[t]his growth process gives further meaning to the flexibility inherent in the fiber medium; that fluidity, adaptability can evoke even a connotation of hope: no matter how insignificant a fiber piece may appear, it can be changed, added to, evolved'.⁴⁵ Just as Hassinger connects landscape to architecture through a crossing of hand and place, *Forest* and its counterparts name a newly complex, profoundly collective character that acknowledges the past in ways that signal the potential for change, growth, and adaptability.

Notes

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- Hassinger, Zoom interview with the author, November 2022.
- Hassinger, Unpublished interview with (Arthur) Van Rhyn, c. 1979. Maren Hassinger papers, Getty Research Institute.
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- Hassinger's *Forest*, in its analogy to a patch of reeds, may well have informed Agnes Denes' environmental installation *Wheatfield* (1982), in which she successfully cultivated and grew a two-acre field of wheat on the same site.
- See Hassinger papers, Archives of American Art.
- Maurice Berger, "'The Weeds Smell Like Iron': The Environments of Maren Hassinger", in *Maren Hassinger, 1972–1991*, Brookville, 1991.
- Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, see all, especially 'Introduction' and 'Cross-Cultural Poetics', trans. by J. Michael Dash, Charlottesville, 1996, quote at 10.
- Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 133; *The Poetics of Relation* trans. by Betsy Wing, Ann Arbor, 1997, 189–194.

- 40 Elena Filipovic, David Hammons: *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, London, 2017, 90.
- 41 Hassinger, as quoted in Berger, “‘The Weeds Smell Like Iron’”, 6.
- 42 Speaking about a show for which she was preparing in 2024 at the Susan Inglett Gallery, Hassinger went on to explain that she had become interested enough in exposing her process that for the new gallery show she attempted to transport the studio into the gallery in order to engage in the process of making during the exhibition itself. In our discussion in her studio she explained, ‘I just wanted to have more communication or a different kind of communication. It’s kind of like, if you’re going to go someplace [more] important, you have your hair cut or buy a new dress, and you’re all done up. But what if you showed up with your hair in curlers and tattered, torn stockings, or in your night clothes? It’s a total reveal’. Hassinger, studio conversation with the author, April 2024.
- 43 Hassinger, Zoom interview with the author, November 2022.
- 44 Hassinger has frequently spoken of these ideas in genealogical terms, noting that her father, an architect, is very much in her, his presence in her work becoming all the more apparent to her as she ages. She sees a common lineage in their method of creation and acknowledges the way in which built structures and foundations sit at the core of her practice. Hassinger, studio conversation with the author, April 2024.
- 45 Neda Al-Hilali, ‘Fiberworks’, *Fiberworks* exhibition catalogue, Claremont, 1973, np.