

Folkerts, Hendrik. "Where We Are, Why We're Here, And Who We Are. A Conversation Between Hendrik Folkerts And Maren Hassinger," *Afterall*, 24 February 2021.

Afterall

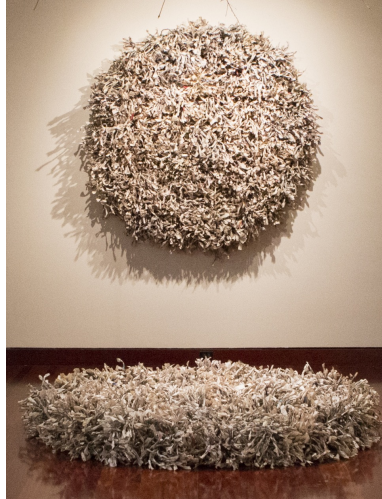


Maren Hassinger, *Leaning*, 1980, wire rope and wire. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, acquired through the generosity of The Modern Women's Fund and Ronnie Heyman. Photograph: © The Museum of Modern Art, SCALA and Art Resource, New York

Hendrik Folkerts: I would like to start our conversation by talking about materiality, considering your pioneering role in using unorthodox and everyday materials in sculpture from the early 1970s on - wire rope, plastic, newspapers, and leaves, to name a few - as well as the ways in which you return to these throughout your oeuvre. For instance, your installation *Paradise Regained* (2020), on view at the Aspen Art Museum last year, strongly resonates with how you used wire rope as both an organic and artificial structure in *Interlock* (1972) and *Leaning* (1980).¹ Your recent site-specific commission at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, entitled *And a River Runs Through It* (2020), brought me back to how newspaper is both material and metaphoric in *Wrenching News* (2008/2018) and *Sit Upon* (2010/2018).² How would you describe your first encounter with these materials? And has your relationship with them changed over the years?

Maren Hassinger: My interest in these materials is mostly intuitive; I seek what's available. And I'm interested in what parameters I can explore through the use of that material. In *Paradise Regained* at the Aspen Art Museum, I'm saying that in our time, nature and that which is manufactured by us are linked, inextricably. I feel that there's an absence of nature, yet a proliferation of human-made products which reflect nature, or imitate nature. Wire rope is one such product. When I use materials made by people that resemble things found in nature, like reeds, flowers, trees, etc., I'm also saying that the proliferation of the copies are causing the erasure of the 'real' nature. Materials made by people have a tumultuous effect on the survival of nature as we know it. The use of these manufactured materials is both a warning and a plea and suggest a time for nostalgia.

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Maren Hassinger, *Wrenching News*, 2008, shredded, twisted and wrapped New York Times newspapers. Installation view, 'Maren Hassinger: A Retrospective', Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Spelman College, Atlanta, 2015. Photograph: Progressive Images Photography. Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, New York

I use New York Times newspapers in a variety of ways and techniques simply because I am trying to include everybody in the conversation and because it is the 'paper of record'. *The Veil Between Us* (2007/2018) and *Wrenching News* are made of copies of the newspaper twisted and bound. The first time I ever used newspaper was in the Campfire Girls. I made *Sit Upons* for our end of day meetings at day camp. Campfire Girls' culture is based on Native American traditions. I suppose I somehow assimilated a lot of these ideas because to this day, I am haunted by something I learned recently from the artist Edgar Heap of Birds. He told me that at the end of their pow-wows Native Americans say: 'We are all related.' This idea is at the root of everything I do and think.



Maren Hassinger, *And a River Runs Through It*, 2020, newspaper. Installation view, 'Duro Olowu: Seeing Chicago', MCA Chicago, 29 February-10 May 2020. Photograph: Nathan Keay. Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, New York

And a River Runs Through It is about the motion of the Chicago River, but it's also about the politics that the river makes possible. And using the newspaper to replicate these dynamics is another way of including all of the people, white, black and others, that are affected by physical division, as well as by the social, political and cultural lines that separate and segregate. In *Sit Upons*, the newspaper is folded and woven. I learned the twisting and knotting and gathering of the many involved in *The Veil Between Us*, for example, in graduate school, where I majored in Fiber Structure. In Fiber Structure, that kind of twisting, knotting, and weaving of strands are all considered primary processes.

I also use a lot of plastic bags, and natural leaves and branches. The pink plastic bags are employed to call attention to trash in the environment. Their bright colour is in high contrast to the grass of natural environments so that you will notice them. Trash becomes really inappropriate. Sometimes, I use the pink bags to make pieces called *Love*. Each *Love* bag is inflated with human breath and has a

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little typewritten note that says 'love' applied on it. Then, I choose how I'm going to install the piece based on my analysis of the particular location. The last one I did like this was at the Boca Raton Museum in an entry to the galleries where I wrapped the room in this expression of love, as if you were being embraced. It might be interesting to note that one of the docents complained about my use of plastic bags. I told her that they were recyclable bags. She said, 'it doesn't matter, aren't we just trying to use less plastic?' I agree with her. So now, I don't know whether I'll do that *Love* piece anymore. Should an artwork have the same moral demands as everything else? I haven't decided yet.



Maren Hassinger, *Love*, 2019, pink plastic bags filled with air, breath, and love notes, steelhead pushpins. Installation view, 'Maren Hassinger: Tree of Knowledge', Boca Raton Museum of Art, Boca Raton, 2019. Photograph: Jacek Gancarz. Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, New York

I've also often used preserved rose leaves and branches. The idea to use preserved rose leaves came from my work in a flower shop where my job was to clean the roses of thorns and excess leaves so that they could be used in arrangements and bouquets. This offered a lot of material which I managed to preserve. The leaves were used in site-specific installations on the wall, and suspended, as in *The Dream* (2001/2015), or I collected branches where tree-trimming was done. One of my favourites was *Blanket of Branches* (1986), which covered the entire ceiling of the Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum, hung like a blanket from it. And it was dense. The idea I was trying to get at was the solace and protection that nature can provide. I used branches and leaves to call to mind nature, and used newspapers to do the same with people. The plastic bags with the love notes are meant to suggest that the primary goal of people is to all get along and respect one another. And wire rope suggests how the nature around us and how so much of it now is in fact a human product. The materials I choose are metaphors, as you noted.



Maren Hassinger, *Walking*, 1978, wire and wire rope elements. Installation view, Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA. Photograph: Jim Gipe. Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, New York

You mentioned *Leaning*. Certain pieces like *Leaning* as well as *Walking* (1978) and *Whirling* (1978) from the early wire rope days are very much about motion and yearning to be a dancer. I feel they capture my heartbreak at being unable to dance professionally.

HF: What is the force driving your choice of materials and by extension, your relationship to them as an artist?

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MH: I'm trying to describe what I see. I'm saying that using found materials can erase nature, can mimic it and can cause us to reflect upon that relationship. I'm doing what visual artists have always done - showing what's there. It's like painting a landscape of what's in front of me. Wire rope is not just a phony vine. The problem is that we have to use so much of it to support this bridge or to support these cars that we're affecting the character of lived life. We're taking natural materials and using them to create something that compromises the intention of support. I'm talking about this in this particular way, saying 'you can't have everything', but I'm just recording it. I'm just a witness.



Maren Hassinger, *The Veil Between Us*, 2007/2018, twisted and knotted New York Times newspapers, twine, wire rope and steel; *Whirling*, 1978, wire and wire rope. Installation view, 'The Spirit of Things', Baltimore Museum of Art, 2018. Photograph: Mitro Hood. Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, New York

HF: I would like to return to what you said about wire rope being connected to motion and your desire to be a dancer, which is a nice segue to your work in performance, both live and lens-based. In my opinion, this part of your work has always been deeply relational, both in terms of your early collaboration with Senga Nengudi, but also in terms of space, probing the body's relationship with its surroundings, both natural and architectural. How did performance manifest for you, and how did it develop in tandem with - paralleling or intersecting - with other parts of your practice?

MH: Regarding performance, let's talk about my collaboration with Senga. It was many years ago, but I believe I remember conversations in which I agreed to be Senga's material. You see in these works that were documented as photographs Senga using me and herself as an extension of the pantyhose themselves. We and the pantyhose as one.

Performance became a part of my practice when I discovered that there were limitations on how I could communicate with an audience using only static work. When you're moving through space, I think there's a relationship between beginning, middle, and end. Its temporal. Temporality is something that's not part of static work. And also, in performance, I'm present. My body is present and there is a primary kind of communication going on there, while the maker of a static work of art is usually not in attendance. Actually, performance provides an opportunity for intimacy. In lens-based works, while you can recognize the maker, time becomes abstract and evocative, somehow, so that reality has softer edges. It can evoke ideas that are not possible with a static piece standing in the middle of the floor, for example. I think the wind is a perfect example of this. If I really want to talk about wind, what better way than to show it in action? And I always love the texture that is created by film, it's inviting.

In the case of *Pink Trash* (1982), which was performed for only a camera and the curator Meghan Williams, in later years, when it was redone for the crowd of the Brooklyn Museum, I just thought, 'How are you going to show the inappropriateness of trash in the environment?' So I used the colour pink, which is complementary to grass, but would make it stand out. In the case of the first *Pink Trash* pieces, the parks were really littered with trash, regular trash, and I picked up all of that trash and put it in containers on site, where it should have been in the first place. Then, I put out my pink trash. I remember the piece in Central Park as if it had just happened. It was on a Monday and the

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weekend had been warm and there was a lot of barbecuing going on in the meadow where I chose to do my piece. And when I went to pick up all the existing garbage, I found that people had discarded meat wrappers and that Styrofoam packaging for meats. It was truly disgusting. So, I conscientiously put all that in trash containers and then, just as conscientiously, spread my pink trash around. When I had completed the task of spreading pink trash, a man and his children walked through it from across the field and came to me and said, 'It's so beautiful, it looks like fallen leaves.' The next day, I returned to take photographs, it was clean as a whistle. No white trash, no pink trash. All gone.



Maren Hassinger, *Pink Trash*, installation and performance in three New York City Parks, 1982. Photograph: Horace Brockington. Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, New York

Although the wire rope talks about the problems of technology and our society, and the pink trash talks about waste and the environment, they're both about reflecting on our behaviour for the future. Why I would do one sculpture of wire rope or a Pink Trash piece depends on the site I'm being asked to work in and the nature of the task I'm being asked to do by the curators.

HF: This brings us to site and site-specificity in your work. How do you approach a site, be it chosen by you as the space to make a work in, or a given space for a commissioned work? Which factors are important for you to consider? A second element I'd be interested to talk more about is the migration or displacement of work that is anchored in a certain site or place. For instance, is *Love made anew* for each location? And could *And a River Runs Through It*, made for Chicago, be displaced to another city, or can it only exist once?

MH: I like talking about site-specificity because I like thinking about the intersection of architecture, space, the body, and use of the space. I enjoy this because it's a holistic way of considering sculpture. Let me share how I go about analysing the elements. Let's imagine a space that's an entranceway to a larger space. It has no windows, there are people walking by all the time trying to get inside. There's a door that opens periodically, but it's a revolving door and there's not a lot of breeze or noise. The floor is marble, the walls are plaster, the ceiling is high, maybe 20 ft (6m). Obviously this place is used as an entryway. Putting something on the floor would impede traffic. So that's out, unless it's going to be close to where the wall and floor meet, almost like a baseboard. Maybe I might go off on a tangent thinking about baseboards. These baseboards, or mouldings, are profound for me because they are a backdrop for entering. That space is where people are moving their feet to enter the building. Their feet are that action. The whole time I'm thinking, I'm seeing bodies moving through the space in a hurry. They're trying to get to the inner spaces of the building. I kind of think of them as performers. Most likely this space would have been chosen for me by the people who own the building, or the architects, or the curators of a special show in this space. There could be a situation where there's a handful of artists chosen to do something in someplace together. In such a situation I would choose the weirdest space, like a corner somewhere, to investigate it unfettered. My thinking is that it's the most unusual space in the spaces given and it's most likely that nobody wants it.

So the factors I think are important are the same ones described above. If this isn't an architectural space, what is it for? What is significant about it? If it's just any space for any room, still, there's

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something about the height of it or the quality of the floor, or the texture of the walls. The city itself may be the site. There's perhaps something really important happening to the people in that city, which should somehow be addressed. It could also be the climate of the place. Or, for example, if it's winter outside and you want it to be summer, as an artist, you can make it summer. There could be a lot of air conditioning circulating and there's something you can do that calls attention to that 'wind'. You might hang something in front of the air current to magically move. Basically, what I'm saying is that I really want people to consider where they are in space. And that concerns several factors described above. Most of the time I usually go for one thing that I notice that's most obvious.

It's possible to move works from site to site. Recently, a series of pieces called *Monuments* I did at the Marcus Garvey Park in New York were moved to another park in Massachusetts.³ In these pieces, I simply recreated what I had done in New York. The Massachusetts project was a recreation of the New York project and therefore, it wasn't site specific. But it looked good because it was outside and made of branches. Elsewhere, in Washington, DC, I made a branch piece that responded to the site and somehow managed to speak of the current issue we're having with monuments because of its position near a park with traffic going by.

The work *Love* is always new and site-specific. I make it to respond to the architecture of the space in which it is situated. I also try to acknowledge your position in space and to attempt to impart the concept of love by the way the bags containing 'love' notes surround you. *And a River Runs Through It* is probably only possible to make in Chicago because I don't know of any other cities with rivers running through them that divide populations in terms of politics, economics, and race. That was me, thinking specifically about Chicago. I believe works such as the branch pieces at the Marcus Garvey Park I mentioned above, or *Monument* (2020) at an intersection in Washington, DC, can change character from place to place and be site-specific. They would always be made of branches, but local ones, and the shape and size would change according to features at each location and pedestrian traffic, etc.

I believe that sculpture can help us understand where we are, why we're here, and who we are. That's why I make them.