



# WORKS ON THE FLOOR

SYMPOSIUM | YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART | DECEMBER 16, 2022

## SCHEDULE

8:50–9 am

### Welcome Remarks

9–10:30 am

### Panel One: The Body and the Floor

Introduction

JOANNA FIDUCCIA

Fallen Monuments: The Floor as Symbolic Space

PEPE KARMEL

Rummana Hussain: Feminist Muslimhood  
and the Aesthetics of the Floor

SHRUTI PARTHASARATHY

Walking on Doris Salcedo's Floor-Based Artworks

MICHAEL TYMKIW

10:30–10:45 am

### Break

10:45 am–12:15 pm

### Panel Two: Land, City, and the Planet

Introduction

ALEXIS LOWRY

Grounding Sculpture: From Earth Alienation to Planetary

JOY SLEEMAN

When the Floor Falls Out

MARIN SULLIVAN

Process, Site, and Entanglement in the Sculpture of Maren Hassinger

ELYSE SPEAKS

12:15–1 pm

**Lunch**

1–2:30 pm

**Panel Three: Sculptural Dialogues**

Introduction

MOLLEEN THEODORE

“Brancusi is our model”: Scott Burton  
and the Cultural Politics of the Pedestal

JONATHAN VERNON

Melvin Edwards Covers Anthony Caro:  
The Smokehouse Associates Interrogate  
and Reframe Modernism, c. 1968

JOHN J. CURLEY

Olga Balema, Computer, 2021

MATILDE GUIDELLI-GUIDI

2:30–3 pm

**Break**

3–4 pm

**Artist Conversation**

Karla Black

WITH RACHEL STRATTON,  
POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCH  
ASSOCIATE, YCBA



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### John J. Curley

John J. Curley is associate professor of modern and contemporary art and Rubin Faculty Fellow at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He is also a Paul Mellon Centre Mid-Career Fellow for 2022–23. He has published widely on postwar American and European art, including a 2021 article in *Art History* on the connections between the paintings of Morris Louis and Cold War cultures of rationality. He is the author of *A Conspiracy of Images: Andy Warhol, Gerhard Richter, and the Art of the Cold War* (Yale University Press, 2013) and *Global Art and the Cold War* (Laurence King, 2019). He is currently at work on a long essay on Anthony Caro and a new book project provisionally titled “Critical Distance: Black American Artists in Europe 1958–1968.”

### Melvin Edwards Covers Anthony Caro: The Smokehouse Associates Interrogate and Reframe Modernism, c. 1968

In 1968, the Smokehouse Associates, a group of Black American artists who believed in the radical possibilities of abstraction, presented an open-air exhibition of wall paintings and sculptures in an abandoned lot in Harlem. While attributed to the collective, Melvin Edwards was responsible for the show’s brightly colored, pedestal-free sculptures made of welded steel. At first glance, Edwards’s objects bear an uncanny resemblance to the works of Anthony Caro from the mid-1960s, even though Edwards has denied the connection.

In my talk, I want to think about Edwards’s painted steel works from the late 1960s as inadvertent cover versions of Caro, but not in the term’s sometimes pejorative sense. Instead, these sculptures are transatlantic utterances, comparable to certain Black American recording artists at this same moment reclaiming the pop modernism of the Beatles for themselves – Nina Simone’s covering “Revolution I,” for example. If Simone was, in a sense, repossessing the Beatles – whose success was dependent on the precedent of Black American music – then Edwards’s sculptures might function similarly. They redeploy Caro’s modernist forms in order to interrogate and reframe the complex histories of the twentieth-century avant-garde, especially to force viewers to reconsider the racial implications of high American modernism and the ways these same forms might be considered liberatory in this new public context.

### Matilde Guidelli-Guidi

Matilde Guidelli-Guidi is the associate curator at Dia Art Foundation and a PhD candidate at the Graduate Center, City University of New York (CUNY), where she specializes in art, media, and architecture of early twentieth-century Europe. At Dia, she has curated exhibitions of work by Leslie Hewitt, Jill Magid, Mario Merz, Senga Nengudi, and Jack Whitten, among others. As the organizer of Dia's Artists on Artists Lecture Series, she has commissioned performative talks by artists including Olga Balema, Aria Dean, Duane Linklater, Naeem Mohaie-men, Precious Okoyomon, Marina Rosenfeld, and Tiffany Sia. Prior to joining Dia, Guidelli-Guidi served as curator and researcher at international institutions including the Musée du Louvre and the Museum of Modern Art and taught courses in art and architecture history at City College and Hunter College, CUNY. She lives in New York.

### Olga Balema, *Computer*, 2021

For Olga Balema, the physical and psychological character of the art gallery is a starting point; the relationship between parts is another. As such, her sculptures enter in dialogue with site-responsive practices of the 1960s and 1970s; that is, works that presented a reciprocity between the body of the sculpture and the cultural space that surrounds it. A close reading of Balema's *Computer* (2021), this paper parses similarities and differences with that earlier sculptural vocabulary, highlighting in so doing the specificity of Balema's formulations.

### Pepe Karmel

Pepe Karmel is a professor in the Department of Art History, New York University. He is the author of *Picasso and the Invention of Cubism* (Yale, 2003) and *Abstract Art: A Global History* (Thames & Hudson, 2020). His next book will be *Picasso: Metamorphoses* (to be published by Thames & Hudson in 2023). He is currently working on a book about global contemporary art.

Karmel has contributed to numerous exhibition catalogues and written widely on modern and contemporary art for publications including the *New York Times*, *Art in America*, and the *Brooklyn Rail*.

He assisted William Rubin in the organization of *Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism* (MoMA, 1989), and was co-curator, with Kirk Varnedoe, of *Jackson Pollock* (MoMA, 1998). As a solo curator, he organized *Robert Morris: Felt Work* (Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 1989), *Dialogues with Picasso* (Museo Picasso Málaga, 2020–23), and other exhibitions.

### Shrouds and Relics: The Floor as Symbolic Space

The advent of “works on the floor” in the 1960s was associated with a shift from traditional aesthetics to phenomenology. In Robert Morris's well-known words, minimal sculpture “[took] relationships out of the work and [made] them a function of space, light, and the viewer's field of vision.” In works like Morris's *L-Beams* and Richard Serra's *House of Cards*, the art's placement directly on the

floor heightens viewers' awareness that the work is subject to the same force of gravity as are the viewers themselves.

Richard Long's early work combined performance and documentation. He would display a map of a walk across the English countryside, or a photograph of a rock circle assembled during a hike through the Andes. In slightly later works like *Stone Circle* (1976) and *Quantock Wood Circle* (1981), he brought rocks and branches into the gallery, where their placement on the floor recalled their origin in nature. In her contemporary *Siluetas* series, Ana Mendieta excavated symbolic shapes from the earth, asserting a link between feminine experience and nature. For both artists, the earth or floor served as a symbolic element and not merely a platform for phenomenological experience.

In Jean-Hubert Martin's seminal exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, a *Red Earth Circle* by Long was juxtaposed with a cosmological diagram made from colored earth by Paddy Japaljarri Sims and other artists from Papunya, Australia. The work's placement on the floor recreated the sacred landscape of religious narrative. In contemporary installations by Western artists like Christian Boltanski or Wolfgang Laib, discarded garments or bowls of rice acquire a similar quality of sacredness by being placed directly on the floor. The symbolic value of the candies in works by Félix González-Torres is signaled by the way that they are spilled onto the floor and wedged into the corner of a room. Quotidian materials become relics or sacrificial offerings. Other contemporary artists like Teresa Margolles and Imran Qureshi transform the floor into a sacrificial altar stained by the blood of criminal, political, and religious violence.

### Shruti Parthasarathy

Shruti Parthasarathy is an art historian, writer, editor, and literary translator, with a special emphasis on South Asian art, particularly its contested modernities. She is the editor of *K. B. Goel: Critical Writings on Art 1957-1998* (New Delhi: Sher-Gil Sundaram Arts Foundation, 2020). Her lead essay on the avant-garde 1960s art collective, titled "Group 1890: The Journey of a Moment," for the exhibition *Group 1890: India's Indigenous Modernism* (DAG, New Delhi, 2016), was hailed as an original, significant contribution to art historical scholarship. Her monograph on the late Indian abstract painter Ram Kumar is forthcoming from DAG, New Delhi (2023). Her English translation of Mihir Pandya's *Hindi Cinema via Delhi* is forthcoming from HarperCollins India and a three-volume translation by the painter-writer Ram Kumar is a work in progress. She is pursuing a doctoral degree in art history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

### Rummana Hussain: Feminist Muslimhood and the Aesthetics of the Floor

This presentation examines the art of the late Indian artist Rummana Hussain, whose easel-based practice took a dramatic turn toward politically inflected installation and performance art in the wake of the 1992 demolition of the fourteenth-century Babri Mosque in central India by Hindu extremist vandals. The act triggered nationwide communal violence and marked the moment of polarization in Indian society, the Indian Muslim now the Other.

As a Muslim and woman, Hussain's urgency of response reflected in her practice by shifting to a political engagement from an artistic position that was feminine and activist. Her immediate explorations around 1993–94 saw her adopt material linked to the earth and woman: terracotta shards, cowrie shells, indigo pigment, charcoal, and the richly earth-coloured *geru*; and the profoundly compelling imagery of the cut-open papaya, symbolically filled with seeds, metaphors for female sexuality, the womb, and fertility. Crucially, she moved these objects to the floor, using broken and sliced terracotta pots, scorched black and spilling earth pigments, metaphors for an earthbound, fecund femininity that brimmed with life force but also under attack, suffering brutal violence. This material aesthetic reappeared in her 1995 foray into performance art where the symbolized body entered corporeally the art space, and the artist wielded a powerful feminine self through her own bodily female presence, placing objects on the floor, and walking with her mouth open in a silent howl of protest. In the installation works she created over the next four years until her death in 1999, she used a diverse array of material: photographs, plaster casts of papayas, and those that connoted an Indic feminine, earthbound, agrarian cultural heritage such as long strips of dyed fabric, rice, prayer beads, farming implements, and Arabic text that she mounted directly on the floor. Utilizing elements of centuries-long Islamic heritage in India, as an Indian woman Muslim at the cusp of the twenty-first century, Hussain posed questions of citizenship, belonging, and nationhood, bringing into conversation Islamic anti-colonial, female Islamic protest, and the contemporary.

Hussain's conscious inclusion of the floor as essential receptacle and stage of her art offers an interplay and dialectic, an urgency gained by the artwork's contact with the earth, taken down from pedestals, stands, and walls. They reorient the viewer who has to bend, kneel, squat, or sit to take in the works, creating perspectives of intimate, informal engagement. Fronting a feminine-sexual position in her explorations, Hussain's choice of floor, I offer, also powerfully uses the earth to speak of women and their laboring bodies – the daily acts of cutting vegetables, cooking, cleaning, washing and dyeing clothes, even birthing, historically done seated on the floor across cultures – as they locate a continuum of feminine praxis across time and cultures, but also a specific location within the Indic in which she places her womanly and artist self. Rejecting the easel tradition and the Albertian window of classical western art, her works invite a powerful, raw engagement. This presentation will examine the ways in which bringing the works to the floor charges Hussain's art and the questions it poses on femininity, feminist-activist praxis, belonging, loss, and nationhood from the radical stakes as a female Muslim citizen-activist artist.

### Joy Sleeman

Joy Sleeman is professor of art history and theory at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London. A writer and curator, her research is focused on the histories of sculpture and landscape, especially 1960s and 1970s land art. With Nicholas Alfrey and Ben Tufnell, she co-curated the UK touring exhibition *Uncommon Ground: Land Art in Britain 1966-1979* (2013-14) and with artist Rebecca Partridge, is cocurator of the exhibition *Expanding Painting: Landscape after Land Art*, Hestercombe Gallery, Somerset, UK (2022-23). Her publications include the essays “Seven scenes and fourteen stills from the work of David Lamelas” (2017), “Lawrence Alloway, Robert Smithson, and earthworks” (2015), and “Land art and the moon landing” (2009), and the book *Roelof Louw and British Sculpture since the 1960s* (2018). Sleeman has a strong commitment to public engagement and developing scholarship and understanding of art related to landscape and environment in public arenas and artistic communities.

### Grounding sculpture: from earth alienation to planetarity

My paper launches from the observation that humans leaving Earth’s gravitational field to begin an extraterrestrial existence coincides with sculptors’ emphatic orientation toward the Earth’s surface.

As well as rearranging natural materials on the ground outside and inside the gallery, Richard Long implored us in 1972 to “look the ground in the eye”; Nancy Holt looked down to follow painted trail markers on the ground as she walked across Dartmoor in England in 1969; David Lamelas “signalled” objects with “dotted lines” of metal plates placed on the ground in urban parkland; and Roelof Louw placed cast-iron wedges at the juncture of architecture, street, and sidewalk in the streets around Park Lane in central London in 1968.

Are these coincidental orientations indicative of “Earth alienation,” in the terms of Hannah Arendt in “The Human Condition” (1958)? Or of a shift toward what Dipesh Chakrabarty has more recently termed “planetarity” (2021)? From this perspective, Chakrabarty sees human relations with the nonhuman aspects of the Earth as challenged and changed.

Can grounding sculpture play a role in decentering the human? The plinth elevated the individual human (still evident in recent protests that involved pulling statues off their pedestals), but the grounded sculpture can gather significance from the environs (whether institution, street, or landscape) and enmesh unhuman and human matter and material.

As human exploration of the moon and planets beyond Earth resumes, fifty years on from the first Apollo lunar landings, this paper revisits the grounding of sculpture.

### Elyse Speaks

Elyse Speaks teaches art history at the University of Notre Dame and her research and writing focus on the history of modern and contemporary sculpture and installation. Her research focuses on the intersection of installation, gender, and race in art from the 1970s through 1990s, particularly through the lens of



processes often considered to be amateur, blue-collar, untrained, or craft based. She has published essays in anthologies and journals including *American Art*, *Art Journal*, the *Journal of Modern Craft*, and *Sculpture Journal*.

### Process, Site, and Entanglement in the Sculpture of Maren Hassinger

A site courted by minimalists to expedite contiguity with the viewer, the floor first offered a means to activate the space of the gallery as a physical entity rather than an imaginary frame. Increasingly by the 1970s, direct connection with the floor facilitated a more complex form of viewer engagement. In the work of African American artist Maren Hassinger, the floor worked as both a literal site and form of transport. Even as her wire and cord sculptures articulate the physical space of the gallery or museum by setting up a clear dialogue with the floor, they court a set of alternative terms aligning with the symbolic language of exterior spaces. In her work from the 1970s, this rhetoric often feels decidedly urban, run-down, and incongruous with the rarefied gallery and natural connotations it otherwise asserted. It conforms to the post-Watts streets of Los Angeles and the junk aesthetic that they precipitated. But the emphasis Hassinger places on process, namely on active forms of weaving and binding, as well as unweaving and fraying, affects an unbroken alternation in the work, so that the literal (the space of the gallery) and its alternative (the decrepit urban) cannot be extricated. In this, process and floor operate as dyadic terms that affirm the abstract works' material presence as worked or labored objects, the physicality of which anchors any symbolic positions that they occupy.

### Marin R. Sullivan

Marin R. Sullivan (PhD, University of Michigan) is a Chicago-based art historian, curator, educator, and consultant. She specializes in the histories of modern and contemporary sculpture, especially its interdisciplinary, intermedial dialogues with photography, design, and the built environment. Sullivan is the director of the Harry Bertoia Catalogue Raisonné and co-curator of *Harry Bertoia: Sculpting Mid-Century Modern Life*, organized by the Nasher Sculpture Center. She is the author of *Alloys: American Sculpture and Architecture at Mid-century* (2022) and *Sculptural Materiality in the Age of Conceptualism* (2017) as well as numerous essays and articles in publications including *American Art*, *Art History*, *History of Photography*, the *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, and *Sculpture Journal*.

### When the Floor Falls Out

Sculpture has traditionally been a medium displayed on a plinth, but also one of volume and mass. While modern sculptors increasingly began to explore the sculptural potential of voids and holes, in the later twentieth century some started to do so directly in built or natural environments, literally sculpting into the ground upon which we walk, offering exhilarating, unsettling new perspectives on the spatial orientations of above/below, inside/outside, mass/void. This paper looks at the phenomenon of sculptors not just placing their works directly on the ground, but literally cutting or digging into it, embodied, for example in



works by Keith Arnatt, Andy Goldsworthy, Michael Heizer, Cristina Iglesias, Anish Kapoor, Mary Miss, Sekine Nobuo, and Doris Salcedo. These artists did not simply place objects on floors or make indents or superficial marks within it, but rather realized structural excavations, inhabitable holes, and deep fissures. While many of these projects explore specificities of place and the politics of landscape, they also frequently interrogate and evoke far more universal, existentialist concepts of death, loss, and unknown abysses, suggesting that sculpture can also ask questions about the invisible forces, histories, and spaces below our feet.

### Michael Tymkiw

Michael Tymkiw is senior lecturer in art history at the University of Essex, where he began working in 2015 after a postdoctoral fellowship at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max Planck Institut. He received his PhD and MBA from the University of Chicago and his BA from Yale University. Tymkiw’s research largely focuses on issues of spectatorship in modern and contemporary art and visual culture. His writings include *Nazi Exhibition Design and Modernism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), the recently completed book manuscript “Walking on Art, 1950s–Now” (currently under review), and various articles in journals such as the *Art Bulletin*, *Art History*, *Journal of Design History*, *Leonardo*, and *Word & Image*.

### Walking on Doris Salcedo’s Floor-Based Artworks

“The floor,” as Colombian artist Doris Salcedo has noted, “is a constant in my work. To me, that relationship interests me greatly, that [act of] looking down, which . . . humanize[s] us because we tend not to look, to forget what is there.” Consistent with this remark, Salcedo has created several works that are either embedded in the floor or placed just above this surface to function as floors in their own right. Such works include *Shibboleth*, a 2007 installation at London’s Tate Modern; *Palimpsest*, a 2013–17 installation commissioned by Madrid’s Museo Reina Sofia; and *Fragmentos*, a 2018 memorial artwork in Bogotá. Together, all three works use the floor to closely interrogate place-based identity: *Shibboleth* through the insertion of Colombian rock face into Tate Modern’s floor; *Palimpsest* through floor-based names referring to migrants who drowned trying to reach Europe; and *Fragmentos* through its metal tiles, made by melting weapons from guerillas who had fought in Colombia’s long-standing civil war. Although Salcedo stresses the importance of *looking* down at the floor, the three floor-based artworks just described also elicit embodied experiences that extend beyond vision and, for most spectators, involve ambulation. As such, this paper considers the stakes of walking on Salcedo’s floor-based artworks, and how this mode of spectatorial engagement provokes an affective yet unsettling connection between audiences and individuals who have endured political violence. As this paper argues, the act of walking on Salcedo’s floor-based works ultimately highlights a spectator’s own agency in altering the behavior and thinking upon which violence depends.

### Jonathan Vernon

Jonathan Vernon is an associate lecturer at The Courtauld Institute of Art, London. In 2020–21, he was a Leonard A. Lauder Postdoctoral Fellow at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, where he worked toward a book project examining the cultural politics of the sculptural fragment in the twentieth century. Last year, he was a visiting research fellow at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, where he conducted research for an exhibition exploring the “Brancusi paradigm” in British sculpture of the 1960s. His research has also been supported by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Vernon was awarded his PhD at The Courtauld in 2019 and served as the Ridinghouse Contributing Editor at the *Burlington Magazine* from 2014 to 2017. His latest publication, an article for *Sculpture Journal*, tells the story of how Brancusi’s sculpture became a tool of Cold War cultural diplomacy.

### “Brancusi is our model”: Scott Burton and the Cultural Politics of the Pedestal

This paper explores how cultural politics affected the coding of Constantin Brancusi’s pedestals, as mediators of the relationship between the sculptural object and the floor, in the United States and the sculptor’s native Romania.

In 1989, the artist Scott Burton curated one of the first-ever “artist interventions” in museum collections displays—a room of sculptures by Brancusi at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, titled *Burton on Brancusi*.

Now a common practice in reinterpreting objects and revising dominant art-historical narratives, such interventions were initially condemned by politically and culturally conservative commentators as acts of “postmodernist” symbolic violence. In Burton’s case, these voices focused on his decision to exhibit Brancusi’s sculptures and pedestals independently of one another, lending both a highly charged relationship to the floor.

In fact, this aspect of Burton’s display negotiated a number of complex points of cultural reference, from American minimalist and post-minimalist practices to European constructivist methodologies and Romanian craft traditions. Each of these paradigms had been invoked to articulate a relationship between the form and function of Brancusi’s pedestals and categories of national and political identity since the sculptor’s death in 1957.

As such, the development, execution, and reception of *Burton on Brancusi* made visible a set of ideological conflicts that had profoundly shaped the legacies of Brancusi and modernism as a whole. In doing so, Burton at once implicated sculpture’s relationship to the floor as the principal site of those conflicts and sought to recover the political possibility of the space between.

## Karla Black

Born in Alexandria, UK in 1972, Black creates her abstract and immersive sculptures through experimentation with unconventional materials, combining, for example, cotton, wool, sugar, paper, make-up, earth, toothpaste, or gold with more conventional foundations such as paper, cellophane, and plaster. Tactile, transparent materials are interspersed with natural and cosmetic substances, smudged and blurred by hand, or lightly sprinkled. She expands the parameters of sculpture through ephemeral worlds and affective layered landscapes, at once monumental but also weightless. These room-filling works are often spread on the floor or suspended from the ceiling to create entire environments. Despite their site-specificity, she considers them self-contained sculptures.

Black's preferred way to understand the world and communicate within it is through material experiences. For her, materiality is closely tied to psychological states of being; her unique practice is an exploration of materiality and texture, and the emotions they transmit. Her interplay of delicate abstract forms, pastel colors, and surprising materials demands a physical experience and encourages a new way of seeing and perceiving.

Black's solo exhibitions include the Fruitmarket, Edinburgh, (2021); Des Moines Art Center (2020); Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt (2019); Le Festival d'Automne, Paris (2017); Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Deurle, Belgium (2017); Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh (2016); Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (2016); Gemeentemuseum, The Hague (2013); Dallas Museum of Art (2012); and Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow (2012). Her many group shows have appeared at Deichtorhallen, Hamburg (2020); Lenbachhaus, Munich (2017); Centre Pompidou, Paris (2016); Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh (2014); Museum Ludwig, Cologne (2012); Carré d'Art-Musée, Nîmes (2011); Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn (2010); and Tate Britain, London (2009). Black represented Scotland at the Fifty-Seventh Venice Biennale (2017) and her work was shown at Manifesta 10 in St. Petersburg, Russia (2014). She was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2011. Her work is in major public collections such as the Tate, London; Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh; KiCo Collection, Munich; and others. She lives and works in Glasgow, UK.

### Joanna Fiduccia

Joanna Fiduccia is assistant professor in the history of art department Yale, where she specializes in European and North American modern art. Her scholarship and art criticism have been published in *Art History*, *October*, *Parkett*, *East of Borneo*, and *Artforum*. Her current book project is titled *Figures of Crisis: Alberto Giacometti and the Myths of Nationalism*.

### Alexis Lowry

Alexis Lowry is a curator at Dia Art Foundation, New York, where she is responsible for exhibitions, commissions, collection presentations, and public programs across Dia's sites and location.

### Molleen Theodore

Molleen Theodore is the associate curator of programs at the Yale University Art Gallery where she develops and oversees public programs. Molleen holds a PhD from the Graduate Center, City University of New York (CUNY), with a focus on the art of the 1960s and 1970s.