HETEROGENEOUS OBJECTS:
THE SCULPTURES OF MARTIN PURYEAR

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A DISSERTATION
PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY
OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

RECOMMENDED FOR ACCEPTANCE
BY THE DEPARTMENT OF
ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY
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June 2013
Abstract

Often described as a perplexing anomaly, originating – chronologically and aesthetically – in the murky interstice between minimal art of the 1960s and postmodern art of the 1980s, the crafted abstract sculpture of Martin Puryear (b. 1941) has long been considered remote from mainstream sculptural practices. Its joint appeals to such craft traditions as woodworking and rich allusions to the architectural schemes of non-Western cultures are often counted as the sources of its unique nature and appearance. Relying upon close formal analyses of Puryear’s sculpture alongside critical analyses of the dominant trends in postwar sculpture, I argue, however, that it does indeed engage such developments of his time as minimalism’s primary structure and commodity art’s appeal to borrowed forms. Yet, as I argue further, Puryear’s sculpture maintains its individuality on the basis that Puryear makes it with his own hands as opposed to relying upon processes of industrial fabrication.

Using construction as his method, preindustrial materials such as wood, rawhide and sod for his materials and a mix of western and non-Western sources as references, Puryear makes single yet formally complex sculptures which double metaphorically as complex subjects. These subjects—Puryear himself, mountaineer Jim Beckwourth, and Reconstruction era activist and educator Booker T. Washington—are the specific persons to which my dissertation gives focus. I posit all three African American subjects as model makers who construct culturally hybrid or heterogeneous selves, variously demonstrating that the term “African American,” as Puryear suggests, is not a biological marker of an essential sameness across persons. Registering the processes of their own making, Puryear’s sculptures demand their viewers to trace out visually their constitutive elements, the close combination of which produces the construct of a formally and culturally hybrid self. Making visible the processes by which identities become visible as processes of manual construction, I demonstrate that sculptural making articulates processes of
self-making with sculpture and subject alike constructed as layered, heterogeneous and complex configurations rather than monolithic solids. In the context in which artist and art alike assume the market strategies and material conditions of the culture industry, Puryear, as I argue, carves out an autonomous space for self and sculpture to produce meanings not delimited by consumer society.

With his body of sculpture a complex puzzle to sort, Puryear has scarcely been a subject of dominant art-histories, past or contemporaneous, which all too often theorize intelligible group identities and their prevailing heroes. The first book-length study of Puryear’s oeuvre, my dissertation seeks to remedy its occlusion from the literature on postwar art, sculpture in particular. It highlights Puryear’s role as a maker in postwar America and the implications of his self-proclaimed status as one for his sculptures and their viewing audience from the 1970s to the 1990s; it analyzes the mainstream sculptural trends contemporaneous to his own sculptural production; and assesses his sculptural project of self-making in relation to the strategies of commodity art practiced by his immediate peers and distant predecessors.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A dissertation can only be as conceptually complex as its subject and it is to Martin Puryear’s intellectually rich sculptures that this study owes its own complex relation of forms, cultural references, and philosophical ideas. Monographic attention to Puryear’s ingenious approach to sculpture is long overdue and I am certainly glad that it receives as much within these pages. I first encountered Puryear’s sculpture at the National Gallery of Art in Washington during my 2006-07 term there as an Academic Year Intern. It was at the Gallery that I met Ruth Fine, formerly Curator of Special Projects, whose early advice and moral support helped make this project possible. I thank Karyn Behnke of The David McKee Gallery in New York and Brennan Elston, formerly of the defunct Donald Young Gallery in Chicago for providing me with images and press on Puryear’s sculpture. Curator Michael Auping of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth in Texas was gracious enough to grant me a meeting to discuss Puryear’s work. His keen interpretations of Puryear’s Ladder for Booker T. Washington (1996) in particular, were crucial to the development of chapter 3. A special thanks goes to curator Lowery Stokes Sims of the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, whose brief comments made with regard to Puryear’s take on craft, were also crucial to the realization of chapter 3.

I am deeply grateful to Emily Talbot, formerly Curatorial Assistant of The Museum of Modern Art’s Prints & Illustrated Books and various staff of the print departments at the Yale University Art Gallery and the National Gallery of Art for granting me access to Puryear’s works on paper. I thank the Joslyn Art Museum of Omaha and the Museum of Modern Art Archives for showing me to crucial documentation of Puryear’s sculpture. I also express gratitude to the Smithsonian Institution Archives for giving me access to photographs of specimens once displayed in the Museum of Natural History in Washington, a magical place for Puryear.
At Princeton, my advisor Rachael DeLue’s incisive commentary gave critical shape to the final form of this study. I have always believed her critical acumen to be among her greatest scholarly strengths and it was my good fortune that this project received its assiduous attention throughout its development. I am also indebted to Hal Foster whose own perceptive writings on postwar sculpture deeply informed my own postwar study. A hearty thanks goes to Chika Okeke-Agulu and Irene Small for serving on my committee as well. Though not an official member of my committee, Spyros Papapetros provided me with rich conversation and feedback on chapter 1. I thank him. Thank you to fellow graduate students Miri Kim and Tessa Paneth-Pollak for patiently listening to me ramble on about Puryear in the early stages of this project and for productive conversation. Yetunde Olaiya and Chelsea Adewunmi kindly read and commented on chapter 1, whose suggestions only made it better. I thank Adedoyin Teriba for his friendship, corny musical references, and moral support without which I am sure I would not have endured the many challenges that graduate life at Princeton presented. Finally, The Department of Art & Archaeology’s Spears Fund and a departmental finishing grant provided crucial financial assistance to this project for which I am grateful.

At the Getty, Sabine Schlosser opened the doors of the Getty Research Institute to me, where I was provided an office of study nearly every winter and summer that I was in graduate school. I cannot thank her enough. Thank you to Karen Stokes and Rebecca Peabody, also of the GRI, for being the steadfast cheerleaders that they are. I am deeply grateful to my most loyal “Oxy” ally Courtney Williams for hours of fun conversation and commiseration. I thank my grandmothers Mary Maxwell and Judy Walker and mentor Teresa Warren for their sustained prayers and encouragement. Finally, I thank the members of the Maxwell family—Kevin Sr., Darlene, Tiffany, Kevin Jr. and Stephen Maxwell—for their unconditional love and support.
“Puryear is, above all, a maker,” declared the late critic Robert Hughes of TIME magazine.¹ “What makes him different is his hand. Puryear makes his sculptures – of cedar, oak and hickory, of poplar and of ash – with planes and saws and spokeshaves, with a cabinetmaker’s skill. Somehow he’s restored an unfamiliar warmth to the look of current art,” a critic for the Washington Post concurred.² “Above all, there is a personal touch, with faint echoes of African-American roots and ancient cultures, setting him apart from other mainstream sculptors. In an age of high-tech fabrication, his is a labor-intensive craftsmanly approach, incorporating folk traditions and motifs,” wrote another for Cleveland’s Plain Dealer in 1993.³ In a declarative statement on his “craftsmanly approach” to sculpture, Puryear finally proclaimed: “I am fundamentally a maker, in the physical sense, in the literal physical sense.”⁴

In an era in which the majority of sculptural production plays itself out in the strategies of commodity art which largely involve the appropriation and manipulation of existing cultural goods, Puryear’s “craftsmanly approach” to sculpture, a mode of physical making in which the sculptor’s hand is the primary agent of production, is particularly unique. In this study, I explore what it means in postwar America for a sculptor to be a “maker in the physical sense” and the implications of Puryear’s self-proclaimed status as one for his sculpture and its viewing

audience. Puryear’s sculpture is widely appreciated today for its traditional craft and technical competency, rich display of various woods and its formal allusions to the vehicles and vessels of non-Western cultures. In a manner distinct from most other mainstream contemporary sculptors, Puryear constructs his abstract yet highly referential sculptures with layers of wood that he cuts and assembles together, usually around a hollow center. While Puryear’s handwork and appeal to preindustrial materials appear specifically misplaced in our modern present, these practices were actually in close affiliation with those loosely identified as postminimalist around the time of his emergence in the early 1970s. Countering the austere geometry and anonymous surfaces of minimalism, these practices involved the performance of manual procedures on such raw substances as rope, leather, and felt, producing an aesthetic with which art historian and critic Jonathan Crary identified Puryear’s own handmade constructions,

At first this kind of log-cabin ‘minimalism’ seems an ironic comment on 1960s sculpture, but it is really part of a specifically ‘70s sculptural practice, seen in work by Jackie Ferrara, Jackie Winsor, and others. Often-noted features include a repetitive character of construction tied to a distinctly handmade look. It involves working with intrinsically simple shapes, then overlaying them with supplementary signs of the artist’s physical activity and obsessiveness. A detached reading of elementary forms in ‘real’ space is compounded with traces of a subjectivity, of an intensive production, with the residue of a kind of performance.5

Counted among the “others” churning out this “distinctly handmade look” were Siah Armajani, Alice Ayock, Mary Miss, Nancy Graves, Jene Highstein, Joel Shapiro, Ursula von Rydingsvard, and many more. Mining the legacy left by the postminimalists, they warped the idioms of minimalism such as its grid, gestalt and geometry, substituting minimalism’s cold anonymity with quirky touches of their own. Injecting minimalism’s “intrinsically simple shapes” and “repetitive character of construction” with referentiality and “traces of a subjectivity” that could only be wrought by hand work, these artists recovered traditional

techniques and natural materials. Similar to Puryear, they sought to reintroduce expressive content back into the formal qualities of sculpture that had been excluded by minimalism’s commitment to literalism, the object’s strict refusal to reference anything other than itself.

Despite Puryear’s shared affinities with his immediate predecessors and peers, critics continued to cast him distinctly as a loner, as one such critic articulated,

Puryear’s work has obvious affinities to the work of such artists as William T. Wiley, Lucas Samaras, Robert Morris (that is, the Robert Morris who works with rope), Eva Hesse and H.C. Westermann. This is not to say that his work is overly indebted to any one of the above artists, but that it explores a similarly kinky type of poetic vision. Puryear is, I suspect, a loner who will eventually develop a highly individual—if still quirky—style, far removed from the mainstream of modernist sculpture.6

This “kinky type of poetic vision” did not underscore a perverse eroticism so much as Puryear’s “quirky” intermingling of modernist values such as high abstraction with those of other material cultures including common craft. In the chapters that follow, I will attempt to illuminate what I identify and what critics have described as the “quirky” or “highly individual” nature of Puryear’s sculpture and its inextricable link to his status as a maker. “I believe that art,” Puryear once said, “is created by people, often by quirky people who often, I think, put these jogs and switchbacks in the historical continuum that people always want to believe in. There are always convoluted and complicated cul-de-sacs that don’t allow things to be read just as a linear evolution.”7 By drawing close attention to the materials, procedures, and sources of Puryear’s manual practice, I will make clear his own uneven and contradictory “jogs” toward external reference in an era of literalism and “switchbacks” to folk technology in an industrial age, the inevitably of which becomes apparent when we consider the sculptor’s formative artistic and cultural experiences of his no less “quirky” biography.

Born in 1941, in Washington, D.C., Puryear grew up in the early days of desegregation, attending a segregated public school until the sixth grade, when his family moved to the more affluent northeast quadrant. He found refuge from the city’s grim segregationist politics by spending the majority of his childhood in inner-city Washington reading up on topics such as the natural sciences, Native American culture, archery and ornithology, and drawing specific birds and animal species. In addition to these interests, Puryear also pursued the arts; while still in elementary school, he attended the children’s art classes of local artist, Cornelia Yuditsky and frequented many of Washington’s museums, including the National Gallery of Art, The Smithsonian Museum of History and Technology, the Washington Zoo where he drew animals, and the Natural History Museum which impacted him enormously. Books were also a staple of his curious diet: “During the last two years of high school and all through college I worked after school in a public library, and so for 7 years was surrounded by books—handling them, checking them, in and out and shelving them. I read a lot, on a variety of subjects. This has not stopped,” Puryear reminisced.  

Supplementing his book knowledge with practical experience, he made things such as classical guitars, small boats, and furniture, with his hands and the aid of instructive books, midway through his undergraduate years in his father’s basement workshop. Though he concentrated in painting at the Catholic University of America in Washington, he took a required sculpture course. There, he began to adapt his acquired woodworking and guitar making skills to his experiments with sculpture. However, before his spatial turn to the three-dimensional volumes of constructed sculpture was complete, Puryear would carve into the shallow recesses of woodblocks made for printing.

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8 Puryear, as quoted in a letter to the author, December 14, 2010.
Inspired by migratory, nomadic peoples, Puryear applied to the Peace Corps after graduating college in 1963, for which he served two years in the remote village of Segbwema, in southern Sierra Leone. Of this experience, he recalled matter-of-factly,

I was in Sierra Leone on the West Coast. I was teaching in a small mission school, way up in the country and the isolation was very good for me. I would occasionally get the odd art magazines from home, but I dropped out of what was going on in art. I drew incessantly and I made woodcuts. It was a very simple, non-technical way to come to grips with myself and to monitor my progress and change it.9

Prior to cutting up strips and poles of wood that he configured into fully rounded sculptures, Puryear cut graphic portraits of his immediate surroundings into the flat grounds of woodblocks, monitoring his “progress” from realism toward abstraction: “I continued to copy nature during this period, but in a more fragmentary way. Although I’d made a little sculpture during my college years, before I went to West Africa I thought of myself as a painter. I didn’t really focus on sculpture until I’d left Sierra Leone, and most of my work since then has been abstract,” he recounted in a recent interview.10 Parallel to his march toward abstraction, Puryear edged his way toward construction, the joinery techniques of which he adapted from African carpenters. In the wake of his new focus on sculpture, Puryear abandoned painting. “I still love to look at paintings, but I haven’t made a painting myself since leaving Africa in 1966,” he continued.11 Harnessing abstraction to construction, Puryear would go on to build abstract forms, the linear scaffolding of which was inspired by the carpentry of Scandinavian furniture design that he encountered in Sweden.

Puryear enrolled in the printmaking program of Stockholm’s Royal Swedish Academy in 1966. Of his move up to the frigid north, he recalled,

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11 Ibid.
I wanted a place in Scandinavia. I wanted to go to school. I wanted to continue studying. I got into the Royal Swedish Academy, which narrowed the choice down. I had been interested for a long time in Scandinavian woodworking. I was interested in their furniture designing in the sixties, Danish and Finnish design in particular. I thought it was really innovative, respectful of the material and function, and I wanted to see what that was all about. I did. I spent a lot of time in Denmark. In Stockholm I worked with James Krenov who had a very strong influence on my work. He was a man who had enormous respect for the material and an interesting person.12

Surprisingly, Puryear soon found that what he mistook for fine woodworking in Scandinavian furniture design was in fact the fine work of machinery. “It seemed to me that Danish furniture had evolved out of a craft tradition into modern production without losing the vitality of the original precedent—or so it seemed to me from a distance. What appeared to be a lot of care and craftsmanship at close range turned out be the result of very sophisticated technology.”13 However, while the various examples of Danish and Finnish furniture design that he encountered certainly modeled this deception, an exquisite chestnut and pear wood chest by James Krenov, housed in the Nationalmuseum, Sweden’s national art museum in Stockholm, did not. Taken by its superior workmanship, Puryear contacted the furniture maker who shared with him his commitment to handwork.

Inspired by Krenov’s example, Puryear finally “put the building and art impulse together.”14 Working constructively, utilizing fine woodworking techniques typically applied to furniture design, the sculptor began to cut, shape and join wood of diverse textures, into abstract forms in the late 1960s. Thus, succeeding years of experimentation with the two-dimensional media of painting and drawing, and printmaking, Puryear finally committed to sculpture. “I decided that building was a legitimate way for me to make sculpture, that it wasn’t necessary to

12 Ibid.
13 Puryear, as quoted in Hugh M. Davies and Helaine Posner, “Conversations with Martin Puryear,” in Martin Puryear (Amherst: University Gallery, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, 1984), 32.
14 Ibid., 30.
work in the traditional sculptural methods of carving or casting, said Puryear.\textsuperscript{15} An alternative to the conventional processes of “carving,” “casting,” and modeling of industrial metals, Puryear’s construction treated cut, shaped and joined layers of wood as so many building blocks for sculpture.

When not constructing his own work, Puryear made frequent visits to the Moderna Museet, also in Stockholm, to observe that of others. There, he saw various exhibitions of modern and contemporary art, including work by American Pop artists Claes Oldenburg and Andy Warhol, Afro-Chinese-Cuban painter Wilfredo Lam, and examples of work by such contemporary European artists as Tàpies, Jean Dubuffet and the Swedish sculptor Carl Friederick Reuterwärd. Encounters with these works were highly instructive for Puryear, in his move toward the creation of objects, as they helped him position his own artisanship against that of the broader landscape of modern and contemporary art.

Upon his return to the States, Puryear carried his handcraft with him to the graduate program at Yale. “I wanted to understand what was happening in [the United States] and plug into that,” he revealed.\textsuperscript{16} While studying with sculptor James Rosati and visiting artists Morris, and Richard Serra, and Salvatore Scarpitta, and taking courses in African and pre-Columbian art with Robert Farris Thompson and Michael Kampen, respectively, the newly minted sculptor learned that “what was happening” on the New York art scene largely included minimalism and postminimalist responses to it. Sympathetic to these responses which sought to recover the manual process and so-called natural materials lost to sculpture with the appearances of Duchamp’s readymade and the Constructivist model in early twentieth-century modernity, Puryear seized the material experience of physical making with aplomb. Yet, as apparent in

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Puryear, as quoted in Swift and Wittenberg, “An Interview with Martin Puryear,” 34.
Puryear’s sculpture, this process of making produces forms that reference the artifacts and shelters of foreign cultures, the likes of which find their sources in Puryear’s books, travels and museum visits.

A great deal is known about Puryear’s trips to Africa and Sweden in the early phase of his career and the various craft traditions that he learned and adapted from their local peoples to his art. The sculptor has discussed them both at length within the context of interviews for reviews and exhibition catalogues. However, critics have often treated such travels as the sole creative inspiration of his sculpture and thereby, its very subject. As a 1984 review reads,

Many artists are currently working in a style that deliberately reaches back to the archaic or primitive, but often their work is decorative, cluttered, and romantic. Puryear, on the other hand, is the real thing, an artist who has studied so-called “primitive” sources and digested them to the point where they are completely integrated in his work. Puryear is a Chicago-based sculptor in mid-career whose style has been influenced more by his travels than his formal study, although he was an art major at Catholic University in Washington, D.C., and holds a master of fine arts degree in sculpture from Yale. He served in the Peace Corps for two years, teaching art in a remote part of Sierra Leone. He learned as much as he taught there, and he writes in the exhibit’s excellent catalog, about the importance to him of ritual objects made by craftsmen working in a continuous tradition rather than a revival. After Africa, he studied printmaking and woodworking for two years in Scandinavia, a region whose tradition of high quality furniture-making appealed to him.17

Echoing these sentiments, New York Times writer Michael Brenson extended further priority to Puryear’s foreign travels as an influence on his art. “Throughout the work, there is a strong feeling for craft and link with tribal sculpture, which reflect the two crucial years Puryear, who is 43 years old spent, as a Peace Corps volunteer in Sierra Leone,” he wrote.18 Seconding this remark, he later said: “The importance of Puryear’s two years in Sierra Leone as Peace Corps volunteer, from 1964 to 1966, can hardly be overemphasized…The years in Sierra Leone provided him with a rich source of imagery, shaping his feeling for wood, for crafts, and for a

particular approach to craftsmanship – that of the carpenter, not the carver.”

The precedence given to foreign travel as the source of this “feeling for craft” in Puryear’s sculpture has not always bode well with Puryear whose practice, according to a 1991 interview, has been evolving in the States as well as abroad,

The time in Sierra Leone was 25 years ago, and it’s spoken about as if it were yesterday. That and my time in Sweden are the two determinants; they have become the myth behind the work, if I may say that. Some people like to understand it in terms of cultural polarities, Western culture versus tribal culture. And that may be a metaphor for a whole raft of thoughts. But I find it’s a little unfortunate because it eclipses the fact that I’ve been working and changing for all of the time since. My time in Africa was very strong, if for nothing else because it happened when I was young and was my first trip out of the country, my first time seeing another culture, my first time making contact with the source of my own people. That was powerful. But I don’t know that it got into my work in a way that you can say is direct. I mean, I have an enormous admiration for tribal art of all kinds and I had an incredible interest in African sculpture, although I have to feel its otherness very strongly. Being in Africa made me feel how American I am. I think I always knew it but was confronted with it when there. A lot of Afro-Americans have the feeling that Africa is ‘home’ in a certain sense. But we really are a hybrid people. We have a complicated and convoluted identity. The Western legacy is ours too.

Drawing up an analogous relationship between his African American identity and his sculpture, Puryear argues that both are inherently “hybrid,” cross-bred between the “complicated and convoluted” influences of western and non-western geography. No longer geographically specific, origins are rendered transhistorical and multicultural. As Puryear’s biography narrates, his commitment to handcraft actually originated in his childhood experiments making guitars in America and has grown along with his travels, domestic and abroad, ever since. As critics rightly point out, Puryear certainly has drawn upon ethnographic material, artifacts and collections as artistic sources for his sculpture. However, as this study emphasizes, these foreign sources are distilled and mixed with contemporary trends in American sculpture as well.

“In their materials, technique, and presence, the works of Martin Puryear epitomize current ideas and directions in American sculpture,” so wrote curator and critic Kellie Jones in the wake of Puryear’s sole representation of the United States in the 1989 São Paolo Bienal, where he was awarded the grand prize.21 “Though a personal language that is at once poetic and allusive as well as formally complex, Martin Puryear explores not only exterior physical but also interior psychological space, and reflects a new sense of wholeness and balance, a contemporary American sculpture that benefits from pluralism and internationalism,” she continued.22 Synthesizing minimalism’s reductive forms and earthwork’s natural materials with global sources, Puryear thus achieves a thoroughly integrated sculpture whose capacity for containing difference within itself is more characteristically American than commonly believed.

However, the subjects of Puryear’s integrated sculptures are not merely his technical facility with wood nor his close combination of cross-cultural sources into individual works of art, aspects of his practice that have been given considerable critical attention. Rather, as this study emphatically argues, the subjects of Puryear’s sculptures are the culturally complex persons to which they allude. Many of his pieces possess forms, materials, and symbolic content that integrate diverse and formal and cultural points of reference. Together, these references evoke the broad narrative strokes of the given person’s biography, drawing attention to its most distinctive aspects: the capacity of the subject to participate in multiple cultural communities simultaneously.

The specific persons to which this study attends are the sculptor Martin Puryear himself, mountaineer Jim Beckwourth, and the Reconstruction era activist Booker T. Washington.

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22 Ibid.
for Puryear, this has involved drawing upon the formal influences of objects encountered in the diverse countries to which he has traveled. Beckwourth, on the other hand, passed for a Crow Indian while trapping for fur as a frontiersman in the mid-19th century. As for Washington, this meant negotiating the social boundaries between the segregated communities of whites and blacks in Reconstruction era America. In this study, all three African American subjects are posited as model makers who construct culturally hybrid or heterogeneous selves, variously demonstrating that the term “African American,” as Puryear suggests, is not a biological marker of an essential sameness across persons.

By registering the processes of its own making, Puryear’s sculpture demands its viewers to trace out visually its constitutive elements, the close combination of which produces the construct of a formally and culturally hybrid self. In their direct experience of these sculptures (selves), his audience members collectively perceive the process by which identities become visible as processes of manual construction. Thus, as this study argues, sculptural making articulates processes of self making with sculpture and subject alike constructed as layered, heterogeneous and complex configurations rather than monolithic solids. I believe that this is the fundamental conceptual gesture of Puryear’s sculpture and the distinguishing feature of his body of work. Fusing separate traditions and ethnic groups into individual works, Puryear uproots his sculptures from any specific time and place, rendering any attempt to assign a native context, ethnic or otherwise, to any one of them difficult. Indeed, as one critic put it “Despite the current rhetoric about being true to one’s ethnic heritage, Puryear’s art does not try to preserve any specific past tradition; he appears to seek a unique way of defining himself as an individual, of creating a new identity inspired by many traditions.”

The resulting objects are cosmopolitan

23 Fred Camper, “Ideograms in a New Language,” Chicago Reader (December 5, 1991), ART Section 1, 34.
figures contained within single skins. It is important to foreground the signifiying capacity of Puryear’s sculpture as this aspect of his work is so often neglected in the critical literature on his work. In other words, the excessive attention given to his craft fails to consider the fact that Puryear’s sculptures are made to mean. And what they mean is significant: though we may appear as simple, surface subjects to others, we are culturally transformative beings rather than monolithic, fixed givens. It is important to foreground the capacity of Puryear’s artisan-based sculpture to mean something of such significance as commodity art is the primary subject of literature on postwar sculpture. The implication of this uneven focus on commodity art is that art is incapable of saying something more unique than the mass-produced goods with which we live. With this study, I hope to show, as Puryear’s sculpture suggests, that there is an autonomous space for self and sculpture to produce meanings not delimited by consumer society.

The method through which I consider Puryear’s corpus is selective. Rather than a comprehensive survey of his sculpture, this study narrows its interpretative focus to three select groupings of works. Each sculptural grouping is centrally organized around one of the three named subjects and represents the formal and thematic concerns of Puryear’s sculptural production in one of the three decades (1970s, 1980s, and 1990s) discussed. Elaborated over the course of a single chapter, each grouping is shown to represent the various ways in which Puryear’s sculpture conforms to and works against the prevailing trends of three-dimensional art in an individual decade. In my effort to grant clarity and depth to our understanding of his sculptures’ entwined engagement with self-creation, I engage in a close formal analysis of his works that is supplemented thoroughly with contextual analysis. Establishing the framework through which I speculate about this engagement are the critical literatures on historical and contemporary trends in American sculpture across the three decades discussed as well as critical

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24 This dissertation does not consider Puryear’s outdoor public commissions or his miscellaneous print projects.
reviews of Puryear’s sculpture. I treat these textual sources comparatively, assessing the similarities and dissimilarities between what are perceived to be the aims of Puryear’s sculpture and that of his contemporaries. Together, they create the critical context in which Puryear works, illuminating how his sculpture is positioned in relation to his immediate and distant predecessors. However, I do not give this literature the final word as I assess such outsider opinions of his work against Puryear’s work itself. Out of the murky interstices between my comparisons, emerges my own interpretive model which grasps Puryear’s sculpture not as a remote body of work whose craft is undeniably keyed to a kind of “primitive” difference but rather as material evidence of Puryear’s participation both inside and outside of mainstream sculptural trends. In so doing, I look to Puryear’s own interpretations of his work, which I often take to be unproblematically explanatory of it, for support. For instance, I take him at his word when he says that construction’s appeal is its allowance for the working out of ideas prior to their being pieced together. It is indeed because of Puryear’s commitment to puzzling out his sculptural ideas beforehand that I take him to be an artist in full or near-full awareness of his artistic process, its sources and aims, and therefore its most keen interpreter to date. However, there are certain conceptual dimensions of his work heretofore unseen by both Puryear and his critics that are critically elaborated here by me: Puryear’s intense preoccupation with his own complexity as made manifest in his sculpture.

The first chapter of this study titled “Skin as Solid,” discusses Puryear’s freestanding sculptures of the 1970s whose biomorphic forms appear carved but are in fact constructed. Assembled from strips, poles and pieces of wood that are arranged into convex, concave and planar surfaces, these structures are made by means of cutting, shaping, fitting and overlapping. These hollow structures wear their heterogeneity on their skin, bearing tracks, traces, textures,
and patterns of myriad materials, references and methods of making. Yet the richness of Puryear’s composite surfaces evokes a plain yet vexing question: namely, why recode the skin—the mere surface of things—to articulate just how the rich the self can be? This chapter addresses this question, claiming that the artist coats the skin of his sculpture with mixed layers of allusion, materials and techniques, all of which he has acquired on his travels over time, to demonstrate that the subject surfaces in the world as surface. Through a close analysis of his freestanding sculpture Self (1978), I argue that modern sculpture, more broadly, establishes analogy with the human subject as a means to investigate how the latter produces meaning, illuminating the relationship between the individual self and its collective reception.

The second chapter titled “Sculpture as Verbal Experience,” examines Puryear’s sculpture of the 1980s, giving particular attention to his Equation for Jim Beckwourth (1980), a multipart site-specific sculptural installation of three existing works (For Beckwourth (1980); Rawhide Cone (1980); and Some Lines for Jim Beckwourth) for the 77-foot-long glass-walled Bergman Gallery of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in early 1980. Focusing closely on the no longer extant installation, a composition of geometrical equivalences that narrates the cross-cultural ventures of African American mountaineer and War Chief of the Crow Indian tribe Jim Beckwourth, I demonstrate just how its formal qualities signify its titular content. In 1854 and 1855, the illiterate Beckwourth orally dictated his own autobiography to a one “wandering newsman” Thomas D. Bonner who translated it into the text later published as the memoir Mountain Man, Indian Chief: The Life and Adventures of Jim Beckwourth (1856). In 1980, Puryear then transformed the broad narrative strokes of the memoir into a pictorial equation: a geometrical configuration of worked sculptural elements whose formal utterances (discrete material properties) were not meant to be heard as oral speech but rather seen
as sensuously concrete visual forms. Horizontally arranged, these visual forms produce lateral connections among them, the greater significance of which is contingent upon the positioning of these forms in space. Thus, his equation requires the skill of direct observation rather than epistolary literacy (the capacity to read the written letter) for comprehension. Puryear’s hands rematerialize Beckwourth’s story directly as sculpture, making it the very medium through which the narrative is articulated. A lived past dictated to others through sculpture, *Equation for Beckwourth*, this chapter argues, is a sculptural form of spoken experience.

The third and final chapter of this dissertation titled “Social Progress as Manual Process,” considers Puryear’s sculptural production during the 1990s, particularly his *Ladder for Booker T. Washington* (1996). Booker T. Washington, the Reconstruction era activist and educator to which the sculpture’s title alludes, advocated self-advancement through manual work in his day. Adamantly opposed by some African American intellectuals, who believed that scholarly education, rather than the acquisition of vocational and domestic skills, should be the primary foundation for political activism, Washington confronted some of the same prejudices against manual work as Puryear while studying with minimalists and conceptualists at Yale. This chapter will investigate the politics of manual work and assess its capacity to be an effective vehicle for social progress, or at least a metaphor for such progress, in the case of art.
SKIN AS SOLID

Self

In *Young American Artists: 1978 Exxon National Exhibition* at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, one of a near-annual series of exhibitions committed to showcasing emerging American talent, Martin Puryear debuted his newly completed freestanding sculpture *Self* (1978) of over five feet (Fig.1). A hulking black monolith, roughly conical in shape, *Self* is at once profile and three-dimensional structure. Its silhouette of organic irregularity transforms from flat, abstract figure to a rounded presence of bodily plenitude once circumambulated. As with minimalism’s pure forms, the viewer comes to grasp its rounded frame as his or her body perceives it in real time and space. To view *Self* is to witness its vertical profile morph into a bulbous skullcap that eventually deforms into a bulky back hump. Engrossed in this transformative play between the sculpture’s straight edges and curvilinear shapes, the viewer may or may not know that its facade of formal unity is quite deceptive. While this black singular figure is massive and carved in appearance, it is actually hollow and constructed of heterogeneous parts.

Puryear later described the deceptive character of this sculpture as stemming from its embodiment of “contradiction, which allows for…the ability to contain opposed ideas”: “So on the face of it *Self* is organic, almost as if carved out of a block, but in reality it was made over a form, built in layers. It was very important to me that the piece not be made by removal or by abrading away material, but rather that it be produced by a more rational process. It was put together piece by piece…*Self* is all curve except where it meets the floor at an abrupt angle. It’s
meant to be a visual notion of the self, rather than any particular self—the self as a secret entity, as a secret, hidden place,” he explains.²⁵

A hollow shell, the “secret entity” that Puryear described is actually public and its composite nature private. Thus constituted of formal “layers” while striking a monolithic image, Self consists of concomitant contraries whose balance is contained within the space of a single, unified shape. Substituting minimalism’s own cubic shape for a metaphorical subject (self), Puryear made a pivotal turn away from the precedent, which claimed “allusion” and “illusion” anathema to its’ own “transparently real objects.”²⁶ “I value the referential quality of art,” Puryear once said, “the fact that a work can allude to things or states of being without in any way representing them.”²⁷ Allusion (from the Latin allusio meaning “a play on words” or “game”), as Puryear suggests, calls physical things to mind without explicit reference to them, a capacity that is a distinguishing feature of his abstract sculpture. For instance, though Self does not present a human subject, its titular allusion to personhood implicitly draws it into comparative relation with one. Therefore, in his displacement of an abstract concept onto his sculpture based on key correspondences between the two, Puryear liberally employed metaphoric thinking in his work. “Metaphoric thinking,” so Jonathan Crary argued, was central to the art of the 1970s which allowed for a “plurality of significations.”²⁸ Thus, Puryear’s placement of titles like “Self” onto his sculptures endowed them with broader significances that extend well beyond their abstract forms yet don’t delimit the number of ideas that they engage.

²⁵ Puryear, as quoted in Hugh M. Davies and Helaine Posner, “Conversations with Martin Puryear,” in Martin Puryear, exh.cat. (Amherst: University Gallery, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, 1984), 23.
“Three dimensions are real space,” wrote artist and art critic Donald Judd, “That gets rid of the problem of illusionism…” which is to say, the figure / ground relationships characteristic of the pictorial. Though *Self* explicitly alludes to rather than actualizes a self, neither it, nor the minimalists for that matter, could effect a complete elimination of figuration. Figural in basis (it possesses a vertical axis, front and back) and metaphorical in subject (titled “Self”), Puryear’s sculpture strikes a singular image, albeit deformed, positioned atop the ground of the “real” exhibition space. Though it may not formally resemble a human figure, its life-size stature prompts us to engage it as such. Hiding its interior from view, the vacuous *Self* stimulates efforts at visual penetration past its opaque shell en route to its mysterious center. Yet, the stubborn opacity of its shell inevitably cast the viewer’s gaze back out onto its hard surface, about which the keys to its secret contents are diligently sought. In so doing, *Self* externalizes meaning and the very subject to which it alludes.

In her seminal “Sense and Sensibility: Reflection on Post ’60s Sculpture” (1973), Rosalind Krauss argued that the externalization of meaning and self were central goals of the minimalists. She claimed that minimalism’s “expurgation of illusionism” made “meaning itself a function of surface—of the external, the public, or the space that is in no way a signifier of the a priori, or of the privacy of the intention.” Thus, in contradistinction to modernist art’s idealist model of consciousness, a model of meaning in which the private space of the artist’s mind functions as illusionist space for the ideas that form there (not unlike painting whose illusionistic space props up the figures that occupy it), Krauss argued that the phenomenologically based work of minimalism insisted upon meaning as a function of the body’s experience of the surfaces.

30 Rosalind Krauss, “Sense and Sensibility: Reflections on Post-60s Sculpture,” *Artforum* 12, no.3 (November 1973), 47.
that occupy the world. Using Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s influential *Phenomenology of Perception* as a critical guide, Krauss further contended that minimalism not only did away with the notion of private meaning but a private self that exists prior to its interface with others in the world: “I must be the exterior that I present to others,” Merleau-Ponty wrote, “and the body of the other must be the other himself.”

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Puryear’s *Self*, along with other examples of post-minimalist sculpture, gave sculptural form to this critical preoccupation with the public dimension of human subjectivity. Yet if the self is generally considered to be the unique psychological interior of a being, what did it mean for Puryear to construct his “visual notion of the self” as an empty shell? Why did Puryear consider *Self*’s construction “…piece by piece” a “…more rational process,” that is to say, a process in which the work was “fairly well conceived beforehand” and later pieced together rather than spontaneously arrived at? 32 And how might one reconcile his conception of the self as simultaneously empty, yet, a “hidden place”? In my analysis of *Self*, I wish to consider these important questions within the context of minimalism’s own preoccupation with the externalization of meaning and the self throughout the early to mid-1960s. A hollow shell, Puryear’s *Self* thematizes the externalization of human subjectivity, yet, as I will argue, it does so in ways that render its ostensibly simple surface-subject subtly layered, polymorphous and complex.

In an accompanying interview to the Guggenheim show, Puryear elaborated upon his early commitment to depicting single subjects. “In my earliest work,” he remarked, “when I was really not even aware of being an artist, I was always selecting a single image and putting it in

32 Puryear, “Martin Puryear,” 56.
the middle of a picture.” Preceding his sculptural production, Puryear’s busied himself with experiments in drawing and printmaking, all of which displayed a loose adherence to the figure / ground arrangement, offering up a “single image” for the eye to circulate around. For instance, while serving as a Peace Corps volunteer in Sierra Leone, he included his own drawings of the local peoples in the letters that he sent back home to his parents. “I didn’t have a camera so my whole enterprise was drawing. I sent drawings back home,” Puryear remembered. Throwing the two-dimensional surface of drawing into relief, he made woodcuts, *African boy* (1965) prominent among them (Fig. 2).

A blocky black profile of a boy’s head emerges from the left-hand side of the cream-colored page. Yet in the center of this black surface, is a carved interior figure untouched by black ink, whose outline vaguely mimics that of its carrier. With a large kidney bean-shaped head and a comparatively diminutive torso, this light interior figure is striking against the dark background in which it floats, prompting the eye to settle upon it; one cannot help but to contemplate this single void amidst the abyss of milky black ink, a fetal-like form budding inside the expanse of the boy’s mind. Though visually rich, these paired organic forms are equally abstract—evacuated of their interior detail, leaving only the outline of their structures apparent.

*African Boy* visualizes succinctly Puryear’s turn to abstraction in the 1960s, a turn with which he reckoned initially, as he claims, in two-dimensional terms,

I was always a maker of things. I guess in my early work I was a painter and was depicting the real world. When I left the country and went to Africa I think that was when I really earnestly, in two-dimensional terms at least – in drawings, in prints and a little bit of painting – found a way to deal with what I had recently discovered about abstraction. At that time in the early sixties, I was very late in coming to grips with abstraction.  

33 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
This turn, however, was a gradual one as evidenced in his comments made in a recent interview,

So by the time I went to college I’d taught myself to copy the look of things quite faithfully in various mediums, including oils, watercolor, and egg tempera, but in college I found myself confronting abstraction for the first time. I didn’t understand abstract art at first, and I didn’t consider it very valid. I soon learned, however, that the representational art that I was most drawn to had qualities that depended less on the sleight of hand of the artist in reproducing the look of things in nature than on how the work of art was structured. This allowed me to begin to relax the death grip I had on verisimilitude as the crux of what constituted art for me. It felt like I was recapitulating the history of modernism in my own struggle during this period, grappling with the transition in my own work from realism to something more abstract.\textsuperscript{36}

In this pithy recapitulation of his move from realism to abstraction, Puryear summarizes it as an ideological turn away from “verisimilitude” to “structure.” In other words, for Puryear, the crux of art was no longer illusive (“reproducing the look of things”) but structural (linear scaffolding). This transition from illusion to structure, the latter of which Puryear harnessed to the scheme of abstraction, marked what Hal Foster termed the “crux of minimalism,” which sought “to exceed painting altogether in the creation of objects.”\textsuperscript{37} Along with the 1960s sculptural movement, Puryear pushed this term \textit{structure} past the two-dimensional surface of the picture plane into the three-dimensional realm of real space where transformed into volume, it could be circumnavigated.\textsuperscript{38} Case in point: though Puryear continued to draw and produce woodcuts while learning old joinery methods in Africa, he virtually abandoned two-dimensional media to commit to sculpture soon after.

Immediately following this recent commitment, Puryear encountered minimalism for the first time at the Venice Biennale in 1968. “At that point, Minimalism became a strong clue for

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\item\textsuperscript{38} This move from two-dimensional surface to the literal space of three-dimensionality was prefigured by Picasso’s own cubist construction \textit{Guitar} (1912). For a discussion of Picasso’s transition from collage to relief forms, see Clement Greenberg, “Collage,” in \textit{Art and Culture: Critical Essays} (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1961), 70-83.
\end{itemize}
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me about how powerful primary forms could be,” he recalled. Soon after his enrollment at Yale for graduate study in 1969, Puryear embraced the cogency of thought exhibited by minimalism’s “primary form” but rejected the impersonal working methods by which it was produced. He declared candidly,

The hands mean too much to me. The risk-taking in the process of building and making something means too much to me. I never did Minimalist art, I never did, but I got real close… I looked at it, I tasted it and I spat it out. I said, this is not for me. I am a worker. I’m not somebody who’s happy to let my work be made for me and I’ll pass on it, yes or no, after it’s done. I could never do that.

Minimalists often contracted industrial fabricators to execute their works, assuming a “hands-off” approach to artistic practice. Yet, for Puryear, the hands meant “too much” as did the “risk-taking in the process of building and making,” which ultimately prompted him to substitute the role of manager for “worker,” making himself the primary agent of his work’s creation.

Puryear enacted his ecstatic embrace of manual labor and the risk that it entails in his creation of *Some Tales* (1975-78), a wall-mounted counterpart to the freestanding *Self* (Fig.3). Consisting of six elements attached to the wall, the sculpture consists of what Puryear described as “a group of long, extremely attenuated wooden things, some of them actually split from saplings, from young trees, and worked the way a person would in say, fashioning a handle for a scythe, shaving it down until it was extremely attenuated. In this group the pieces are very close to their origins, very close to nature.”

These six “extremely attenuated wooden things” of yellow pine, ash and hickory horizontally stacked as if on a wall rack, resemble the very hand tools used to make them. For instance, figured prominently amongst the elements is a dark saw-like piece hacked from a large...
beam and notched with protruding teeth. While resembling an object of utilitarian value, the saw’s subtle shift in orientation renders it useless: its “teeth have a very slow, incremental change in direction,” Puryear illuminated.\textsuperscript{42} This illogical shift undermines the tool’s capacity for accurate incision, thereby, rendering it a mere object of aesthetic contemplation. “If they’re tools, then their function is to effect visual responses, If I’m fortunate, spiritual responses, too,” Puryear remarked.\textsuperscript{43} Thus, this impossible tool was not meant to bore through hard matter but rather picture a tool that strikes its contemplative viewer as at once strange and uncannily familiar.

To contemplate the saw’s process-oriented nature, however, is not merely to recount the visible strokes that hacked it into shape in the first place but to imagine the rough sequence in which the strokes were made. In his retrospective account of Some Tales, Puryear alluded to this order of events, a progression of which bears comparison to the plot structure of stories,

It is hard to describe “Some Tales.” I think there were six pieces, all very much about time. They are all attenuated and have increments along a length. I am reminded of the Andean quipu, those mnemonic devices that were used by the Inca Indians to tell stories. These are used in many places in Africa by the tale bearer, the history bearer, who has in his mind an incredible store of events. And he has this device — a knotted cord with pendant cords hanging from it, each knotted. He can finger this and recount the stories.\textsuperscript{44}

Closely analogized with the “pendant cords” of the Andean quipu, a story telling device which will be discussed at greater length in chapter 2, the tool-like tails of Puryear’s sculpture are indeed tales of their own making. The notches, cuts and “increments” that occur along the physical lengths of these individual tales visually record the succession of hand movements with which Puryear worked across them, as well as the orientation of the edge tools with which he did so. Thus a sculpture and story simultaneously, Some Tales registers the formal progress of

\textsuperscript{42} Martin Puryear, as quoted in a lecture given at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, 1980. The Museum of Modern Art Archives.

\textsuperscript{43} Puryear, as quoted in Shearer, “Martin Puryear,” 54.

\textsuperscript{44} Puryear, as quoted in Swift and Wittenberg, “An Interview with Martin Puryear,” 33.
manual process. This bold registration of facture is the precise vehicle, through which Puryear articulates the content of his art as he claimed in 2003,

…my vehicle, typically, is to make work that is about the presentation of the work itself and what went into the making of the work as an object. And there’s a story in the making of objects. There’s a narrative in the fabrication of things, which to me is fascinating. Not as fascinating, perhaps, as the final form or the final object itself, but I think by working incrementally, there’s a built-in story in the making of things, which I think can be interesting. 45

Thus the “built-in story” narrated by the jagged teeth of Some Tales is not a fictional account of literary peaks and valleys but hand-incised notches whose initial left to right orientation proposes the very order in which they were made. Yet, while the work’s broader formal arrangement reveals that Puryear’s manual process occurred over time, our experience of the work persists in time as well. Time or progress is an inherent dimension of the literary arts, written works of a given language, period or culture, as they do not reveal their contents in their entirety in one instantaneous glance. With its various lengths of wood mounted on the museum wall as meaningful lines to be comprehended, Some Tales facilitates a temporalized mode of viewing in which the viewer’s eyes are prompted to read rather than see the work. The wiggles, peaks and curves of the two bottom left figures that run horizontally across the wall evoke the undulations of cursive and the personality of the autographic signature, prompting the viewer’s mobile eyes to scan them directionally from left to right, right to left, line to line, to crack their hidden meanings. With the museum wall redefined as page, in this instance, sculpture is reframed by writing whose meaning is determined in the process of reading over time.

While Some Tales anticipated the durational experience of the three-dimensional, polymorphic Self, Arkon Bwah (1973), a polyvalent piece of wall sculpture, which Puryear referred to as a “real archetypal notion of a bow—a bent, wooden bow” prefigured the time-

laden manual process by which Puryear would eventually arrive at \textit{Self} (Fig. 4).\footnote{Puryear, Skowhegan lecture, 1980.} A semi-circle of wood whose radius is delineated by a horizontal line of hemp, this work hangs on the gallery wall as if awaiting a beholder to put it to use. Yet, though static, the angle of the bow makes it look like a bow in motion – since it’s at about 180 degrees, as if it is being pulled back by an invisible hand – as if it is performing on its own accord without an archer. While this arc of willow appears as a naturally-occurring shape, its contours were actually laminated into place. Wood lamination is a process in which a mixture of thin wood strips is sanded down and glued together under pressure to form a smooth, cohesive unit. Thus, this unitary shape is constructed out of heterogeneous elements—hemp rope, mixed layers of wood, organic (arc) and geometric (line) form. Similarly to \textit{Self}, it retains the formal unity of abstraction though constructed out of heterogeneous parts.

This appeal to processes of lamination marked Puryear’s turn away from rudimentary methods of making toward a more sophisticated process of construction. Though the sculptor learned joinery and fine woodworking in Africa and Sweden, respectively, in the mid-1960s, he initially eschewed these artisanal techniques for less complicated means of making. A simple procedure performed on materials, sculpture for Puryear was a merely a matter of carving and assembling pieces of wood together.\footnote{Paul Richard, “A Test in Connoisseurship,” \textit{Washington Post} (January 29, 1972): C8.} In search of a rationale or dictate for his early work in the 1970s, Puryear performed what he termed “dumb” activities upon materials such as trimming, blade cutting and carving.\footnote{Puryear, Skowhegan lecture, audio recording.} Results were literal, like his 1972 \textit{Fir Beams (Spliced Stack)} whose title plainly describes the cantilevered stack of four fir beams of which it consists (Fig. 5).

Assuming the literalist sensibility of minimalism, Puryear’s fir beams registered the aggressive
cuts that sliced them, revealing the elementary process and constitutive materials by which they were produced. Thus, like Some Tales, Fir Beams recorded the basic methods of its construction. Puryear, however, eventually abandoned deskilled labor and his fundamental preoccupation with making processes of construction visible, as it distracted the viewer from “intense formal concentration” and the perception of an “intact objectivity.”\textsuperscript{49} Instead, he took up a new “version of assembly,” which curator John Elderfield described as “…very different from the tradition that stretched from Pablo Picasso to Smith”: “[This was] a matter of building solid (or solid looking), simple (or seemingly simple) objects in space and sometimes across a wall. Puryear’s sculptures were assembled from strips, poles and pieces of (usually) wood—straight, curved, and often spliced together—arranged in linear sequences or, more often, formed into convex, concave and planar surfaces by means of cutting, shaping, fitting, abutting, laminating, and overlapping.”\textsuperscript{50} This “version of assembly” resulted in objects that appear solid though in fact hollow, as does Self.

\textit{Self} (1978)

Like its sculptural antecedents, Self, too, is an aggregate structure of layered strips of wood. Borrowing from boatbuilding techniques known as cold-molding and strip-planking, Puryear created the curving, rounded surfaces of the volumetric yet mass-less sculpture by carefully shaping and gluing thin wood strips to a framework he built. After stapling them into place until dry, he then removed the staples and the underlying framework, leaving only the skin

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 19.
behind.\textsuperscript{51} Constructed by boatbuilding technique, this skin is meant to float, as it appears to do at times, along the museum floor. Yet this sense of sculptural movement to which Self gives visceral form was already latent in minimalism of the 1960s.

“There is no question that so far as an image goes, (Minimalist) objects removed themselves from figurative illusions. But in a more underlying way, in a more perceptual way, they did not. Probably the main thing we see all at once, or as a thing, is another human figure…The specific art object of the sixties is not so much a metaphor as it is an existence parallel to it. It shares the perceptual response, we have towards figures,” so Robert Morris explained in his “Notes on Sculpture,” a series of articles originally published in \textit{Artforum} (1966-69).\textsuperscript{52} Through this analogy, Morris animated the “specific art object,” designating it a surrogate “existence” implicitly filled with the life and breath of humans. Aligning human figuration with mobility (the figure is “most always in motion,” Morris claims), he explained “undoubtedly why the subliminal, generalized kinesthetic responses are strong in confronting object art.”\textsuperscript{53} Basically, we move around the specific object (figure), as we imagine it moves around us.

\textit{Phenomenology}

In his landmark writings on phenomenology, Maurice Merleau-Ponty insisted upon the centrality of movement to the body’s experience of surfaces and its determination of their meaning. “Phenomenology is the study of essences;…the essence of perception, or the essence


of consciousness,” he wrote.\textsuperscript{54} “Essence,” for Merleau-Ponty, was the basic, real and invariable nature of a given thing, whose knowledge could only be achieved through the human body’s engagement with the world in real time and space. He proceeded: “…the world is ‘already there’ before reflection begins—as an inalienable presence.”\textsuperscript{55} The implication is that the world is in a perpetual state of becoming; its essences though “already there” only disclose themselves to us as we experience them. Installations of Robert Morris’ \textit{Untitled} (L-Beams), three identical eight-foot fiberglass “Ls” variously arranged enacted this very dynamic; though identical, each shape assumed a different appearance according to the conditions of the gallery space and the viewer’s alternating position within that space (Fig. 6). Viewer engagement with Morris’ beams thus attests to Merleau-Ponty’s provocative claims: “by re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world,” human bodies attain the capacity “to return to the ‘things themselves’” and “describe” them through physical encounter.\textsuperscript{56}

Merleau-Ponty’s view of the world, however, not only posited “things themselves” as objects of disclosure but human beings as well,

…the alter ego is a paradox. If the other is truly for himself alone, beyond his being for me, and if we are for each other and not both for God, we must necessarily have some appearance for each other. He must and I must have an outer appearance, and there must be, besides the perspective of the For Oneself—my view of myself and the other’s of himself—a perspective of For Others—my view of others and theirs of me. Of course, these two perspectives in each one of us, cannot be simply juxtaposed, \textit{for in that case it is not I that the other would see, nor he that I should see}. I must be the exterior that I present to others, and the body of the other must be the other himself.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 33.
For Merleau-Ponty, “consciousness” was a “meaning-giving operation” that involved the assignment of meanings to things in the world as they are experienced.\textsuperscript{58} Surface—the social interface—by which such experience is mediated is principally perceived through the eyes of others: “…it is not I that the other would see, nor he that I should see,” Merleau-Ponty wrote. Thus, consciousness (the self) comes into existence as it surfaces in the world. This conflation of the self and surface implies, I believe, that skin is solid—the self is the exterior that it presents to others understood only through experience. Therefore, there is no inner man to the “Others” viewing the surface figure, only an inner man to himself.

Based on such assertions, Krauss staked a great claim for the continuity between minimalism’s “externality of language and therefore of meaning” and post-minimalism’s new interest in “the discovery of the body as a complete externalization of the Self.”\textsuperscript{59} Elaborating upon Michael Fried’s notorious alignment of human presence with the stage presence of minimalist objects perceived by viewers in real space, Krauss asserted that interiority is a function of exteriority. “Part of the meaning of much of Minimal sculpture issues from the way in which it becomes a metaphorical statement of the self understood only in experience,” she remarked.\textsuperscript{60} As our diverse facades are perceived in real time and space, our identities are rendered variable—a series of shifting impressions that alter as they are encountered.

Inviting phenomenological participation from the viewer to derive its meaning, Self’s spatially compressed figure, too, facilitates an optical and bodily relationship between itself and its audience. “Such are the simpler forms that create strong gestalt sensations. Their parts are bound together in such a way that they offer a maximum resistance to perceptual separation,”

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 32.  
\textsuperscript{59} Rosalind Krauss, “Sense and Sensibility: Reflections on Post-60s Sculpture,” 49.  
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
Robert Morris wrote.\textsuperscript{61} Though a wooden shell, constituted of crisscrossing layers of red cedar and mahogany, these layers are combined, compressed and smoothed over in black paint. Thus, \textit{Self} is perceived as a whole black shape as opposed to an open space of interrelated parts. However, as Morris contended, “simplicity of shape does not necessarily equate with simplicity of experience. Unitary forms do not reduce relationships.”\textsuperscript{62}

\textit{Self}’s metamorphic potential attests to this claim as the sculpture momentarily alludes to various natural and cultural phenomena in its individual form over time. For instance, what appears to be an eroded rock from the front, morphs into the rump of an animal seated comfortably on its hind feet when seen from the back. Perceived at the fore, the sculpture appears as a seamless shiny black bullet in all of its striking verticality. Thus, as the viewer works their way around \textit{Self} over time, their eyes watch its form morph from a rock into an animal, an animal into a bullet and a bullet into a self-at-large. Thus, time is thoroughly embedded in the experience of \textit{Self} as it reveals its various personages sequentially rather than at once. With this integration of sequential identities into a single, sculptural object, Puryear, I believe, works to articulate that individual selves produce multiple subjectivities. Thereby, though single and compressed like the human figure, the self to which Puryear’s surface-subject alludes, is shown to be complex: formally layered and constituted of the multifaceted personages that humans share.

Nevertheless, this individual richness and complexity that \textit{Self} describes resides exclusively on its surface. “We see one thing and only one thing: \textit{surface, the frontier of something invisible} [emphasis added],”\textsuperscript{63} British craftsmen, architect, and industrial designer David Pye argued in his \textit{The Nature & Aesthetics of Design} (1978), a revised version of \textit{The Nature of Things}, 6.

\begin{itemize}
  \item Ibid.
\end{itemize}
Nature of Design (1964), which Puryear encountered while in Europe. Though Puryear’s version of the self supports Pye’s assertion that the surface of things is virtually all that meets the eye, it discounts his further claim that something of substance lies submerged beneath it. “For me, hollowness was at the center of my thinking as I made Self…,” Puryear confirmed in 2007. If hollowness was in fact central to Puryear’s conception of Self, the secret inner life implied by its opaque shell does not exist. Establishing analogy with the human figure, the vacuous sculpture thus implies that hollowness is a condition of human subjectivity—that man, too, like Self, might be a surface whose personality is one with her shell.

If so, man becomes a place, with Puryear suggesting that hollowness “…in fact… gave rise to the title and to the notion of the work as a place as much as an object.” Thus, Self’s status as a location in space becomes equal to its status as a concrete thing. Together, “a location in space” and a “concrete thing” form a home. This notion of self as home is further supported by the sculpture’s solidified shell. The smooth skin of Self is not soft and pliable like the flesh of man but hardened (reified) to figure a object for visual contemplation that doubles as a protective enclosure whose curves appear to be worn down by the harsh elements of sand and weather. Yet, if the self is skin, then for whom does this skin as home exist?

In The Poetics of Space (published in French in 1958 and again in English in 1964 and 1994), a study of the intimate values of interior spaces, Gaston Bachelard drew up a direct relationship between human imagination and the interior zones of the home. “All really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home,” Bachelard wrote. He continued,

We shall see the imagination build “walls” of impalpable shadows, comfort itself with the illusion of protection—or, just the contrary, tremble behind thick walls, mistrust the staunchest ramparts. In short, in the most interminable of dialectics, the sheltered being

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gives perceptible limits to his shelter. He experiences the house in its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams...An entire past comes to dwell in a house.66

If, as Bachelard suggested, “the first task of the phenomenologist is to find the original shell” of any given dwelling, then according to the above statement, that shell is psychological. The interior spaces of the shelter that a being inhabits do not merely consist of the “thick walls” of which buildings are made but the dense accumulation of memories, dreams and memories of those dreams as they were dreamt up by the inhabitant. Thus, any given interior space—corner, closet, a room—is a space for imagination in which the inhabitant produces mental images associated with that space and the world beyond. Though the shell of Self does not house the organs of a physical body, it does supply a surface for the images produced by the artist’s mind.

“It was put together piece by piece, though I finally arrived at a shape that existed a priori in my mind, and it was a carved kind of shape,” Puryear explained with regard to Self.67 Before Self surfaced in the world, it sustained an a priori existence as a “carved kind of shape” in the artist’s mind. As Puryear explained,

For me, making constructed sculpture means having a clear enough idea at the outset to allow structural decisions to be made to allow the work to be put together from elements. It requires a kind of a priori grasp of an idea or form from the beginning, quite unlike carving or modeling, which seem to involve a kind of search for a form within the material...it seemed natural to put my early building attempts together with my interest in art.68

Therefore, Self was not discovered incidentally within the process of making but conceived beforehand. It is this “a priori grasp of an idea or form from the beginning” that enables Puryear “at the outset to allow structural decisions to be made,” arriving at the optimal process by which to make his sculpture. Thus, chance and accident are minimized, making way

for a “more rational process” in which the artist logically thinks through the finest solution to a
formal problem before the process of construction. This solution most often involves the
construction of form “piece by piece” as opposed to the additive and subtractive method of
carving and modeling. Conceptualized beforehand and later pieced together, Self, therefore, is
the product of an idealist model of consciousness: Puryear conceived of it as both form and idea
within the private space of his mind prior to its displacement into the world. Accordingly, he
simultaneously subscribes to a model of ego psychology (artist as origin of meaning) while
offering up a visual representation of the self as skin. Reconciling these opposed models of the
self, Self becomes a home for the very contents of the artist’s mind which surface in the world as
the skin of the sculpture itself. Therefore, the surface of Self provides a structural model of the
artist’s mind that reveals just how his mind does structural work.

Free of any pedestal to ground it in a particular site or separate it off into symbolic space,
Self sits flush against the museum floor at an abrupt angle in real space. Though it sits weighted
in the space that it occupies, its “upward thrust” and shiny skull cap polished to a high sheen
endow it with a phallic presence reminiscent of Brancusi’s own ovoids on arched necks.69 Yet,
unlike the fetish, Self’s seams are not smoothed over but show through the thin splotchy wash of
black paint that attempts to hide them. With long vertical wooden planks and irregularly sized
square pieces exposed, Self narrates the process by which it came into concrete existence as a
sculpture. The prominent display of this process, as Puryear indicates, produces a visible link
between himself and the objects of his creation,

Presently I’m very aware of trying to make particular kinds of objects to create just the
right sort of link between my world and myself. More than ever, I feel this is a time for
me to trust my intuition. For example, I feel better than ever about making

69 Elaine A. King, “Beyond Style, The Power of the Simple,” in Martin Puryear: Sculpture and Works on Paper,
things with my hands. I work with a certain awareness of putting materials together. Since I was small, I’ve been a maker of things of all sorts, including tools, musical instruments, boats and furniture.⁷⁰

Therefore, this link is indexical: to trace out how the “materials” of Self are forged “together” is to trace out the work of Puryear’s hands. To trace out the work of Puryear’s hands is to trace out the process by which he conceptualizes his sculptural objects. As Puryear states,

The thing shows itself near the end, but when I build or construct a piece I need to have what seems like a sixth sense about working, so I can conceive the thing in space, beforehand, totally, and then backwards down to the details of how it’s going to go together. Whatever way I work my hope is the same—that the object should have a rationale which grows out of the making and points to the maker.⁷¹

By registering his thinking process on the surface of Self, Puryear reconciles the Cartesian split between the private thinking mind and the public non-thinking body. The sculptor’s thought manifests the body of his sculpture which in turn manifests his processes of thought. Riddled with nicks, cuts, scratches and wood grain pattern, the sculpture assumes the surface diversity of the indexical tracks and traces that chart the process of Puryear’s own workmanship (and thinking).⁷² This surface diversity, however, is not merely indexical but color-based. From a distance, Self appears as to be a monochromatic black, yet upon looking closer, one picks up subtle gradations of turquoise that flicker in and out of visibility among the black strokes of paint. Here, the color “black” is integrative, which is to say, it combines a range of colors into a single one. This wildly integrationist aesthetic, I believe, is the reigning metaphor of Puryear’s work, a powerful riposte to America’s own segregationist past. In protest, Puryear fashions a self (the artist himself as much as the sculpture) whose multiformity and formal diversity defy societal impulses to split off one element from another. At once a surrogate for the

⁷⁰ Puryear, as quoted in Shearer, “Martin Puryear,” 54.
⁷¹ Ibid., 56.
artist and a broad model of modern subjectivity, Self is lastly, a portrait of the artist’s mind, registering its otherwise hidden structural capacities. It is to this third dimension of Self as articulated by Puryear’s sculpture more broadly, that my analysis turns.

**Brancusi and Duchamp**

A composite of readymade idea (“a priori grasp of an idea or form”) and constructed form (“put together from elements”), Self is a hybrid of the readymade and constructivist technique. Thus his sculpture is best compared to that of minimalist Carl Andre who like Puryear not only turned to wood for material but the avant-garde precedents set by modernists Marcel Duchamp and Constantin Brancusi. Looking to Constructivist Rodchenko’s own “transparency of construction and his near-serial generation of structures,” Andre instrumentalized the readymade as a “structural device” in which “identical units” were combined to generate an overall construction.73 According to Hal Foster, Andre’s “combination of construction and readymade was mediated by the sculpture of Constantin Brancusi…”74 Brancusi carved wood sculptures like Endless Column (1937-8) with elements he first carved, then cut. Like him, Andre combined “given elements like bricks, wood blocks, or metal plates” to produce spaces for the viewer to tread upon.75 This notion of sculpture as place was one that he shared with Puryear whose private enclosures like Self circumscribed space. As both sculptors eschewed the pedestal, their works were converted into mobile places or homes displaced from one museum space to another.

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74 Ibid.
75 Ibid., 473.
Puryear’s *Sleeping Mews (Where the Heart is)*, a replica of a yurt, the cylindrical wooden dwelling of the semi-nomadic Mongols and Turkic peoples of Central Asia, which he began in 1977, is a literal embodiment of the sculpture as home (Fig. 7). A tent-like structure made from a wooden frame and covered by wool felt, the traditional yurt is very easy to collapse and assemble again. For Puryear, Brancusi, whose sculpture *Sleeping Muse* is punned by Puryear’s *Sleeping Mews*, shared with him an aptitude for integrating dualities like art and craft and forging them into unitary elements that generate a multiplicity of meanings.

Consider, for example, Brancusi’s very own famous fragment *Sleeping Muse* (1908)—a polished bronze of a reclining female head of great formal purity and balance. Though Brancusi sought to capture the essential quality of the human head—its oval shape—through a process of refinement, what he ultimately created was an abstract form whose neutrality spawned an extraneous chain of extraneous visual and verbal associations (Fig. 8). What precisely does Brancusi present to his viewers? A muse? female head? an egg, perhaps? When Brancusi proclaimed “Simplicity is complexity resolved,” he inaugurated a dialectical moment in which his attainment of the essential quality of a given thing was matched by an equally excessive heterogeneity: a plurality of figurative resemblances. Due to *Sleeping Muse*’s formal likeness to other figures (i.e. female head and egg), the sculpture accrues the numerous significations that they bear which range from the sexual to the maternal.

Puryear’s sculpture, however, achieved the semantic flux of Brancusi’s work by pushing its formalist logic to illogical conclusions; he replaced essence with excess, proclaiming the very essence of things to be the formal and semantic diversity that they contain. Thus, he usurped one totalizing gesture with another, replacing Brancusi’s formal purity with semantic heterogeneity. For instance, the very title of Puryear’s own *Sleeping Mews (Where the Heart is)* simultaneously
connotes “mews” (breeding cages for hawks) and its homonym “muse” (the inspiration of a creative artist) which is the subject of Brancusi’s aforementioned sculpture. Puryear exhibited this 18-foot pavilion on four separate occasions—1981, 1987, 1990, and 1992—consistently changing its external appearance and internal contents. Displacing and adapting the structure of the yurt to a modernist sculpture, Puryear converted this non-Western assembly of parts into a structural configuration for art.

Where the Heart is, Puryear claimed in a 1984 interview, “was certainly a literal representation of something that already existed in the world. Though it’s not my own invention, the yurt was nonetheless heavily charged with poetry. It reflects a very subjective attitude toward something that already existed, …” This “poetry” with which this replication was “charged,” is what Puryear went on to describe as “the apparent simplicity and harmony of life in distant places.” The “subjective attitude” with which he approached his model manifested itself in the modifications made in its recreation: the sculptor’s inclusion of objects crafted by him that reflect his own biographical past. Latticework walls capped by a low, arching wooden conical roof, variously covered by sheets of thick felt, this pavilion, no longer extant, effaced the aesthetic distinctions between private home, public sculpture, and theatrical display: Where the Heart is is a portable home on view as a work of art that spotlights the artist’s biography on the grand stage of the museum.

With its second appearance at the and/or Gallery in Seattle (1981), this shelter’s status as sculpture was made even more insecure. In a conversation with curators Hugh M. Davies and Helaine Posner in 1984, Puryear conflated it with the subject, claiming “My sister, who lives in

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77 Puryear, as quoted in Davies and Posner, “Conversations with Martin Puryear,” 29
78 Ibid.
79 Kirshner, 18.
Seattle, saw the work and thought it was a real self-portrait. If so, what resided in this self as home? More important, what did its contents express about their author? According to the interview, the yurt, which Puryear built after a fire took place in his Brooklyn studio in 1977 prompting his subsequent move to Chicago, was furnished with: an African-type chair, a carved wooden bird-of-prey effigy perched inside, and another outside on a ledge on the Gallery wall. He described these effigies as somehow emblematic of his longtime interest in ornithology and more particularly, the metaphorical value of birds’ polymorphic potential,

The installation also consisted of some quotations from a Russian ornithologist who had written a book on a particular bird of prey that’s fascinated me for a long time. The bird is called the gyrfalcon, and has a rather romantic history. It is the largest of all falcons, and appears only in Artic regions of the globe: Lapland, Siberia, Alaska, Iceland, and Northern Canada. The gyrfalcon is found in different color phases, from pure white in Greenland to nearly solid black in Labrador. There are various theories advanced about the color phases, regarding whether the plumage differences represent subspecies or racial differences and why they’re distributed as they are geographically. This interested me as another kind of metaphor.

Though the pavilion was shown on four separate occasions, its display at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in 1990 as part of “Connections,” a series of solo exhibitions put on by contemporary artists in connection with art of the past, is the focus of my discussion here. According to curator Vishakha N. Desai, artists were advised to “place objects of their own choosing in a context of their own making.” The first artist to show in the series, Puryear chose an Indian painting of a falcon which he encountered earlier at the MFA in 1977 and several hand-colored prints of North American birds by naturalist John James Audubon to place in his yurt. Thus, if the yurt was to be taken as a “self-portrait,” Puryear’s interior was furnished with birds. Yet, while the pictured birds embodied the beauty of feathers and the freedom of flight in a

80 Puryear, as quoted in Davies and Posner, “Conversations with Martin Puryear,” 29.
81 Ibid.
manner similar to Brancusi’s own shiny bronze *Bird in Space* (1923), the carved birds placed in the yurt were stiff with death (Fig. 9).

Through the latticework, one could see that the initial furnishings of this piece (African-like chair and a carved bird-of-prey effigy) were replaced “by several falcons in various materials perched on the floor, ceiling, and walls, and nearly filled with half-finished lathe-turned wooden forms.”\(^{83}\) While archetypes of these birds-of-prey, stood tall and erect on the walls and in the corners of the gallery space, according to critic Christine Temin, “their cousins inside the yurt” embodied a more dismal fate: “Cracked and unfinished,” she remarked, “these other lathe-turned objects are like aborted birds strewn on the floor. A heap of sawdust might be its blood. Mostly they’re wood, but a few are blown glass, and these seem particularly vulnerable.”\(^{84}\) If the portability of the yurt is to suggest the romantic freedom of escape, why convert its interior symbols of flight into “cracked and unfinished” effigies lying static on the floor? In short, if Puryear chose to work with motifs suggestive of transcendence—why was flight here “aborted”?

The falcon effigies strewn about the yurt evoke a deathly scene from Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, a literary classic of the Harlem Renaissance first published in 1923 which Puryear read while teaching at Fisk University in Tennessee. A composite of fiction, poetry and drama, *Cane* is a diverse narrative form by which Toomer relates the complexity of African American life in the 1920s. In the earlier part of this text, there is a short poem entitled “November Cotton Flower” originally published in a periodical titled *The Nomad* in the summer of 1923. An excerpt reads,

> Drouth fighting soil had caused the soil to take  
> All water from the streams; dead birds were found

\(^{83}\) Ibid.  
In wells a hundred feet below the ground—
Such was the season when the flower bloomed.\textsuperscript{85}

In this meditation on drought, life and death exist in symbiotic correlation: “dead birds were found” in “the season when the flower bloomed.” In other words, the birds were sapped of life to the degree that the flower was energized with it. Similar to the birds in this scene, Puryear’s falcon effigies lie static as dead material on the museum floor but paradoxically prompt us to consider the very ideals such as flight to which they give bloom though they fail to embody them. If the idea/l is only legible \textit{in} the weighty dimensions of material phenomena then what Puryear’s effigies thus literalize is the sculptor’s capacity to vitalize inert matter through figurative transformation: material for sculpture into abstract ideas.

\textit{Conclusion: Inventor’s Power}

Puryear elaborated this metaphor for the embodied nature of thought in cerebral terms when he referred to the circular top opening of his no longer extant \textit{Cedar Lodge} (1977), the cedar dwelling-like structure he completed prior to beginning \textit{Where the Heart is}, as a “very open-minded head” (Fig. 10).\textsuperscript{86} With its latticed cupola likened to a head, \textit{Cedar Lodge}’s lower region inevitably assumed the anatomical role of body, which as a 1978 review reveals, held “a smaller object—the viewer—inside, at its center,”

Built of vertical strips of red cedar held in place by five thick exterior hoops of bent Douglas fir, the piece ascends asymmetrically some 14 feet from an elliptical base to a circular top opening, across which a scraped and dried cowhide is stretched. Arched over the top ring, in an open latticework of bent wood strips and saplings, is a 4-foot-high roughly hemispherical cupola that serves to “finish” the rounded form of the lower structure while allowing light to pass through the translucent cowhide. At the far point of the ellipse, a low rectangular cut, not immediately evident, functions as a door. Simple in appearance, the work almost invites misapprehension. Because of its materials and “organic” contours, it seems at first a latter-day version of an Indian lodge or other

\textsuperscript{86} Puryear, as quoted in Elderfield, “Martin Puryear: Ideas of Otherness,” 20.
primitive shelter, yet the sophistication of its plan and the precise calibration of its construction remove it from the status of updated wickiup. In contrast to the smaller sculptures, there is obviously much less ad hoc reaction here to the accidents of materials: the piece wasn’t “discovered” in construction; it was planned in advance and built to specifications.  

A mixture of “organic contours” and “precise calibration,” the husk-like “construction” was likened to an “Indian lodge or primitive shelter,” the “plan” of which originated “in advance” in a manner similar to Self, not in the “accidents” of its making. Holding its viewers, the construction confirmed the functionalism of its elliptical “plan” which is precisely why its maker comfortably referred to it as a “house” merely a year after its display,

The house embodies visceral things I want to share. People who saw it will remember that it was a red cedar structure shaped like a haystack – about eighteen feet tall altogether. Like a barrel or canoe, it has ribs or stays, it has sheath-like walls of red cedars which were fastened on the inside. Across the ceiling was stretched a cowhide, a rawhide, untanned, just scraped which becomes translucent like parchment.

Carrying on, Puryear elaborated,

That light was something I always wanted. When I first did a rawhide back in Tennessee – which I always wanted to do – I had the opportunity and the space there and I was far enough from neighbors to be able to work on the skin. I put it up in a huge oak tree. It was a big skin about ten feet across. When I woke up the sun was coming up behind the skin. It was like a great, great, lampshade. I went crazy. I thought, I’ve got to share that someday. The house turned out to be the way to showcase the phenomenon, tympanum-like, almost like a rose window.

Filtering light through a “rose window” of rawhide typically associated with Native American teepees, this “home” conjoined a rational plan with the visceral materials of “primitive” culture, a conjunction of the natural and artificial (Fig.11). However, as curator Holiday T. Day once pointed out: “Puryear’s approach to non-Western culture is one of understanding rather than one of merely borrowing forms and materials, as done by earlier

87 David Tannous, “Martin Puryear at the Corcoran,” Art in America 67, no. 3 (May/June 1978): 130.
88 Puryear, as quoted in Swift and Wittenberg, “An Interview with Martin Puryear,” 34.
89 Ibid.
twentieth century artists." In other words, Puryear does not merely adapt the material textures of non-Western societies to his sculpture as so many signifiers of the primitive—the raw, natural, and above all, archaic in sensibility. Rather, he structurally analyzes their forms, acquiring a fundamental intelligence of their most basic components, which he extrapolates and rematerializes as sculpture for the museum. Thus, rather than actualize the wigwam, the dome shaped hut used by American Indians, Cedar Lodge alluded to one.

In its capacity to allude to an altogether different shelter in its form without re-presenting it, Cedar Lodge’s “open-minded head” and elliptical body showed themselves key examples of Puryear’s own inventive power. “An inventor’s power to invent depends on his ability to see analogies between results and, secondarily, on his ability to see them between devices—a thing which is very much easier to do, for the visible schema of a device is the essential principle of arrangement; and we are fairly well habituated to recognizing similarities between devices by means of that,” wrote David Pye. These “results” to which Pye refers are the “states of things” (i.e. Pye writes: “The kind of result which, for example, cargo vessels are intended to realise is cargo transported overseas”). According to Pye, invention is born when an inventor manages to recognize an analogical relationship, a structural affinity between two or more unlike devices (pre-existing and not yet existing). He gives a most salient example of an inventor who “fetched from the memory” the yuloh, an oar used in China, as a structural device by which to model the construction and behavior of his doubled lever. Pye continued: “He was looking for a combination of results – the fulcrum steadied, the stone abutted to a block on the lever, the lever

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91 Pye, 15.
92 Ibid., 61.
stiffened at the fulcrum.” Consequently, the inventor displaces this given “principle of arrangement” and adapts it to his new object. Like the inventor, Puryear pulls given structures from visual memory, displaces them from their original contexts and adapts them to works of art. The results are radically new forms whose significations oscillate between old and new associations, antecedent and present connotations.

However, though Puryear’s sculpture merely alluded to a wigwam instead of actualizing a home in the traditional sense, this fact was not acknowledged by some critics. “I find it interesting, that this is not just a house, but an object dealing with sculptural concerns, that the problems of inside and outside space were uppermost in your mind and were part of what motivated you to construct the house to be an object which would demonstrate this,” critic Mary Swift related to Puryear with regard to Cedar Lodge in a 1978 interview. Contesting the ambivalence with which Swift cast the work’s ontological status, Puryear swiftly made his own definitive claim about the work’s objecthood: “To me it is much more of an object than a house.” He would later qualify this assessment inadvertently by claiming interior space for sculpture,

Interior space is often the secret space of sculpture, certainly in traditional sculpture which is monolithic. I feel that Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth were the first modernist carvers to put holes through sculpture, and in Hepworth’s case the openings through some of her works became hollow voids, interior volumes with shapes of their own. I think of the interior space as a world with enormous conceptual potential, an important aspect of sculpture.

Maintaining “interior space” as the “secret space” of sculpture, Puryear preserved the “enormous conceptual potential” of Cedar Lodge, claiming it as a home for the artist’s ideas not domestic habitation. Such “potential,” as I argued earlier, is the capacity of material objects to

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93 Ibid.
94 Swift, as quoted in “An Interview with Martin Puryear,” 34.
95 Ibid.
96 Puryear, as quoted in Powell, “A Conversation with Martin Puryear,” 108.
conjure forth such concepts as human subjectivity for contemplation. If Cedar Lodge along with Self and Where the Heart is are shelters for ideas structured by the artist’s mind, then to contemplate them is to assess conceptual spaces into which the viewer can “project” him or herself. In a 2007 interview with The Brooklyn Rail, Puryear pointed to this element of projection, stating,

So much sculpture historically has been about looking at a thing in front of you and being completely outside of it. However colossal it is, you’re outside of it, and I’m always fascinated by what it’s like to have a sense of the inside of something, and that’s in a way what I felt as I was doing in “Cedar Lodge.” It was a kind of strange, bio-morphic, organic structure that had a door that you could enter. So I’m fascinated by that, and even in the things that aren’t inherently about dwellings or about inhabitable spaces, there is the sense that if a thing is a certain size or a certain scale in relation to your body, and that you’re conscious of the hollowness of it, I think there is a way to project yourself into it, to imagine what it would be like to experience that from the inside. This has given rise to a lot of my works which are not sealed off, unbroken skins, but are in fact various ways of articulating a space or a volume that’s permeable, visually permeable, that you can penetrate, sense the inside as well as the outside. It’s always been fascinating to me to have that dual sense. So it isn’t about fantasies of living in a primitive way, it’s about the space that you can intuit or feel inside of.97

As Puryear suggests, his sculpture, more broadly, establishes analogy with the human subject to investigate how the latter produces meaning, illuminating the relationship between the individual self and its collective reception. In our collective reception of Self, and others of his sculpture, we find that meaning making is a collaborative process between self and viewer. Thus, to closely examine one of Puryear’s sculptures, is not merely to “intuit or feel inside of” another material body but a conceptual space structured by the artist’s mind for viewer contemplation. It is to the viewer’s direct experience of Puryear’s materialized concepts that I now turn.

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2. SCULPTURE AS VERBAL EXPERIENCE

Direct Experience

In a 1989 interview supporting his representation of the United States in Brazil’s São Paulo Bienal that same year, Puryear called for an art that “defines itself and describes itself to the world,”

I trust the experience of the work. I believe in work that defines itself and describes itself to the world, nakedly, without having a huge amount of theoretical interdependence. I know that in a situation as complex as we live in now it’s a kind of a ridiculous hope that art can still speak directly. I think finally it is a question of faith. I guess what I trust is my hands and my eyes and the eyes of other people...It has to do with a certain pride in the fact that one’s hands are important.98

As if to retroactively elucidate the above claims, the sculptor would later remark in a 2007 interview: “…I came from a generation where the work itself was the information, and so there remains this belief that the work itself can have an identity that can hopefully speak…”99

Taken together, Puryear’s remarks communicate that the sculptor conceives of art as direct information. Only when unclothed by external theorizations, so Puryear’s comments imply, can the work’s formal, material and technical properties function as primary sources of signification, enabling the work to produce and communicate meaning on its own.

For the sculptor art’s form and materials were meant to convey meaning directly to a collective audience of viewers and this direct experience of work could only be facilitated by direct means, the artist’s immediate engagement with materials through manual labor. “I’m

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98 Puryear was the first African American artist to be the sole representative of the United States in Brazil’s São Paulo Bienal and was voted the best artist of the exhibition. Puryear, as quoted in Dwight V. Gast, “Martin Puryear: Sculpture as an Act of Faith,” The Photojournal of Art 2:1 (September/October 1989), 7.
trying to hold on to some kind of faith in maybe what’s a very old-fashioned, direct way to make sculpture with your own hands,” Puryear confided. In his “Meanings in Modern Sculpture” (1949), sculptor Isamu Noguchi, championed this “very old-fashioned, direct” turn away from mediated means of sculptural production toward more immediate measures apparent in sculpture since Rodin, a turn the effects of which are no less felt decades later in Puryear’s own sculpture,

Our expanded mechanical ability now makes it possible to handle the toughest materials with comparative ease. This has stimulated our search for the expression of reality through the direct use of materials—as by direct carving, sawing, melting, flowing, welding, glueing, braising, grinding, etc. This simplification of construction has…improved the position of sculpture economically by eliminating the necessity of an expensive and deadening transference from one medium into another.

Prior to Brancusi’s introduction of direct carving without a prior model into the tradition of carved sculpture in the early twentieth century, sculpture was achieved by means of “transference”: the transfer of a sculptural idea from modeled clay original to marble block by an assembled team of assistants with the aid of tools such as a pointing machine and caliper. Thus, the manufacture of a single work was fragmented and mediated by multiple skilled practitioners whom fulfilled individual roles in converting it “from one medium into another.” According to Noguchi, such mediation casted a “deadening” effect on sculpture as it positioned its production at a significant remove from the living artist. By contrast, “simplification of construction” as characteristic of direct work, for Noguchi, initiated an intimate interface between materials and the artist who willfully engages them, resulting in a singularized “expression of reality.” Though Puryear certainly did not mine the mechanical elements nor the

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102 In an entry on the sculptor Brancusi, Rosalind Krauss writes: “During the first four weeks in 1907 when Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957) was one of fifty assistants working for France’s most famous sculptor, Auguste Rodin, he would have been…one of a contingent of “pointers”—operators of caliper-like devices used to transfer a sculptural ideal from its plaster model to the marble block (often to make enlargements or reductions)—he would have seen the travesty of the aesthetic “original” wrought by a kind of assembly-line production.” (Hal Foster, et al., Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism, [New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005], 216).
production modes of a highly industrialized society as did the constructors to which Noguchi refers in his passage, the sculptor shared in their “rediscovery of the sculptor as direct worker” as shown in his commitment to craftsmanship.  

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In the 1980s, direct work, much less direct information, was seldom seen. Displacing craftsmanship, peers such as Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach mimetically immersed themselves in the consumer culture of the day, appropriating shiny commodities for their art.  

104 Displaying consumer goods as basic as basketball shoes and gym equipment in the gallery or museum space, such artists dissolved the boundary between twin desires for banal commodities and works of art. What resulted were readymade viewer experiences similar to yet not synonymous with the experiences of purchasing commodities. In his 1989 interview, Puryear proceeded to lament this “complex situation in which we live today,”

I think art is its own language. A lot of art being made today is nihilistic: it really elevates doubt and cynicism to quite an eloquent level. I can admire eloquence and articulateness in talking about art, but when you’re confronted with the work, it’s often amazing how much of a blank you have to draw. Even given the verbal support, it still just doesn’t do it for me. I believe in experience much more than I believe in dogma or notions of historical connectedness.  

105 “Nihilistic” in its often total collapse of art into the commodity-form, commodity art for Puryear was best analogized as a phenomenon similar to “The Emperor’s New Clothes”: once stripped of “verbal support,” it is naked, thus prompting the viewer to see a “blank.” Put another way, Puryear saw commodity art, which drew upon existing forms of media culture, as mediated twice over by the very verbal inscriptions that clothed it: theorizations of art’s ever-increasing commodity status. Thus, art’s shrinking autonomy from the culture industry itself was literalized

103 Noguchi, “Meanings in Modern Sculpture,” 56.
by its own rhetorical mediation: the commodity sculpture like Duchamp’s readymade was a rhetorical question (“Is it art?”) to be considered, not a material object to be viscerally experienced.

As iterated previously, Puryear constructed sculptures whose processes of production were not effaced by the mediators of industrial fabrication as with commodity art, but left apparent for others to see and experience with their own eyes. “What I can say is that at present I’m interested in realizing work that has a certain kind of independence from dogma and from theory and a capacity to speak in a way that I hope is visceral and direct,” Puryear continued.106 Thus, the full expression of sculptures’ making would only reveal itself if stripped of “dogma” or “theory,” taken to be authoritative discourse, which according to the sculptor, substituted for manual process. Puryear’s cynical reservations about dogma, however, were preempted by Noguchi’s own decades prior. “If religion dies as dogma,” Noguchi persisted in his 1949 essay, “it is reborn as a direct personal expression.”107 Reborn as “direct personal expression,” dogma (religious or otherwise) thus gives way to primary meaning, “visceral and direct” signification.

“In his sculpture Puryear chooses to use natural materials whose inherent energy he simultaneously respects and modifies. For Puryear this choice of raw materials facilitates a simple and direct mode of expression. Yet he consciously applies to modern methods and a contemporary formal vocabulary to materials that allude to a world unencumbered by the artifacts of a technological civilization,” said Judith Russi Kirshner. Breaking with the industrial facades of “technological civilization,” Puryear looked to “raw materials” such as rawhide, saplings, vines and earth, as his means and manipulated their unbridled energy into “simple and direct” primary forms.

106 Ibid.
While Puryear’s forms were certainly primary, their meanings were by no means basic. Rather, such forms were integrated into “mathematical systems” of direct expression that alluded metaphorically to complex subjects. With the relations of points, lines, surfaces, and solids in space as a primary concern, geometry (“earth measurement”) was the inevitable framing system through which Puryear chose to coordinate his sculptural elements. To be sure, Puryear’s sculpture did not resolve itself into a precise geometry. Rather, it held together a broad set of geometrically-based ideas (fundamental forms), which Puryear extrapolated from tribal and proto-modern shelters, rematerialized as sculptural objects and organized into solid configurations across planar space. Accordingly, viewers were prompted to observe his sculpted lines and solids in relation to one another, comprehending each one as a distinct object of independent content belonging to a broader expressive whole.

Focusing closely on Puryear’s no longer extant *Equation for Beckwourth* (1980), a composition of geometrical equivalences that narrates the cross-cultural ventures of African American mountaineer and War Chief of the Crow Indian tribe Jim Beckwourth, I demonstrate just how its sculpted geometry and raw materials signify its titular content (Fig.12). Though the installation’s title specifies the broader significances of its sculptural forms, it does not redirect attention away from Puryear’s direct work on those forms nor prescribe how that work is performed. In 1854 and 1855, the illiterate Beckwourth orally dictated his own autobiography to a one “wandering newsman” Thomas D. Bonner who translated it into the text later published as the memoir *Mountain Man, Indian Chief: The Life and Adventures of Jim Beckwourth* (1856). In 1980, Puryear then transformed the broad narrative strokes of the memoir into a pictorial equation: a geometrical configuration of worked sculptural elements whose formal utterances—

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discrete material properties—were not meant to be heard as oral speech but rather *seen* as sensuously concrete visual forms.

Horizontally arranged, these visual forms produced lateral connections among them, whose import was contingent upon the positioning of these forms in space. Thus, his equation required the skill of direct observation rather than epistolary literacy—the capacity to read the written letter—for comprehension. Puryear’s hands rematerialized Beckwourth’s story directly as sculpture, making it the very medium through which the narrative is verbalized. A lived past dictated to perceiving subjects through sculpture, *Equation for Beckwourth*, as I will argue, is a sculptural form of verbal experience.

*Equation for Jim Beckwourth* (1980)

Puryear completed *Equation for Jim Beckwourth* (1980), a multipart site-specific sculptural installation of three existing works (*For Beckwourth* (1980); *Rawhide Cone* (1980); and *Some Lines for Jim Beckwourth* (1978)) for the 77-foot-long glass-walled Bergman Gallery of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in early 1980 (Figs. 13, 14, and 15). Divided into two horizontal halves of stiff, rigid linear rows organized around a central diagonal axis, with a freestanding sculpture appended at each end, the work was elaborated by the sculptor as such,

The two halves of the equation were different in their materials but alike in that both halves included helical lines placed on the wall at eye level, like writing. Essentially the piece had two zones, one of skin and one of wood. The skin side was made up of tightly twisted rawhide thongs and a large rawhide cone serving as one polarity high up on the wall. The other half, the wood zone, was composed of twisted vines and saplings, making loose, looping irregular coils; and a timber and sod object resting on the floor. The object was a box or cabin shape with a fuzzy turf top, like a domed sod roof. An extremely long, slender sapling connected the rawhide cone and timber sod box
diagonally.¹⁰⁹

“A sculptor,” Noguchi wrote, “at work, more often thinks of it as a composition of points, lines, and planes.”¹¹⁰ Puryear ordered his ideas in terms that evoke such geometry: “halves,” “polarity” and “zones” are just a few of the terms that he grasps for to formally describe the relationship arranged between readymade lines, shapes and figures across the planar surface of the gallery wall. In his aggressive compartmentalization of his equation’s interior zones as seen in installation images, Puryear sectioned off wood and skin, paradoxically, such that they can be read in relation rather than apart from one another. Indeed, the twenty-foot diagonal ash sapling (gathered by the artist in upstate New York) bisects the two separate horizontal successions of tree and flesh only to be countered by the vertical axis of another sapling which divides it in half, subdividing the wall space even further.

Exacerbating this division between “skin” and “wood” zones is the fact that each are coded in opposite tonal values: light and dark. For instance, where the spindly limbs of the diagonal and slightly tilted vertical axes cross each other, four angles are formed, two of which are obtuse and the other acute. The right obtuse angle that encloses six linear multi-colored rows of twisted rawhide (untanned cattle skin) is skinned, the exterior removed to reveal the light-colored tissue that lies beneath the sapling’s deeply dark tree bark, as if to underscore the very presence of the flesh that it brackets. Conversely, the obtuse angle encompassing six linear rows of spiraling saplings are left covered in their dark outer surface which matches the dim layer of “fuzzy turf” encrusting the top of the “cabin shape” at bottom. The cylindrical “cabin shape” at bottom and the “rawhide cone” at top are two geometric figures paradigmatic of the initial and

¹⁰⁹ Puryear, as quoted in Hugh M. Davies and Helaine Posner, “Conversations with Martin Puryear,” in Martin Puryear (Amherst, Mass.: University Gallery, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, 1984), 25.
¹¹⁰ Noguchi, “Meanings in Modern Sculpture,” 56.
latter phases of James Beckwourth’s life, the former spent among white settlers on the frontier in St. Louis, Missouri and the latter among the Crow Indians on the Great Plains.

James Beckwourth

A mixed-race mountaineer who played a pivotal role in the early exploration and settlement of the West, James Beckwourth was the son of an enslaved black mother and an English father who emancipated him and raised him in St. Louis, Missouri in the early 1800s (Fig.16). Yet, driven by an quenchless wanderlust, Beckwourth left home at the young age of nineteen to join the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, assuming a life of adventure on the frontier as a fur trader, mountain man, and scout, and eventually becoming War Chief of the Crow Indian tribe of Absaroka. Though a classic model of cross-cultural exploration, for Puryear, Beckwourth’s biography is most exemplary of socio-cultural transcendence: “… he is an example of someone who was not confined by the conditions of his birth,” Puryear once reflected.111 Despite his slave origins, Beckwourth meandered across plains far beyond home, constructing a peripatetic existence for himself otherwise impossible had he remained socially and geographically in place. Inhabiting various regions under the guise of diverse vocational roles, the frontiersman assumed an elastic identity free from the constraints of racial stereotype. No doubt, Puryear is all too familiar with this narrative, as its multicultural dynamics and transcendent aspirations are everywhere to be seen in the sculptor’s own life and work. However, if Puryear embraced the nomadic tenor of Beckwourth’s life, why geometricize Beckwourth’s rich and moving life into a fixed equation?

Geometry

Committed to the analysis of objects—their shapes, surfaces and planes—and the consequences of their broad positioning in space, geometry offers spatial visualizations of the relative position of figures. Meaning and sense would only emerge in the space of Puryear’s sculptural visualization of Beckwourth’s biography, if each of its geometricized objects communicated individual ideas the sum of which cohered into a precise narrative. Thus geometry’s capacity to clarify complex spatial relationships among objects made it a certain guide for Puryear’s art. With the mountaineer’s illiteracy in mind, Puryear sought to construct a visual alternative to Beckwourth’s oral dictation, the understanding of which didn’t require the ability to read the written word but rather observe and decipher the significance of its geometric vocabulary. However, though Puryear sculpted the elements of Beckwourth’s narrative into primary forms recognizable in any number of concrete phenomena, he did so with materials belonging to specific types of shelters, i.e. the rawhide of the teepee. Therefore, Puryear stabilized the relation between vision and memory, prompting his viewers to trace out his geometric forms with visual sense while identifying the symbolic value—associative content—of their materials simultaneously.

Having extrapolated cone and the cylinder from the blockhouse and teepee that were staple housing models in Beckwourth’s life, Puryear needed only situate them within his positional system, a method of representation in which the location of values in a space of given dimensions is rendered in geometric terms. The sculptor proceeded to achieve such a system by setting up a striking color contrast between the light and dark areas of his Equation, which highlights the very difference between its constitutive materials (animal flesh vs. hard wood), but also foregrounds the balance between the two. Since any two angles opposite each other are
equal, skin and wood, in this instance, inhabit angles of equal degree. Thus, Puryear’s geometrical expression conveys equality between this binary set of values. However, only when we look to the freestanding sculptures appended at the opposite poles of the equation, do we realize that these values are not merely opposite but absolute.

The adjective “absolute” derives from the Latin *absolūtus*, which means finished, perfect, and pure. Summarily, this definition describes a condition of autonomy, in which the meaning of a given object is expressed with finality, not alterable by the contingencies of context. For Plato, the absolute manifested itself in the formal terms of geometry. In *Philebus*, his Socratic dialogue on the comparative values of pleasure and knowledge, he asserts,

> For when I say beauty of form, I am trying to express, not what most people would understand by the words, such as the beauty of animals or of paintings, but I mean, says the argument, the straight line and the circle and the plane and solid figures formed from these by turning-lathes and rulers and patterns of angles; perhaps you understand. For I assert that the beauty of these is not relative, like that of other things, but they are always absolutely beautiful by nature.¹¹²

Similar to Puryear, Plato eschewed language (“words”) for geometry as the basis for understanding his definition of the “beauty of form.” Equating the “absolutely beautiful by nature” with the “straight line and the circle and the plane and solid figures” generated by “rulers and patterns of angles,” Plato identifies the absolute values of beauty as geometric values. Therefore, the independent content of “beauty” is comprised of the very straight line, circle and plane that structure its form. Plato’s philosophical conception of the absolute provides a perfect explanation of the central operation undergirding Puryear’s own abstract sculpture. Parallel to the philosopher’s own geometricization of physical quality, Puryear extrapolates the line, circle, and plane from the architectural structures in his view and subjects them to sculptural form resembling their model of copy.

Converting Plato’s absolutism into a working philosophy, Puryear pared down his two freestanding sculptures appended at the opposite ends of his *Equation* into wood cylinder and rawhide cone, the geometry of which the absolute ideas of blockhouse and the teepee are comprised, respectively. Blockhouses, isolated forts of heavy timber, were staple buildings on settlements of Americans in St. Louis, which happened to be a major site of fur trade between the Native Americans and French and Spanish settlers gathered since the Louisiana Purchase effected by the French government in 1803. Blockhouses served as strong defensive ports against the attacks of the natives hostile to the influx of Americans whose presence interfered with their exclusive trade with the French and Spanish.

“For protection against the Indians,” Beckwourth recounts, “who were at the time very troublesome and treacherous, it became necessary for the whites to construct blockhouses at convenient distances…There were constant alarms in the neighborhood of some of the blockhouses, and hardly a day passed without the inhabitants being compelled to seek them for protection.” Teepees, on the other hand, were conical tents traditionally made of semi-circular buffalo-hide covers supported by wooden poles. Beckwourth himself resided in this typical housing amongst the Crow which they called “ashi,” once he became war chief among the tribe.

Though Puryear’s two housing structures function as symbolic markers within the context of Beckwourth’s biographical narrative, no particulars inhere within either one of them. While their constitutive materials and shapes allude to the block house and teepee, neither structure refers directly to their respective source. Instead, each structure embodies the absolute form—cylinder and cone—distilled from the excessive detail of their referent. “My work,”

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113 The Louisiana Purchase was the acquisition by the United States of America of 828,000 square miles of France’s claim to the territory of Louisiana in 1803. The Louisiana Purchase encompassed all or part of 15 current U.S. states and two Canadian provinces.

Puryear once said, “is very carefully wrought in the sense that there’s nothing extra that’s just dragging or hanging on—nothing that doesn’t have to be there. You might call it a reductive way of working.”

Rather than replicate the precise model of a teepee built by the Crow in all of its textural particularities, for instance, Puryear reduces the teepee to its pure form only to reconstruct it in material terms.

The late Kirk Varnedoe suggests as much, explaining: “Martin Puryear’s bound structures refer to the prehistoric and tribal sources in less chest-thumpingly monumental terms. They suggest…a domestication of scale…” While alluding thus to grand architectural structures, the mutual scale and proportion of teepee and blockhouse of Puryear’s equation are decreased to that of the sculptural object as if to shore up the fact that these housing models are indeed absolutist ideas, not habitable forms. In chapter 1, I addressed this very inhabitability of the home figured by Puryear’s Self (1978) whose lack of entry foreclosed the possibility of human habitability despite its human scale (see Fig.1). This is so, as I argued, to maintain his sculpture’s purpose as a site where ideas live, not humans. However, while Self’s human scale at least invites viewer’s to imagine themselves occupying the sculpture’s hardened shell, the sculptures of Puryear’s Equation do not even that. Rather, they reside on the wall as absolute ideas to be comprehended from the same distance at which one beholds an inscribed page.

**Absolute-Value Equation**

If the ideas—teepee and blockhouse—that Puryear sets up are indeed absolute, then what his geometrical formulation establishes between block house and teepee may be best understood

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as an *absolute value equation*: an equivalent relationship between two absolute quantities. In geometry, the absolute value of a number measures its spatial distance to the origin point (zero) on the real number line. If we took the absolute origin of Beckwourth’s own biographical narrative here inscribed as an absolute value equation to be Beckwourth himself (he literally spoke it into existence), then the absolute values—blockhouse and teepee—isolated on either side of the equation are of equal distance to him. Equidistant from blockhouse and teepee, Beckwourth’s intermediary position as the central axis of this absolute expression, the “crux of the piece around which all other elements are organized visually and conceptually in a series of correspondences,” underscores his own ambiguous relation to both so-called modern and “primitive” societies.¹¹⁷

“I’m as interested in the modern as I am in the primitive; I think I am interested in where the two meet,” Puryear declared.¹¹⁸ Cultural primitivism was the very means by which Beckwourth crossed cultural lines with him eventually became a trapper under the auspices of the Crow to avoid the tribe’s hostility toward Americans. Alternately trapping and warring for the Rocky Mountain Fur Company and the Crow Indian nation, Beckwourth figured unwittingly the liminal space *between* tribal and western society tracing its socio-geographical contours as he traveled to and fro on horseback and foot.

Figured prominently as absolute values in the form of blockhouse and teepee, western civilization and tribal community exist nonetheless in close relation in Puryear’s *Equation*, connected by the sapling positioned crosswise between them, upheld by the central axis that is Beckwourth himself. For instance, after joining General Ashley’s Rocky Mountain Fur Company as a blacksmith and horse wrangler in the fall of 1823, Beckwourth along with various mountain

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¹¹⁸ Puryear, as quoted in Boswell, “Martin Puryear,” 197.
men counted among the greatest of their time such as Jim Bridger, Jed Smith and Thomas Fitzpatrick, embarked on fur trapping expeditions into the wild.\textsuperscript{119} With a path opened up along the Platte and Green rivers, a southern route over the mountains, the trappers avoided “attack by the ferocious Blackfeet Indians” and charted an easier terrain.\textsuperscript{120} However, though such efforts at independent procurement of fur were made, “the most common means of obtaining peltry or furs was through barter with the Indian.”\textsuperscript{121} Trading forts were erected throughout the wilderness and “beaver skins or buffalo robes” were purchased and brought back to St. Louis.\textsuperscript{122} In about 1828, however, while on a trapping expedition Beckwourth was captured by a party of Crow; mistaken for a long lost tribal chieftain, he was adopted into the tribe.

Deciding that were he to deny his Crow origin, they would not believe him anyway, Beckwourth acceded to their claims, choosing not to “undeceive these unsuspecting people.”\textsuperscript{123} Instead, he passed, exploiting his close resemblance to the Crow and his familiarity with their language: “...speaking nothing but Crow language, my hair as long as a Crow’s, dressed like a Crow, and myself as black as a Crow. No one… doubted my being a Crow,” Beckwourth reminisced.\textsuperscript{124} If tribalism, identity with and loyalty to a given tribe, treats the ethnic as a form of absolute difference, then Beckwourth’s ethnic likeness to the Crow amounts to a mere effect of simulation. Thus, the absolute measure of distance between Beckwourth (mime) and the Native American tribe (mimed) is preserved, with Beckwourth participating in yet failing to belong to the tribal community.

\textsuperscript{119} Bonner, 6.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{123} Beckwourth, as quoted in Bonner, \textit{Mountain Man, Indian Chief; the life and adventures of Jim Beckwourth}, 70.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 84.
At once insider and outsider, he trapped as a Crow, protecting himself from the galling harassment that they would otherwise inflict upon him had he not. Therefore, Beckwourth’s tactical deception was a weapon in which he identified with his enemies so as to ward their evils away. “I can trap in their streams unmolested,” Beckwourth confided within himself, “and derive more profit under their protection than if among my own men, exposed incessantly to assassination and alarm.”\textsuperscript{125} Beckwourth’s transformation into a Crow was near complete when they removed his “…old leggings and moccasins and other garments and supplied their place with new ones, most beautifully ornamented according to their very latest fashion,” Beckwourth recounted.\textsuperscript{126} Newly clothed in tribal garb, Beckwourth marveled at its beautiful ornament, stirring ambivalence within the reader who can’t help but discern his defensive identification with the tribal ally of exotic dress as paradoxical, marked by a desire to fall in with the “primitive” whose daring deeds and foreign uniform titillated him secretly yet frightened him deeply.

As the central axis through which the crosswise connector of the \textit{Equation} runs, Beckwourth is therefore the vertical pole that upholds communal life, albeit conflicted, between the two absolute values (tribal and modern). Holding them in balance (formally and figuratively), Beckwourth reveals the integral role played by both parties in the fur trade, an early manifestation of commercial enterprise in the West. Yet this symmetrical reading is complicated still by the upward inclination of the diagonal connector that stretches from blockhouse to teepee. Although positioned at equal distance from the central axis, the teepee is situated high on the gallery wall while the blockhouse sits low on the ground.

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 70.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 69.
The upward inclination that separates blockhouse and teepee implies not only a reversal of the cultural hierarchy that would place the “primitive” Native American at bottom but that Beckwourth’s life consisted of an upward trajectory in which he moved diagonally from mountain man of St. Louis, Missouri to War Chief of the Crow Indian tribe on the Great Plains. Puryear himself has maintained this notion, confiding that he thinks “of his migration from the humblest of origins to a kind of kingliness.” The rank of chief among the Native American tribe certainly bears a regal tone in striking contrast to the humble sound of “mountain man.” However, as its symmetrical formal arrangement attests, Puryear’s Equation isn’t about origins and ends, as the only origin present is Beckwourth himself who perpetually vacillated between the “primitive” and “modern” societies without end. Rather, as I have argued, it is about the historical fact that “primitive” and “modern” societies develop along different lines that nonetheless overlap.

Puryear’s penchant for creating hybrid works that combine contrary values, nature and culture among them, was not missed by his critics in the 1980s. “Puryear’s sculptures are so subtly constructed that it is easy to mistake them for objects found in nature. This apparent balance between the natural and the man-made has led to their being termed primitivistic,” wrote Peter W. Boswell in a 1988 essay. Primitivism, the appeal to tribal objects as aesthetic models as a way out of the strictures of western representation, often emphasizes the organic shapes found in the natural world to which tribal communities live so near. Puryear’s Greed’s Trophy (1984), a vertically hanging wall sculpture made of wire, was featured in the Museum of Modern Art’s contentious exhibition “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the

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128 Puryear, as quoted in Boswell, “Martin Puryear,” 197.
Modern, a show organized around an effect of resemblance between cultural artifacts and works of art, on this very basis (Fig.17).

Though Puryear’s cagelike contribution was woven together with industrial material, it suggests the fleshy figures of the giant whales that swim the sea: “the dark eye, and the lolling tongue at the bottom, evoke a head, while the shape—dwindling at the foot, expanding at the “chest,” and swelling slightly into a circle at the top of the armature on the wall—is subtly figural.”129 Mounted on the wall like a trophy, the part of an animal taken when hunted, this fleshy aquatic mammal typically “found in nature” appears as both rarefied work of art and token of a huntsman’s excess.

Reflecting upon this transformative tension between nature and culture that runs throughout Puryear’s sculpture more broadly, Paul Krainak suggests “his work is about undermining these unnecessary divisions and achieving a qualitative synthesis. His grafting of organic to mechanical, while conceptually hazardous, is impressive because what this suggests is the creation of a hybrid…”130 A whale of metal grid, Puryear’s Trophy is certainly hybrid, displaying “morphological harmony” between the geometric patterns extrapolable from living matter and mathematical systems of organization. As with the “organic” and “mechanical,” Puryear’s Equation identifies structural patterns of sameness across radically disparate primitive and modern phenomena as well.131 In linking the absolute ideas of blockhouse and teepee together, Puryear’s Equation reveals that inherent to all historical cultures are fixed geometric forms that inspire high art.

\textit{Manual Growth}

Like \textit{Greed’s Trophy}, Puryear’s \textit{Equation}, too, imbricates the organic or living and the manmade, but it does so through its incorporation of objects constructed of natural materials. In a brief rumination on Puryear’s blockhouse, singularly exhibited as \textit{For Beckwourth} (1980) in the exhibition \textit{I-80 Series: Martin Puryear} at the Joslyn Art Museum in mid-1980, curator Holiday T. Day’s attests, “Puryear fashions and adapts his raw materials into particular objects that appear to have some unknown use as a tool or a ritual object. They seem shaped by both natural and human forces. The turf of \textit{For Beckwourth} (nature) forms a cone (culture) but retains its rough edges and grass from nature even as geometry orders its shape into a cone.”\footnote{Holiday T. Day, “Martin Puryear,” in \textit{I-80 Series: Martin Puryear}, pamphlet (Omaha, Nebraska: Joslyn Art Museum, 1980), n.p.} The interpenetration of “raw” and “human forces” that Day identifies in the blockhouse, is in fact the integration of natural materials and manual construction which courses throughout Puryear’s \textit{Equation} more broadly.

Rather than a release of unitary form from a given solid, Puryear’s block house is a construction of multiple parts, which like many organic organisms, records the very processes of its making within its structure. Thus, an analogous relationship is generated between organic and manual growth. Moreover, both the organic material and the object that it constitutes mark their lifelines respectively; the wood blocks’ knots and growth rings chart the life spans of the trees from which they were carved while the object that they make reveals a constitutive process of saw cuts, stacking, joinery and layering.

Organic and manual processes are thoroughly integrated to form a cross-section that reveals the sites at which they converge, throwing one another into relief. Yet, though organic
growth and human manufacture appear here as mutually constitutive entities, it is the latter that takes the former process as model. Puryear confirmed this in a 1978 interview in which he elaborated upon his preference for wood as his primary material. “I prefer wood…I’m most interested in the ways it can be used structurally. Even with the logic and joinery that this requires, the work can still be like nature in having a sense of its own growth contained in it. I want to approach that kind of wholeness no matter how made or controlled it is,” he said. 

Implicitly, Puryear creates works that “like nature” possess a “sense” of internal growth, organic development over time, an exclusive feature of life forms. In other words, he aspires to make inorganic works that mimic the behavior of vital beings, enabling these very works to operate as living organisms themselves. Ironically, however, Puryear indicates that he chose wood as the material with which to make these works not because it is a organic substance itself, but rather because it can be “used structurally,” that is to say, manually manipulated to form a configuration of parts.

Exerting his human faculties (“logic”) thusly, Puryear generates a structure whose facade of “wholeness,” which he equates with having a “sense” of “growth” about it, was in fact “made or controlled” by him. The indexical traces of his tools and techniques left on the body of the block house say as much: the interlocking joints that hold the four wooden sides of the base are boldly apparent as is the circular sweep of the blade used to shear the semi-circular facades of the work. Thus, though constituted of natural parts, the block house is a cultural artifact, manufactured by human hands.

Puryear’s teepee, too, embodies the convergence of organic and human forces. A hybrid of geometric cone and wild fire, his teepee’s twists, folds, and creases register as visual traces of

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the object’s own making—the artist’s kneading and radical re-working of the raw material’s original amorphous shape—reflecting Puryear’s firm commitment to handwork. However, these traces (“twists, folds and creases”) are not merely self-reflexive but were fashioned to mimic the vital energy of the rawhide’s own threat: fire. Thus, the taut rippled edges of the vast strip of rawhide’s excess leathery length imitate the movement of fire, animating the skin with a sense of excitation. Speckled and smeared with tough dark patches of brown against a light brown surface, this membrane appears as if already burned, recoiling into itself against the flames, and ultimately culminating into a cylindrical conic shape. Through his direct carving and modeling of raw materials (skin and wood), Puryear creates objects that combines the natural behavior of their materials with the chosen order that manual work imposed upon them.

Thus, in addition to identifying the geometric shape common among members of a given housing model (teepee or block house), Puryear also identifies the property shared by these opposed models situated on alternate sides of his equation: the combination of natural and human labor used to produce them. Puryear’s formulation literalizes the balance between nature and culture materialized in the single objects of which it consists; however, the sculptor draws up mathematical signs of equivalence on the wall in which their opposing values, skin (nature) and cut wood (culture), not so much to weight them as same but to suspend the difference between the two. The objects—blockhouse and teepee—on the opposite ends of this “equation” are examples of acculturated nature and naturalized culture: the former objectifies skin (modeled flesh) while the latter enlivens the wooden object (imitates growth processes).

The intimate relation that Puryear establishes between the natural materials and constructed forms of his geometrically-based composition highlights the intermixture of nature (material as well as biological) and culture (object construction as much as character shaping).
that grounds processes of self-making, a central theme of *Equation for Beckwourth*. Just as we saw Puryear specially construct for himself a self both multiform and complex with strips of wood in chapter 1, we see Beckwourth fashion himself (in life as well as in speech) into a folk hero of extraordinary cross-cultural adventure, exemplifying a process of *self-making* in which he overcomes the natural constraints of his birth (i.e. born a slave). Using the raw materials of his character (thirst for travel, audacious spirit), the historical figure transformed himself into the lead protagonist of daring frontier exploits on par with his more famous counterpart Jim Bridger. For instance, while spending the next six to eight years with the Crow, Beckwourth rose within their ranks to at least the level of War Chief, and by his own account was named head Chief of the Crow Nation upon the death of the one already in place. Puryear simulates the triumphal nature of Beckwourth’s narrative, modeling flesh and carving wood with his hands, to generate symbolic figurations whose rich connotations trump the mute materiality of the unmotivated natural elements used to make them. Thereby, processes of sculptural making articulate Beckwourth’s processes of self-making.

**Sculpture as Verbal Experience**

If, as Frantz Fanon contends, “to speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax,” then Puryear’s *Equation* verbalizes Beckwourth’s narrative in the “visual-tactile” syntax of the “quipu,” a recording device used by the Incans and their ancestors of the Andean region (Fig.18).¹³⁴ In his illuminating study *The Stone and the Thread: Andean Roots of Abstract Art* (1996), Cesar Paternosto elaborates upon the significance of the quipu, describing it as such:

> The *quipu* consisted of a series of cotton or wool cords, dyed in codified colors, knotted at regular intervals, tied to a principal cord from which they hung. The knots symbolized

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numbers that were organized in a positional system based on the number ten (a decimal system). The task of interpreting the quipu was reserved for a body of specialized civil servants, the qipucamayoc...the quipi...involved concepts of number, logic and spatial configuration, indicating that it may have been much more than a mere mnemonic artifact to store governmental information, which is the definition of the quipu that was originally recorded by the chroniclers...the qipucamayoc composed his record directly, without instruments. Thus, turning the cord in different directions in the process of making knots, he traced figures in space, and this direct construction “required tactile sensitivity to a much greater degree. In fact, the overall aesthetic of the quipu is related to the tactile: the manner of recording and the recording itself; the former in the activity, the latter in effect” (1981, 61).

Thus Puryear resuscitated the dead memory of an illiterate Jim Beckwourth by alluding to a preliterate mnemonic device used to store epic verses and myths. Displacing the connecting strings of word-based grammar, the quipu privileges the “visual” and “tactile” cues of formal arrangement, transforming the meaning making process into a sensual experiment rather than a strictly cerebral reading. As hunter and hunted, Beckwourth certainly relied upon his own human sensorium to cue his awareness to deathly smells and ominous sounds in the course of his dangerous travels. This is not to suggest, however, that the quipu divorced primal sense from sensibility. Its interpreter, like Beckwourth, is required to make meaning out of the very visual, auditory and tactile stimuli with which he is confronted. Similar to the makers of the quipu, Puryear underscores this fact in his appeal to a mathematical system, namely the “absolute value equation,” as the very source of his Equation’s formal arrangement. Though absolute, his sculptural elements reveal their correspondence in their mutual distance from the absolute origin of the equation of which they are a part, therefore, becoming figural images within a “positional system.” Hence, viewers, as did Beckwourth, are induced into an active looking, the cognitive

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and bodily progress of which involves transforming a perception of sensory data into a synthetic judgment.

Direct constructions, the two sets of twisted rawhide and sapling of Puryear’s *Equation* which sit before a flat surface as so many “traced figures in space,” bear a sense of the sculptor’s touch. Registering his tactile manipulation of Beckwourth’s story in both “form and effect,” the twists and turns of rawhide not only evoke the kneading of the sculptor’s hands but exact percussive effects on the viewer: their richly textured and polychromatic materials evoke the desire to be felt, not merely seen. “…I would say I’m interested… in work…that acknowledges its maker and offers an experience that’s probably more tactile and sensate than strictly cerebral,” Puryear once remarked. While not tied to a central cord, the tight coils and hair tufts of the six rows of rawhide are “dyed in codified colors” similar to the quipu’s “series of cotton or wool threads.” However, these coils and tufts function primarily as racial signifiers rather than merely formal colors to be decoded (Fig. 19). The rawhide lengths twisted by the skin of Puryear’s fingertips are “colored” skin whose tonal range extends from black to red, actualizing the play of difference among the spectrum of races and cultures that Beckwourth indeed bodied forth.

Rawhide became a material source for Puryear’s art while teaching at Fisk in Nashville in the early 1970s. Of his initial experiments with the substance, the sculptor related in a 2007 interview, “I was teaching at Fisk University, a historically black college, and it was in Nashville that I set up my first real studio. For a time, I put aside a lot of what I’d learned about working wood in favor of a more elemental, primal way of working…I also began using rawhide made from fresh cowskins from local slaughterhouses.” While Puryear found rawhide’s malleability

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137 Puryear, as quoted in Richard Powell, “A Conversation with Martin Puryear,” 106.
138 Ibid., 104.
most suitable to manual manipulation, it was the medium’s broad usage that most appealed to
him,

The rawhide work fascinated me because it represented a connection to nearly every
human culture that uses skins, that transforms raw animal tissue into human artifacts. The
translucency of the dried skins attracted me, as did the way they went from a limp, soggy
membrane to a hard, rigid form that could be molded as it dried. It seemed like a kind of
primitive fiberglass. It was also interesting to work with a material directly from nature,
not unrefined, not industrially processed.139

Here the sculptor identifies animal skin (a “material directly from nature”) as a universal
medium (“… represented a connection to nearly every human culture…”). Accordingly, the
animal skin of which the six rows of rawhide are made (as much as the sapling that constitutes
the six others), locate them within a broader productive trajectory of “human artifacts” (homo
artifex: man, the artist). Therefore, Puryear’s “drawn-out scribblings” articulate the diegetic
content of Beckwourth’s life in a universal medium whose highly associative potential, by
implication, can be intuited by all who encounter it.140 These pre-symbolic scribblings stretched
taut, however, do not so much represent the specific details of Beckwourth’s life as recall the
bodily gestures that Puryear used to make his visual interpretation of them. Thus, while these
linear materializations do indeed evoke lines of epistolary prose to be read, they demand to be
understood as part of a visual testament to Beckwourth’s extraordinary life, whose tactile cues
are meant to stimulate the viewer’s touch, and, thereby, direct experience of his narrative rather
than its mere perusal.

What this visual testament illuminates about the historical figure’s “extraordinary life” is
his linear “social and geographical movement” between cultures as such movement is encoded

139 Ibid., 104-105.
into the very “frieze form” that that this visual “testament” constitutes. As curator John Elderfield explains,

The frieze is the exemplary narrative form in Western visual art, ideal for describing movement. However, what it traditionally describes goes somewhere, and what Puryear was now working with was the incessant, continuous mobility around a fixed place that attracted him to conical motifs, only to tire of that symmetry and sameness. The most explicit demonstration of mobility in frieze form is…, Equation for Jim Beckwourth, of 1980—…”

A broad horizontal site where very different sculptural elements are brought together, Puryear’s *Equation* prompts its viewers’ eyes to move laterally right along with Beckwourth himself as he is imagined to tread along the footpaths of rawhide and sapling between blockhouse and teepee. Though the graphic line typically belongs to the domain of the “sign,” the near abstraction of Beckwourth’s life into a matter of material lines with no transparent relation to actual referents in the world, prompts the perceiving subject to scan them as visual expressions rather than “read” them as signs with codes latent with deep meaning. This reality is exacerbated by the fact that one can only take in the whole composition and the relations between its various parts when viewing it from a distance, the same distance one occupies when scanning a horizontal limit. Thus, if one were to say, observe the lines of rawhide up close, one would only glean a portion of the greater narrative to which they belong.

When viewed from afar, the full extent of Puryear’s *Equation* in all of its various related parts come into view, including the fact that Beckwourth eventually “tired of savage life,” and left the Crow, casting “around in St. Louis for other employment.” In other words, Beckwourth’s life didn’t simply begin in St. Louis and end with the Crows, rather it circled. Therefore, when the viewer’s eyes scan the horizontal lines of multi-hued saplings and raw skin

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142 Ibid.
143 Bonner, 177.
thongs that link teepee and blockhouse together, his or her eyes don’t settle on any subjective beginning or ending but rather perpetually move to and fro as if tracing out an endless cycle of turns and returns.

Conclusion: Mediated Experience

“Transference,” as Noguchi described earlier, is the conversion of an original sculptural idea from “one medium into another.” Puryear’s *Equation for Beckwourth* completes this process, treating Beckwourth’s transcribed experience, however reduced or enlarged by the mountaineer, as an idea to be reckoned with in sculptural terms. Though narrating an experience, whose name (prescribed by the very title of the work itself) brings the work in relation to the world beyond it, Puryear’s sculptural expression does not treat its formal qualities as secondary to the named experience communicated, effacing them altogether as with commodity art, but rather as the very *means* through which it is spoken.

In an effort to distill Beckwourth’s experience into the precise and brief terminology of an absolute expression, Puryear geometricized his sculptural elements into a set of clear, fundamental and universal shapes that would be readily understood and comprehended by all who confronted them. Therefore, just as Puryear’s *Equation* resists altogether the received cultural hierarchy between the tribal and the modern, the sculptor puts all perceiving subjects on an equal footing, making the internal human sensorium rather than literacy, the key to an understanding of his art.

While Puryear’s geometric configuration of cones, cylinders and lines certainly alludes to a mathematical operation to be solved, it does not actualize one. Rather, it presents a tableau of figures to be observed directly as formal contents with symbolic relations to past events. Thus,
Beckwourth’s experience is materialized as geometricized sculpture, the formal qualities of which narrate it directly to the viewer (me), who in turn rematerializes it (along with my own experience of his experience) back into writing of which this very sentence forms a part. The aspirational tenor of Beckwourth’s narrative was given sculptural form in honor of another significant figure of African American history to which I now turn.
3. SOCIAL PROGRESS AS MANUAL PROCESS

Executives and Executors

There is something archaic, I guess, about working with your hands, because a lot of the most important activity artists are engaged in now is what you could call “executive activity.” I think part of that has to do with social class. I have a hard time thinking of myself as dictating to others how to do my work. And I think it has to do with where I came from in society, where I fit in society, the fact that my people were always executors, workers, their hands were always busy, their backs were always bent. It would be very hard for me to turn into the kind of person who is giving orders for the work to be realized by somebody else. I guess I don’t trust that.¹⁴⁴

“How do you think it does unfold?” was the question posed with regard to art, to which Puryear provided the above response.¹⁴⁵ As his own practice attests, the sculptor’s claims suggest, that art unfolds manually, a process the “executors” of which possess hands “always busy,” and backs “always bent.” Yet if “social class,” the societal level into which subjects are grouped based on their shared economic status, determines the type of artistic work performed, as Puryear surmises, then art unfolds manually exclusively in the skilled hands of the “executor” class, historically characterized by hourly rates of pay and manual occupation. As for the “executive” class, art unfolds verbally, issuing from the mouths of its members who give orders and dictate to others how to reproduce manually the results of the intellectual work performed beforehand in their minds. If the salaried and higher educated executives are indeed managerial authorities to which manual workers are traditionally subject, then, artistic work assumes a socio-economic cast, classed as it were into a hierarchical system constituted of two groups,

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.
counted separate yet hardly equal: the executives and executors. Puryear announced as much in the candid distinctions he made between the two different “camps” of work represented at the Yale University art department which he attended in the late 1960s and early 70s:

When I was there, there were basically two philosophical camps: what I would call the white-collar and the blue-collar artists. The white-collar were essentially the Conceptualists and the Minimalists. Their art involved either language and texts or would develop from an idea or text and later be fabricated by someone else. They were “hands off.” The blue-collar artists, which is what I felt was, worked with their hands…I was interested in working with my hands, in learning my craft as an artist, which at times made me feel slightly out the loop…The false premise is that if you work with your hands in a very deliberate way, you somehow cannot be an intellectual.146

As illuminated in his previous remarks, Puryear’s “people” were “workers” whose hands “were “always busy” and backs “always bent,” positioning the sculptor as one in a genealogy of manual workers. During this period, a manual worker was a “blue-collar” worker that typically wore navy canvas or cotton coveralls, the blue collar of which signified his professional caste. Thus, artists committed to manual skill—working with their “hands” and learning their “craft”—were labeled “blue-collar artists.” One among them, Puryear assumed a social identity and practice, both of which seemed all but “archaic” in relation to those of his executive or “white-collar” peers—the “Conceptualists and the Minimalists”—whose “hands off” approach to art, rather than the white-collar shirts that they did or did not wear, identified them with an administerial class of workers.

In his retrospective assessment of Conceptual art, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh claimed this “hands off” approach to art generative of an “aesthetic of administration.”147 “For this aesthetic identity,” Buchloh wrote, “is structured much the way this class’s social identity is, namely, as one of merely administering labor and production (rather than producing) and of the distribution

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of commodities.” Assuming the “rights and rationale” of a “postwar middle class” newly established in an age of economic, industrial and technological expansion in 1960s America, such artists oversaw labor, conveying and manipulating information for workers to consume as instruction not unlike the managerial class that supervised industrial production. Establishing a broad structural analogy between an administerial artistic practice and a middle-class identity, with few exceptions, Buchloh identified the structural division of labor in which they both participated: the administerial class originates in the mind a set of formal configurations transmitted to a manual labor force as instructional texts, graphs and commercial charts for the commodities—minimalism’s universal cubes or conceptualism’s idealist forms—for which they were made. Thus, the artist transmits a verbal model, from which the manual worker replicates a work of art to be exhibited before a public audience.

“In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair,” Sol Lewitt proclaimed in his economical “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” (1967). Following on Duchamp’s critique of visuality and the craft associations of art, the “idea or concept” that Lewitt described was often linguistic—word based—in nature. In the move from minimalism to conceptualism, artisanal practices of modeling, cutting, carving and constructing were displaced by photographic and textual strategies constituted of and initiated by language. Thus text—written or printed words—became the exclusive domain of intellectual work, the origins of which resided in the medium of the conceptualist’s speech which activated the making of the art piece. As for the minimalist, his speech, too, landed on paper as textual instruction for the industrial fabrication of his geometric

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148 Ibid., 128-29.
149 Ibid., 128.
forms. Regarded as a “perfunctory affair” in both cases, the manual execution of an idea was belated, a series of superficial gestures and aptitudes, the results of which, materially imitated the outlines of an extant idea. This faulty assumption led to the “false premise” that intellectual work and manual work occurred non-synchronously, in temporal succession, rather than simultaneously as part of a singular process. With manual skill excised from this singular process of ideation, it was further implied, as Puryear put it, “that if you work with your hands in a very deliberate way, you somehow cannot be an intellectual.”

This false division of labor in American culture has long puzzled Puryear and it is one of the fundamental problematics posed by his sculpture. “At bottom it’s a class issue really,” he says. “‘Art’ means thought; ‘craft’ means manual work.” But it’s never so simple, for craft means thinking with (not just about) material.”

Central to this notion is the idea that labor is meaningful. “As Peter Boswell notes, Puryear appreciates the anonymity of the craftsperson but leverages it to build unique works of art,” wrote Judith Russi Kirshner. Linking the hand and mind, Puryear utilizes craft traditions, fine woodworking in particular, to manifest his sculptural ideas. In a controversial keynote address given to an assembly of “craftspeople” at the 2006 Craft Leadership Conference in Houston, Puryear said as much, declaring “I would say that my day job is sculpture, usually made by hand, as often as not relying on trades and crafts or other workman-like processes in a variety of materials.” These workman-like processes carried out by hand, produce sculptural forms whose references to the world point toward abstract concepts.

The capacity of material substance and manual means to articulate such concepts, the dream of social progress in particular, is the central subject of Puryear’s sculpture *Ladder for*

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151 Puryear, as quoted in Robert Hughes, “America’s Best Artist: Martin Puryear,” *Time* 158, no.1 (July 9, 2001), 78.
Booker T. Washington (1996) at the mutual levels of theme and technique (Fig. 20). A carefully crafted 36-foot ash ladder, the maple rungs of which taper from approximately two feet wide at its base to an absurd 1 ¼ inches at its peak, conjures forth an illusion of great perspectival distance between its vanishing point and individual observer. This distance, however, also signifies ascendance, the vertical progress achieved once the ladder is manually climbed. For the subject of the work’s title, Reconstruction era educator Booker T. Washington, progress was indeed a manual process (Fig. 21). However, the progress for which he advocated was social. Up from slavery, the title of Washington’s own autobiography, was the climb for which he urged African Americans to equip themselves with craft, industrial and farming skills that superseded “mere book learning.” He projected that if economic equality through manual work was won, civic equality would gradually follow. Thus if Ladder is indeed “for” Washington, then its quick hierarchical succession of rungs signify the calibrated levels of society upon which the historical figure manually sought to secure an economic foothold in his day.

Washington’s commitment to manual work as a vehicle for social progress, however, was adamantly opposed by such political figures as W.E.B DuBois, who believed that only direct political agitation, performed primarily through public speech and legislature, could secure such equality. This preference for linguistic expression as the exclusive forum for intellectual work was a prejudice that both Washington and Puryear confronted in their respective times. Undergirding such prejudice is the belief that transcendence, intellectual or social, cannot be achieved in and through manual work. Put otherwise, craft fails to give rise to thought which renders manual skill an all but impossible tool for social progress. This chapter aims to show just how Puryear’s Ladder, a crafted metaphor of social rise through manual work, debunks such myths. Though criticized heavily, Washington’s advocacy for vocational training among African

Americans bolstered opportunities for economic and educational achievement, demonstrating that manual work could pave a path in which social progress might come to be figured. Undermining the hierarchical relations between art and craft, *Ladder for Booker T. Washington*, as I will argue, sculpturally metaphorizes social progress as a manual process.

**Artist as Craftsman**

Handwork’s capacity to generate all manner of objects—utilitarian and otherwise—was everywhere to be seen in the village of Segbwema, where Puryear was stationed as a Peace Corps volunteer,

One thing that struck me when I was in Sierra Leone was how rich life was for the people there and how much they could do with so few material and technological resources. I learned a lot from watching carpenters in Sierra Leone produce their work with no electricity. What they lacked in electrical power they made up for in skill and ingenuity and sheer muscle. It was pretty inspiring to watch. It was useful when I first started out because I was able to begin working with very little. I did not have the funds to equip my studio as fully as I would have liked, but knew it was possible to make do with a few hand tools.\(^{155}\)

Like his father Reginald, who improvised all manner of furniture in the Puryear household, the carpenters of Sierra Leone taught Puryear that in “working with very little”—basic tools and the hands of which are a mere extension—he could plane, cut and incise art into wood. The effects of this lesson registered in Puryear’s energetic wood cuts, printed engravings that he made while there, the techniques of which he would carry with him to the printmaking program at the Swedish Royal Academy Arts once his term in the Peace Corps ended in 1966. “When I ended up in Sweden in the mid-60s…,” said Puryear, “I knew two things: one was that I was committed to being a sculptor and the other was that I was drawn to the woodworking

traditions I’d seen expressed in Scandinavian furniture.” Independent of his curriculum, Puryear spent his evenings making sculpture in the sculpture studio, a dimensional conversion initiated, at least in part, by the very medium that he would eventually abandon: printmaking.

“It might have been the different ways of incising, which is a kind of carving, that got me considering again the way things were made,” Puryear explained. An incision, a cut into skin or other material, is a form of surgery (from the Latin chirurgiae) which means “hand work.” Within the medical context, incisions are made into the flesh of humans and beasts alike with a scalpel as a means of learning just how their internal systems look and operate. Excavating solid matter from hard wood through carves and cuts, Puryear transformed the medical skill of incision into an artistic one by which he eventually came to know how objects are constructed.

Soon after, incisions made into printed surfaces would become cuts into multidimensional blocks, assembled and gathered into whole, bounded objects by the kneading hands of the sculptor himself. “I wasn’t studying sculpture, but I was doing sculpture. I had been admitted to the printmaking department and was making etchings. In the evenings I would go into the sculpture area and work on my own. Those were some of the richest times,” Puryear reminisced. Those rich times were abetted by some rich encounters with the works and writings of some important European furniture craftsmen.

While Puryear’s newfound, dual commitments to sculpture and the woodworking techniques of its making, were bolstered by his critical encounters with the writings of David Pye, professor of furniture design at the Royal College of Art in London at the time, they were cemented by his exposure to the work of James Krenov, who Puryear once described as “a furniture maker of prodigious gifts and sensitivity, whose enormous influence throughout the

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158 Puryear, as quoted in Richard Powell, “A Conversation with Martin Puryear,” 103.
world of woodworkers was only then beginning to be felt.”

Stunned by the “quality” “grace” and “sensitivity to material” of the cabinetmaker’s work, Puryear sought out Krenov, who happened to own a small shop in the basement of a villa, equipped with “small but extremely robust” machines, a “very large workbench and superb hand tools, including a good number of wooden planes that he’d made himself,” not more than a few subway stops away from Puryear’s own residence.

“Meeting him in the ‘60s was an incredibly powerful experience in forging my feelings about craft and art,” Puryear reminisced. During the two weeks that Puryear spent with Krenov in his shop “just hanging out,” Krenov clarified for him “the fine, bright line between craft and art.”

“The result of meeting Krenov was that I was more committed, than ever to pursue sculpture, and more respectful of the commitment of the seriously dedicated craftsman. The clear distinction between his practice and mine gave me a focus and a freedom to follow my path with a lot less confusion,” Puryear illuminated.

This “distinction,” Puryear learned was that as a sculptor, he possessed the freedom to create a meaningful work of art with woodworking skills, without having to manifest a utilitarian object—furniture and the like—simultaneously. What is more, he learned that he could maintain his reverence for the “material mastery” demanded by the craftsman while relieved to know that he didn’t have to possess it. “The irony is that my work is often thought to be flawlessly crafted, but it isn’t,” Puryear says. “Art shouldn’t wear its craft. The work should transcend its virtuosity. Craft is what is necessary to get the work realized.”

If craft, as Puryear stated earlier, means to think with material, then its primary goal

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160 Ibid., 27.
162 Ibid.
is to materialize the mental pictures derived by its maker, an important lesson that Puryear would carry with him upon his return to the States.

Artist as Engineer

After working for several months as a designer for an English-to-Swedish translator for SCAN, a Scandinavian furniture company in Virginia, Puryear learned upon his matriculation into the master of fine arts program at Yale University’s School of Art and Architecture in the fall of 1969, that not everyone had bridged the art and craft divide. He says:

As a graduate student I found myself coming to terms with the developments in art that had taken place here while I was abroad. Minimalism and Conceptualism were dominant among those developments, but through it all I continued to work with my hands. This made me feel like an anomaly in the department, since so many of my classmates were thinking of art in ways that made the actual creation of the art object something perfunctory, even extraneous.164

If the artist-linguist (Conceptualist) treated the actualization of the art object perfunctorily as a mere vehicle for his ideas, then the artist-engineer treated it as a technological process of industrial production. One “within the growing ranks of young people who had turned to craft work in the late 1960s and early 1970s,” Puryear was “particularly receptive to Krenov’s rejection of the culture’s production mentality, which he blamed for “engineer” art—lifeless design motivated primarily by manufacturing expediency.”165 Quasi-industrial material, exposed production, and serial construction were the principles favored by “engineer” art, a modifier with which minimalism was often described in its day. Motivated by a desire to demystify the sculptor’s craft and influenced by the publication in 1962 of Camilla Gray’s The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863-1922, a survey of formal experiments including Tatlin reliefs,

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164 Martin Puryear, as quoted in Richard Powell, “A Conversation with Martin Puryear,” 104.
Rodchenko’s constructions, the “laboratory” work of Obmokhu group, as well as utilitarian projects such as Rodchenko’s Worker’s Club (1925), the minimalists recovered these principles from Constructivism, assuming the roles of artist-engineers.\textsuperscript{166}

Consider, for instance, minimalist Carl Andre. Widely known for his floor-based configurations of firebricks, wood blocks and metal plates, Andre constructed his own serial arrangements, evocative of Rodchenko’s modular economies, with industrial units of matter fabricated by factory workers. “He calls metal manufacturers, orders squares, and has them shipped directly to museums for placement on the floor. If he is not present for the installation of a work,” informed art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson, “he sends instructions for the museum’s installers.”\textsuperscript{167} Exacerbating the industrial division of labor, Andre issued executive orders to blue-collar workers to fabricate his firebricks and metal plates which he bent his back to assemble, at least some of the times, with his own hands.

While the minimalists were under the sway of Constructivism’s industrial engineer, Puryear was taken by the sensitive craftsman exemplified by Krenov, whose popular books—\textit{A Cabinetmaker’s Notebook} (1976), \textit{The Fine Art of Cabinetmaking} (1977) and \textit{The Impractical Cabinetmaker} (1979)—positioned him as leader of the modern craft renaissance in the United States during the Vietnam war era. An aficionado of modernism yet taken by Krenov’s example, Puryear simultaneously embraced avant-garde art’s technological method of construction and the woodworking traditions of the past that it sought to leave behind, producing wooden

\textsuperscript{166} Hal Foster, et al., \textit{Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism} [New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005], 508. For more on minimalism’s recovery of Constructivists principles, see Hal Foster, “Some Uses and Abuses of Russian Constructivism,” in \textit{Art into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914-1932}(New York: Rizzoli, 1990), 241-253.

\textsuperscript{167} Julia Bryan-Wilson, \textit{Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 52.
constructions that signify. The metaphorically suggestive *Ladder for Booker T. Washington* is one such example.

**Ladder for Booker T. Washington (1996)**

Prior to his experiments with the graphic arts and his final commitment to sculpture, Puryear was a painter.

I was lucky enough as a really little kid to see a guy, painting a portrait on my block, a black guy painting in oils a portrait of somebody right out on the street. And I was just transfixed to see it an absolute likeness. I remember it was like grisaille, it was black and white, it was like monochromatic...I couldn’t have been more than six years old, but I just couldn’t believe it, it just...and it was a black guy, painting another black person, with his easel and paints and everything and palette, right in front of the apartment. And it just blew something open in me.168

The structure of this childhood scenario that Puryear describes closely resembles that of an origin story: the “little kid” all of “six years old” sees a man with skin the color of his own perform an act of mimesis with oil paint. What is more, this man uses this paint to replicate the likeness of “another black person,” an act that opened up, for Puryear, the possibility of black self-representation. As seen in chapter 1 and chapter 2, Puryear has since exercised this right boldly, figuring likenesses of himself as well as the black mountaineer Jim Beckwourth in abstract form. Figuring a third, Puryear gave sculptural shape to the dreams of an additional extraordinary black subject—Booker T. Washington—in the form of a ladder.

“Do you remember much about how this piece developed?,” Michael Auping asked with regard to Puryear’s *Ladder* in a 2003 interview. Response at the ready, the alert Puryear replied:

Yes, absolutely. It was made from an ash sapling—a very tall, young ash tree that I cut on my property and brought into the studio. I kept it for awhile and I knew I wanted to do something with it because it was such an interesting form. Most saplings that grow in the woods grow ramrod straight. This one had a lot of very interesting undulations in its

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stem. I’ve always been interested in working with wood from nature. A lot of the sculpture I do make from wood that I buy, processed lumber—boards or planks, and so forth, that are veneered. But once in a while I like to get a tree and make a piece of sculpture out of a tree or part of a tree. In this case the undulations were fascinating to me, and I kept it for quite some time just in that shape, with a kind of broad trunk with the bark in it. Eventually I peeled the bark off, and began thinking about in relation to a ladder. I had been in France working at Alexander Calder’s studio on an invitational grant for nine months. This was about ten years ago, and I noticed quite a few of these homemade ladders made in the French countryside, mostly in tiny little towns in the Loire Valley. They would just split a sapling down the middle into two half-round lengths.  

Similar to the elongated sapling that centrally divided the space of Puryear’s no longer extant *Equation for Beckwourth* (1980), the ash rails of the sculptor’s *Ladder*, too, were collected from the outdoor surroundings of upstate New York to which he moved permanently in 1990 (see Fig.12). “I like taking things right from nature, going out and cutting the young saplings – hickory and ash saplings,” Puryear offered. Just as he witnessed the French do, he recycled nature (a young tree) into a homemade ladder, a farm-hand object, which closely resembles those he spotted in the French countryside. However, the sculptor’s ladder is hardly useful in the traditional sense, as the 36-foot ladder hangs suspended roughly 2 ½ feet above ground by a set of ceiling cable wires in the double-height concrete gallery of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth in Texas for which it was acquired in 2003. Rendering the ladder all but impossible to climb, its ninety-one “roughly made,” lathe turned maple rungs shrink speedily in scale, pinching at the very top nearly to the point of vanishing. “…I made measurements of each one,” said Puryear. “I could control the way that they tapered, the width the piece would taper and the way

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169 Puryear, as quoted in Michael Auping, “Martin Puryear,” in *30 years: Interviews and Outtakes* (Fort Worth, Texas: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth and Prestel, 2007), 249.
that the rung size would diminish,” he continued.\textsuperscript{171} As the maple rungs squeeze at the ladder’s peak, the rails narrow severely, the results of which produce a very long perspectival ladder.

Linear perspective (Latin \textit{perspicere}, “to see through”), converges the orthogonal edges of objects at a central vanishing point, narrowing them in direct proportion to the object’s distance from the observer to produce an effect of extraordinary distance.\textsuperscript{172} Puryear’s special interest in the application of this perceptual device, typically associated with the two-dimensional picture plane of painting, to sculpture stimulated his completion of \textit{Ladder} from the outset.\textsuperscript{173} Puryear explained,

\begin{quote}
For a long time I had been interested in working with a kind of artificial perspective through sculpture, which if you think about it is not so easy to do. With a ladder, a very long ladder, I could make a form that would appear to recede into space faster visually than it in fact does physically, by manipulating the perspective and exaggerating it by narrowing the parallel side pieces toward the top of the form.\textsuperscript{174}

This discrepancy between visual perception and physical knowledge of the ladder’s actual positioning in space would stimulate confusion within the viewer, an effect that excited Puryear who exclaimed of the ladder’s length,

\begin{quote}
And what excited me about that was that the length of it was such that you wouldn’t really be able to tell whether you were looking at something that had been manipulated or whether it was in fact truly receding into space through the sheer length. I certainly was going to manipulate it, but I was excited by the fact that it was long enough that you would actually have confusion.\textsuperscript{175}
\end{quote}

By calibrating the width of his serial arrangement’s rungs, Puryear rendered a three-dimensional object in perspective, ceding its solidity to a schematized representation. This

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{171} Puryear, as quoted in Auping “Martin Puryear,” 251.\textsuperscript{172} Joseph William Hull, \textit{Perspective Drawing} (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2010), 7.\textsuperscript{173} The idea of the ladder receding into space was conceived by Puryear years earlier in the mid-1970s; in 1995 he had proposed the installation of a 250-foot-tall ladder of similar proportions for the Tokyo International Forum building, a project that was never realized.\textsuperscript{174} Puryear, as quoted in Michael Auping, “Martin Puryear,” 249.\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
conversion of the substance and measure of the world into a rational and repeatable abstraction, Erwin Panofsky argues, is the principal effect of perspectival construction,

Exact perspectival construction is a systematic abstraction from the structure of this psychophysiological space. For it is not only the effect of perspectival construction, but indeed its intended purpose, to realize the representation of space precisely that homogeneity and boundlessness foreign to the direct experience of that space. In a sense, perspective transforms psychophysiological space into mathematical space. It negates the differences between front and back, between right and left, between bodies and intervening space (“empty space”), so that the sum of all of the parts of space and all its contents are absorbed into a single “quantum continuum.” It forgets that we see not with a single fixed eye but with two constantly moving eyes, resulting in a spheroidal field vision.176

In his subjection of minimalism’s serial structure to perspectival configuration, Puryear conjured forth a ladder of seemingly infinite and homogenous units that diminish proportionally as they recede in space from a “single fixed eye.” In such perspective, Puryear’s object rather than Panofsky’s “space” builds rationally from the vanishing point—structurally opposite the viewer—toward the viewer, who is thus placed in command of its pictorial “quantum continuum” of rungs. In this respect, the “homogeneity and boundlessness” figured by the ascending Ladder, discounts the diverse positions from which its multiple viewers encounter it and the binocular vision with which their “constantly moving eyes” observe it. Viewed frontally, the width of Ladder’s orthogonals is not apparent, rendering them as linear elements of a vertical scheme into which a singular view point is structured. This singular view point proffered by the object becomes the one shared by all who encounter it in the physical space in which it hangs.

Though linear perspective typically straightens out the spheroidal curves with which the retina perceives its objects, the shared vision that Puryear’s perspectival ladder makes manifests is itself distorted. As if to prefigure Puryear’s own manual contortions, the sapling itself was found “very contorted.” “That was one of things that interested me so much,” said Puryear. “It

would be pretty ironic to make a ladder out of something so distorted. So when I made it I actually had to split the tree following the undulations, which was a very interesting process in itself,” he continued. 177 Similar to Duchamp’s paradigmatic readymade Fountain (1917), the shape of Puryear’s ladder was found. Yet, rather than release Puryear from manual work, his readymade shape prescribed the form that his manual process was to maintain. After chopping the sapling down, the sculptor pursued the difficult task of cutting it straight down the middle with a band saw, leaving the rails roughly equal. He recounted wearily, “I didn’t want to deviate and make one half weak or thin, and the other half too thick. I also had to keep the cut as much as possible in the same plane, if you will. In other words, it undulated but I had to not rotate or spiral the tree trunk as I was cutting it. I didn’t want to make the cut rotate on its axis. If it started out vertical, in a sense, it had to come out at the other end vertical.” 178

Accordingly, Puryear’s task was to transform the once living wood into a sculpted ladder: “I’m real aware that I’m working with something that has recently been alive. Wood’s moving all the time, as you work. It’s shrinking and swelling all the time,” Puryear illuminated. 179 Ironically, the sculptor accomplished this troublesome task by painting rather than carving the “shrinking and swelling” sapling lying in wait in his studio. Reflecting on the curvature of Ladder’s rails, Auping exclaimed “…they almost look like they’re hand carved, as if you had carved it with a pocket knife.” 180 Offering a corrective of sorts, Puryear claimed that he did not originate the rails’ existing shapes, rather, he merely smoothed them with a drawknife and blade tool.

Well, it’s not carving to give a shape, because the shape is already there. It’s simply carving to smooth the shape, you might say. I’m only taking off a very thin layer when I

177 Martin Puryear, as quoted in Michael Auping, “Martin Puryear,” 250.
178 Ibid.
179 Puryear, as quoted in Michael Brenson, “Maverick Sculptor Makes Good,” 92.
180 Auping, as quoted in Auping, “Martin Puryear,” 250.
carve, to get past the bark, to get down to a certain layer of clear wood beneath the bark… I like to work with blade tools—spokeshaves, planes, drawknives—so that the surface has a life. It’s kind of like Rodin’s sculpture, the way he used his fingers to pinch and push the wax or clay or plaster around. You get the light sort of glancing off the surface in this faceted way. A Rodin sculpture can look smoothly rounded, but when you run your hand over it you realize that’s it’s composed of a lot of planes. It’s much more alive visually than if it was just ground smooth with a sander or a grinder.\(^{181}\)

In these phrases, Puryear treats his *Ladder*’s live rails as *surfaces* for animation. With the aid of manual prostheses (“spokeshaves, planes, drawknives”), Puryear applies manual strokes to the rails which produce “a lot of planes” not unlike the various facet-planes with which Braque and Picasso animated the canvases of their own Cubist paintings. “They’re like brushstrokes,” Auping declared in reference to the facets, the minuteness of which evoked for him the tedium of raking sand in Zen gardens.\(^{182}\) A riposte to the accelerated temporality of industrial production, Puryear temporally dragged out the production process, choosing the long way to “paint” his sculpture: rather than dip it in a stripping chemical, he bathed it in manual strokes. However, he sped up *Ladder*’s apprehension by its beholders: Puryear’s manual process does not reveal itself over time as with the multiple dimensions of sculpture but rather instantaneously as a single, unified image.\(^{183}\) Therefore, though Puryear rejected painting for sculpture upon leaving Africa in 1966, he has since appropriated painting’s effects for his sculpture. In so doing, he achieves a kind of sculpted pictorialism in which the object becomes a two-dimensional plane into which discrete meanings are embedded. Gathered together, the relations between the various parts of a given sculpture become distinct units of a sign whose compositional structure produces a metaphor or allusion.

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\(^{181}\) Puryear, as quoted in Auping, “Martin Puryear,” 251.
\(^{182}\) Michael Auping, in conversation with the author, October 10, 2012.
\(^{183}\) For more on painting’s presentness, see Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 148-172.
This pictorial unity typical of painting, which Puryear’s *Ladder* indeed embodies, is also a perspectival effect. As Panofsky explains, with the subjection of bodies and space to the two-dimensional surface of the picture plane, sculpture underwent its own form of “revaluation and consolidation” in the Romanesque period,

Thus the style of pure surface which painting had worked out found its sculptural counterpart in the style of pure mass. Sculpture again possesses three-dimensionality: but not, as in antique sculpture, the three-dimensionality and the substantiality of “bodies,” whose coherence…is guaranteed for the purposes of artistic effect by an association of distinguishable parts with individually defined extension, form and function (that is, “organs”). This is three-dimensionality and substantiality of a homogeneous substance, whose coherence is guaranteed for the purposes of artistic effect by an association of indistinguishable parts, with uniform (or infinitely small) extension, form and function (that is, “particles”).

In a manner typical of pictorialism, Puryear’s *Ladder* subjects its “parts” of “uniform (or infinitely small) extension, form, and function” to an indivisible structure whose coherence produces an “artistic effect.” This effect is compositional in which the process with which the pictorial object is made is given an overarching shape. With carving and sculptural arrangement now cast as painting and composition, Puryear’s blade tools become paintbrushes with which the sculptor paints a ladder the curvature of which makes the space in which it hangs seem, as Auping put it, “wavy.”

Put another way, the air appears to ripple along with the ladder’s undulating rails, nearly vaporizing the once literal ladder into a pictorial illusion. This process of dematerialization is analogized pithily by the series of shadows that surface behind *Ladder* as afterimages on the dins walls of its enclosure. Pictorial, wavy, and suspended, *Ladder* evokes the imagery of dreams—not the symbolic configurations of Freud, say, but the wavy imagery and kitschy dream harp sound effect of cinema that escorts an actor’s drift from reality into the

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184 Panofsky, 52-53.
185 Puryear, as quoted in Michael Auping, “Martin Puryear,” 253.
space of his or her imagination. This transport of the subject to a dream space of pictorial imagination is akin to the evaporation of “true being” that Panofsky describes,

The perspectival view, whether it is evaluated and interpreted more in the sense of rationality and the objective, or more in the sense of contingency and the subjective, rests on the will to construct pictorial space, in principle, out of the elements of, and according to the plan of, empirical visual space (although still abstracted considerably from the psychophysiological “givens”). Perspective mathematizes; it is an ordering, but an ordering of the visual phenomenon. Whether one reproaches perspective for evaporating “true being” into a mere manifestation of seen things, or rather for anchoring the free, and as it were, spiritual idea of form to a manifestation of mere seen things, is in the end little more than a question of emphasis.186

Exercising the “empirical” control obtained by manual manipulation, Puryear ordered the substance and weight of his dimensional ladder into a linear contrivance whose suspension endowed it with weightlessness akin to a vaporous image. In the manner of congealed vapor, the waves of Ladder’s rails ripple outward into space so as if to pervade the psyches of their viewers with the very social dream that they figure. Therefore, in a decade in which such artists as Mike Kelley sought to exacerbate craft’s abject position, its inferior and debased status on the cultural ladder, Puryear elevated it into a concrete, material sign of shared aspiration. The dream-like atmosphere that Ladder fosters among its collective body of viewers, however, is subtly contradicted by the fact that its ascending trajectory is entirely stunted at its peak. In this respect, contemporary viewers are prompted to wonder if Ladder might in fact be a pictorial analogue for the dream of social progress shared by Booker T. Washington and themselves rather than its actual achievement?

“The title came about very much after the fact, after the piece was finished. And it was an ironic idea to give it that title, it just seemed to make all of the sense of the world to me,” so said a reflective Puryear of Ladder for Booker T. Washington. The belated pace with which Puryear assigned the title to his work underscored the slow pace of Washington’s own social

186 Panofsky, 72.
gradualism closely analogized by the graduated ascension of the *Ladder*’s rungs. Describing the historical figure’s social views, Puryear emphasized the decelerated rate of progress to which they gave shape,

…he was very interested in starting our progress from slavery where we were and not being an agitator and not making demands, but just being ready for whatever advances were offered to us; whatever possibilities were offered to us, being prepared for them. He was quite the opposite of somebody like W.E.B. DuBois, who was a very, very savvy political person and much more analytical about the structure of oppression, and thought that to achieve progress it would be much more necessary for us to actually be forceful, and not to wait hat in hand until somebody gave us a job or gave us an opportunity to progress toward equality.187

For Washington, “progress toward equality” was a durational process which DuBois thought better to count as an immediate seizure. With quick political agitation DuBois’ chosen method of the acquisition of power, speed and means were the sticking points for the two influential leaders, the former of which advocated the long way. Washington once gave verbal shape to the gradual trajectory of his own hypothetical pursuit of a political career as a “Congressman, Governor, Bishop, or President” as a son of white privilege. “I used to picture the way that I would act under such circumstances; how I would begin at the bottom and keep rising until I reached the highest round of success,” mused Washington.188 With the content of speech, Washington conjured forth his own visual conception of success which he imagined as a “round” not unlike the rungs of Puryear’s *Ladder*. In this respect, the puzzle that the viewer is incited to ponder is this: if Washington imagined progress much the same way *Ladder* pictures it, then why would Puryear consider it ironic to title the work after him? With Washington in mind, Auping suggested “He’d probably… like the irony that it is a nonfunctional ladder, that it is essentially an invention.”189 *Ladder*’s inventive pictorialism, however, is not so ironic when we consider

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187 Puryear, as quoted in “Martin Puryear,” 253-254.
188 Washington. 19.
189 Michael Auping, as quoted in Michael Auping, “Martin Puryear,” 253.
that it was meant to visualize the leader’s gradual “picture” of social progress rather than its final actualization.

Born in a Virginia slave hut in 1856, Washington came of age in Reconstruction-era America, the tumultuous period following the Civil War. Once parted from their owners, former slaves were left to find homes and work in a political and social climate all but warm to African American enfranchisement. However, despite tenuous circumstances, Washington committed to gaining an education (a capacity to read and write), an opportunity newly acquired with the abolition of slavery. However, while Washington sought education as a means of attaining financial independence and self-reliance, others saw it as a means to secure “a good, easy time, free from all necessity for manual labour.” In his chapter “The Reconstruction Period,” Washington recalls “the craze for Greek and Latin learning” and the prevalent desire among African Americans to “hold office,”

The ambition to secure an education was most praiseworthy and encouraging. The idea, however, was too prevalent that, as soon as one secured a little education, in some unexplainable way he would be free from most of the hardships of the world, and, at any rate, could live without manual labour. There was a further feeling that a knowledge, however little, of the Greek and Latin languages would make one a very superior human being, something bordering almost on supernatural. I remember that the first coloured man whom I saw who knew something about foreign languages impressed me at that time as being a man of all others to be envied.

Thus the laboring body was a burden, a mortal coil among the many “hardships of the world” to be transcended by the mind, a mind bent on learning “Greek and Latin languages” to better suit it for the learned space of governmental office or the fiery pulpit of the Church. “O Lawd, de cotton am so grassy, de work am so hard, and the sun am so hot dat I b’lieve dis darky

190 Washington, 35.
191 Ibid., 38
am called to preach!,” moaned a “coloured man” in Alabama on a scorching summer’s day.192 This man’s bold exclamation to the skies while at work in the cotton fields, according to Washington’s retelling of it, epitomized “coloured” peoples’ wretched resentment toward manual labor, farming in particular, in the wake of their emancipation. It was this very resentment toward hot sun, manual work and their mutual associations with the slave class that frustrated Washington’s campaign for agricultural training in schools. Yet this attitude found its support in Reconstruction policy, which pushed “coloured men” into state legislatures and county offices, “who, in some cases could not read or write.” Washington identified this sprint to social progress “in large measure a false foundation,” “artificial and forced.”193 Similar to the “artificial and forced” effects of pictorial depth, Reconstruction policy implemented its own perspectival technique: it accelerated the pace of progress by increasing the rate of the subject’s change in position over time. In other words, one could be a cotton picker one day and governor the very next.

Eschewing the false rate of progress perpetuated by such tactics, Washington assumed a perspective of much more graduated proportions. “Besides,” he wrote, “the general political agitation drew the attention away from the more fundamental matters of the perfecting themselves in the industries at their doors and in securing property.”194 Determined to assist “in the laying of the foundation of the race through a generous education of the hand, head and heart,” Washington embarked upon several ventures, his founding of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in Alabama in 1881, most notable among them.195

192 Ibid., 62.
193 Ibid., 40.
194 Ibid.
195 Ibid.
On a newly purchased former plantation, his students literally built the Institute under his direction: making bricks, constructing classrooms, barns and outbuildings, and growing their own crops and raising livestock. In the process, students learned to meet their own necessities while pursuing academic training. While raising funds to support the Institute, Washington ensured that its faculty prepared students to become teachers themselves of farming and trades who taught in the new schools and colleges for African Americans spread throughout the South. The meta-logic of this chosen course, was that if African Americans learned to meet the commercial needs of southern communities, they would become indispensable contributors to the South’s economy (outside of the context of slavery), enabling them to accumulate wealth and rise as a class. The Institute, now Tuskegee University, has since trained thousands of African Americans, making their attainment of higher education and financial power possible.

An accomplished speaker, Washington traveled long distances to give public speeches away from the Institute, among them “The Atlanta Exposition Address,” in which he urged his fellow black citizens to “Cast down your bucket where you are.”196 “Our greatest danger,” Washington continued, “is that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the production of our hands, and fail to keep in mind that we shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify common labour and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life.”197 Dissolving the conceptual dichotomy between “brains” and manual “skill” that divides labor performed under capitalist society, Washington argued that material wealth would accumulate at the rate at which African Americans embraced the time-consuming labors of “common occupations.” Put otherwise, only by slowing down their

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196 The “Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition Speech” given on September 18, 1895, outlined the Atlanta compromise, an agreement between African American leaders and Southern white leaders in which Southern blacks would receive basic education and due process in law in exchange for submission to white political rule.
197 Ibid., 107.
labors—assuming the tasks of manual process instead of the rapid speech flows of politics—could African Americans accelerate their collective climb to Washington’s figurative “highest round of success.”

In a sardonic critique of Washington’s call, DuBois renamed the speech in which it was issued “The Atlanta Compromise,” in acknowledgement of the very agreement to which it gave voice. A single vision among many, Washington’s “picture” of gradual progress by “the production of our hands” offered but one measure by which to remedy the plight of African Americans in Reconstruction era America. However, if Puryear’s sculpture is a testament to its adequacy, it demonstrates that transcendence of matters, social or otherwise, that would seek to sap our powers of self-determination, certainly demand the collaborative labor of the heart, hand and head.

**Conclusion: Nonsynchrony**

Over a decade after Puryear completed *Ladder for Booker T. Washington*, arguably his most famous sculpture to date, *Martin Puryear*, a thirty-year survey of his work opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2007. In its wake, critic David Levi Strauss asked Puryear if he might proffer a few words of wisdom to a younger generation of artists facing an inevitably precarious career trajectory,

I think sometimes when young artists look at a career like yours, they might imagine that it’s been an unbroken string of successes and accolades, and one of the things that happens with a retrospective like this is that the rough spots get smoothed out in the art historical narrative. I know that’s not exactly how things went with you. There were good times and bad times, especially when the kinds of things that you were working with or on were sometimes considered so far out of fashion that there was no place for them in the art historical narrative. Is there anything that you can say that might be useful to younger artists about that? 

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Recognizing the disparity between his sculptural body and that produced by such younger artists, Puryear replied,

Well, it’s interesting that you bring that up now, because looking over a thirty-odd year span of my work, it’s obvious that my way of making art must seem anachronistic and out of sync with what is most vital in art today. I still work with my hands, in the belief that touch, or the way the material is manipulated, can influence the work, and that the physical making process itself can generate ideas, as well as bring them to fruition. And this is happening at a time when so much of the power in recent work resides in the ideas, whose translation into physical form has become almost perfunctory, capable of being farmed out to the skilled hands of others, often quite removed from the artist’s direct control. It’s odd for a living artist to say this about his own work today, but my way of making art seems very traditional, at least in its methodology, and in the values that guide the result. What I can say at this juncture, though, is that even as I am more aware than ever of urgent social realities, and of the youthful surges as the art of our present moment evolves in response, I hope I can continue to persist, and to hold on to what’s most important in my own work.  

Like his sculpture, Puryear’s “physical making process” traces out contradictory figures (sculptures) in time: they are simultaneously timeless (“anachronistic”) and nonsynchronous (“out of syn”) with current trends in contemporary sculpture. Though they are atemporal, belonging to no specific time at all, they appear specifically misplaced in the present. To be sure, Puryear has made his own efforts at maintaining stylistic and thematic independence from mainstream trends: he pursued abstraction when others were defaulting to a generic brand of literalism in the 1960s, he explored self-creation when the humanist subject had all but evaporated into thin air in the 1970s, and he looked to ethnographic sources for inspiration when others sought out the department store for theirs in the 1980s. However, it is the manual nature of his “physical making process” with which he produces his sculptures that keeps them perpetually out of place.

In the context in which artist and art alike assume the market strategies and material conditions of the culture industry, Puryear carves out an autonomous space for self and sculpture

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to produce meanings not delimited by consumer culture or racial politics. For the sculptor, the maintenance of this space is contingent upon handwork. Through such work, the sculptor builds a story into his sculptures that not only relates the course of their making but says “something unique and more deeply satisfying than the objects we live with.”²⁰⁰ For Puryear, this “something” encompasses the heretofore unarticulated complexities of the individual selves that his sculptures’ titles so name. His *Ladder*, for instance, figures the complex network of labors—manual, pedagogical and dialogic—through which Washington navigated his own path to social progress, in its very form. Washington, similar to Puryear, transformed the physical operation of manual labor into the cultural and theoretical dimensions of political agitation for full citizenship in the United States. Therefore, as *Ladder* demonstrates, Puryear carpenters and constructs single sculptures that speak to the self-determination and resourcefulness modeled by their respective subjects. Such model qualities can only be counted typical of Puryear’s sculptures though, as they are at once remote and resonant in our time.

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Fig.1. Martin Puryear, *Self*, 1978. Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska.
Fig. 2. Martin Puryear, *African Boy*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.
Fig. 3. Martin Puryear, *Some Tales*, 1975-78, Panza Collection, Varese.
Fig. 5. Martin Puryear, *Fir Beams (Spliced Stack)*, 1972. No longer extant.
Fig.7.  Martin Puryear, *Sleeping Mews (Where the Heart Is)*, 1990. No longer extant.
Fig. 8. Constantin Brancusi, Sleeping Muse, 1910, Alfred Stieglitz Collection/Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Fig. 10.  Martin Puryear, *Cedar Lodge*, 1977. No longer extant.
Fig.11. Martin Puryear, *Cedar Lodge* (detail), 1977. No longer extant.
Fig.13  Martin Puryear, *For Beckwourth*, 1980. Collection of the artist, New York.
Fig. 16. *James Beckwourth in Denver, Colorado*, around 1860.
Fig. 18. Incan *quipu*. Collecion Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Antropología e Historia del Perú, Lima.
Fig. 20. Martin Puryear, *Ladder for Booker T. Washington*, 1996. Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas
Fig. 21.  *Booker T. Washington in a poster*, 1911.