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The Performative Impulse in Art and Craft

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B Team

Conrad Bakker

Nick Cave

Cat Chow

Sonya Clark

Gabriel Craig

Theaster Gates

Cynthia Giachetti

Ryan Gothrup

Sabrina Gschwandtner

Lauren Kalman

Christy Matson

James Melchert

Yuka Otani

Sheila Pepe

Michael Rea

Anne Wilson

Saya Woolfalk

Bohyun Yoon

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Craft Out of Action

VALERIE CASSEL OLIVER

Craft only exists in motion.
—Glenn Adamson¹

Craft is inextricably linked to performance. As a genre predicated upon process, it requires the doer or practitioner to undertake a series of tasks in the creation of an object regardless of its material composition. Historically, performance, in the form of demonstrations, served as a means by which craftspeople could share their practices and techniques with other artisans and the general public. Such demonstrations, common features at world's fairs and regional festivals, ensured the persistence and viability of particular forms, the mass marketing of products, the dissemination of techniques, and the introduction of new materials. In short, performance was utilized not only to educate but also to reinforce the relevance of craft in the larger social and cultural sphere. This demonstrative aspect of craft performance provides a salient entry point for a discussion of performance as a catalyst and as an interloper to tradition. What if we step away from the concept of craft practice as demonstrative and into the dimension of craft practice as performance art, in which process is viewed as spectacle and workshops and collaborations function as participatory events in which the object is not just created but also used as an expressive element within a performance?

The latter approach finds its antecedents in the seminal work of artists who emerged in the aftermath of World War II. Many were academically trained in studio programs that were built upon philosophies developed at the Bauhaus, the German school that integrated craft practices with more traditional fine arts media such as painting, sculpture, and the performing arts (see fig. 2). One of the key objectives of the Bauhaus was to unify art, craft, and technology, and its teachers rejected the notion of a hierarchy among media or materials. In the years leading up to the war, many teachers and students from the Bauhaus, as well as other European artists, immigrated to the United States. Their presence

Fig. 1
Peter Voulkos conducting a public workshop in pottery making at Greenwich House Pottery, New York, ca. 1962



Fig. 2
The full company of *Das Triadische Ballett* (*The Triadic Ballet*), a Bauhaus production, Metropol Theater, Berlin, 1926, with costumes by Oskar Schlemmer

in universities, colleges, and design institutes contributed to paradigmatic shifts in studio art programs. Schools such as Yale University on the East Coast, California College of Arts and Crafts on the West Coast, and Black Mountain College in the South provided the foundation for an experimental ethos that would reshape the direction of art in the 1950s, eventually altering the course of contemporary art.²

Central to this new direction was a reexamination of the rigid boundaries between disciplines and a questioning of traditional hierarchies that separated “applied” art from “fine” art. Many new forms of art practice that emerged in the postwar era were characterized by an emphasis on performance, materiality, and process. The notion of performance as creative expression and not as mere demonstration proved essential to all facets of art making, transforming the creation of art from a solitary practice to one of spectacle, engaging the public as knowing or unsuspecting collaborators.³

Craft, like the fine arts, was influenced by the social, political, and cultural upheavals of the postwar period as well as by rapid advancements in technology. In addition, the establishment and expansion of studio art programs that integrated craft with other visual art disciplines led to a professionalization of craft and a broader definition of the field. Untethered from its traditional boundaries, postwar American craft began to engage with the avant-garde practices of the day. From within this context arose a generation of artists whose work deemphasized the utilitarian nature of the object, instead exploring the conceptual and contextual issues surrounding object making as well as the philosophical and social concerns that occupied their contemporaries in the art world, such as existentialism, aesthetic hierarchies, and the commercialization of art, identity, and culture.⁴

Early experiments with glass, ceramics, and fiber provide evidence not only of craft’s newfound autonomy from function but also of its engagement

with the art movements of the 1950s and 1960s.⁵ Pioneers like fiber artists Lenore Tawney, Claire Zeisler, and Sheila Hicks, as well as ceramist Peter Voulkos and glass artist Harvey Littleton, were expanding the boundaries of craft, skillfully excising function while elevating materiality and the objectness of the object. Works such as Tawney's *Cloud* series were environments that enveloped the viewer and transformed space (fig. 3), and the production of objects, as practiced by Hicks and Voulkos, often incorporated collaboration and communal, if not public, engagement.⁶

By the close of the 1960s continued experimentation with material, form, and presentation resulted in new hybrid forms that further transgressed traditional boundaries. Lucy Lippard's seminal exhibition *Eccentric Abstraction* (1966; fig. 4) chronicled an important extension of this new hybridity, in which sculptural objects were created using techniques, materials, and even presentation ideas drawn from craft. Some of the works featured also shared a unique blueprint in that they were created out of "actions," performative events that involved the body. Among the artists featured in the exhibition were Eva Hesse, who attended Yale University and studied with Josef and Anni Albers, and Bruce Nauman, who studied with San Francisco ceramist and Funk Art pioneer Robert Arneson.⁷ In developing the overall concept for the exhibition, Lippard was heavily influenced by conversations with her friend Allan Kaprow and his assertion that emerging minimalist art was not user-friendly. With this in mind, Lippard sought out and collectively engaged eight artists whose works, by Kaprow's criteria, offered "an organic, soft and huggable presence."⁸ Although *Eccentric Abstraction* helped introduce the concept of Postminimalism into the art historical lexicon in the late 1960s, the works presented in the exhibition—which employed untraditional materials and engaged ideas surrounding corporeality and performance—marked a significant shift in how process, material, and objects were viewed in the realm of fine art, radically shifting the paradigm

Fig. 3

Lenore Tawney
Four-Armed Cloud, 1979
 Knotted thread
 10 x 22 x 22 feet
 With dancer Andy deGroat;
 installation view at the New Jersey
 State Museum, Trenton



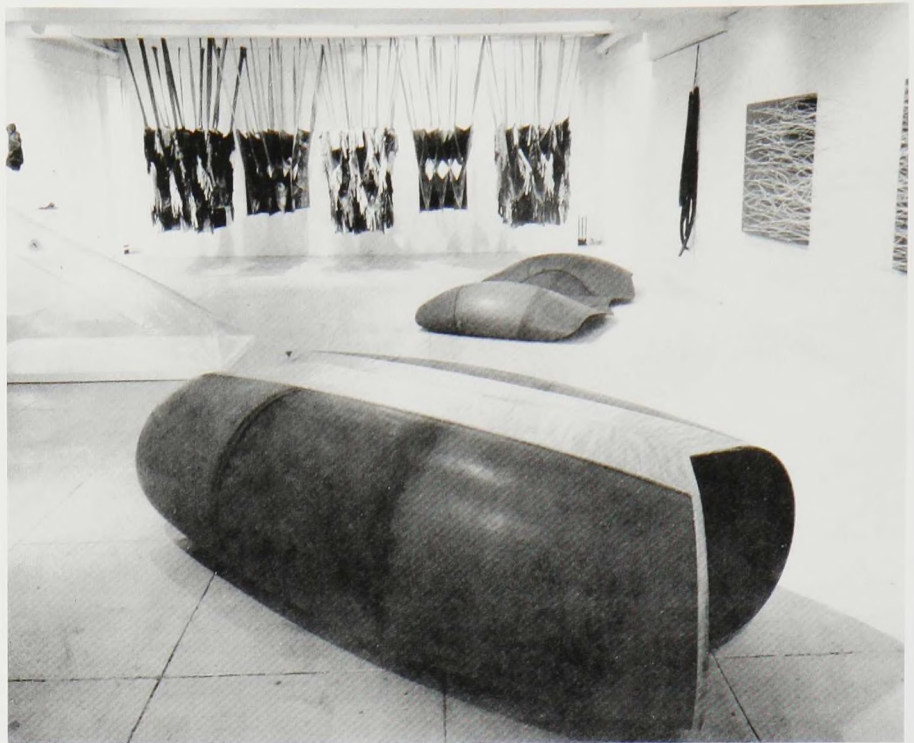


Fig. 4
Installation view of *Eccentric Abstraction*, Fischbach Gallery, New York, 1966, showing works by (clockwise from top) Frank Lincoln Viner, Eva Hesse, Don Potts, and Keith Sonnier

surrounding art and art practices. Hesse's compulsively wrapped, coiled, threaded, and layered work embodied a crafts approach to sculpture, while Nauman's works referenced objects created out of an action or a performance.⁹ The work of Hesse and Nauman would come to represent two different strands of art practice involving craft and performance that would continue to evolve in the following decades.

Extensions into performance and performativity fed into the autonomy of craft and also left an indelible imprint on the potential of contemporary expression not only to create theater but also to tear down the "fourth wall," which relegated the viewer to a passive role. The art that would emerge in the 1960s would, regardless of genre, push beyond the traditional boundaries and demand an active audience. For contemporary craft, the practice of incorporating the object or the process of creating the object into a sort of participatory theater or a theater of spectacle continued in the ensuing decades and into the new millennium. To date, the integration of the visual and the performing arts remains as pervasive and persistent as the utilitarian threads of the craft genre. It has provided the expansive framework for *Hand+Made: The Performative Impulse in Art and Craft*, which looks at craft and performativity from a variety of perspectives, including the porous walls of the theater of spectacle and participatory theater, the use of the body in performance to animate or in some cases alter the handmade object, and objects that are intended to "perform" by transforming over time through deterioration or regeneration.

In the early years of autonomous craft practices, artists such as Peter Voulkos and Sheila Hicks staged performative events in which they experimented with a variety of techniques in creating works of art. While the scale

of their projects seemed to mandate more elaborate processes of creation, literally liberating each from the traditional potter's wheel or loom, respectively, the concept of performance seemed as organic as it was intentional. The concept of participatory theater in this process really spoke to the extension of their practices beyond that of the solitary worker and into the realm of collective creation.¹⁰ As the scale of the work shifted, so did the corporeal relationship to its process. The focus was no longer on the hands but rather on the entire body and the necessity for other bodies. Art-making events frequently involved collaborators or participants as well as incidental audiences. Hicks's works were often created in established workshops where the artist would not only experiment with off-loom apparatuses to create woven sculptural works but would also collaborate with local artisans to explore indigenous methods of traditional weaving (fig. 5), in effect creating new techniques for her massive art forms.¹¹ These large-scale works produced from Hicks's collaborative creative events would oftentimes function as environments for the viewer. The artist would later continue to work with collaborators, incorporating found objects and recycled materials into her works.

Voulikos too emphasized performative actions and processes in the creation of his works (fig. 1). He would rework preconstructed vessels, essentially deconstructing and reconstructing them until he achieved a satisfactory effect. Voulikos's large-scale works often involved students as well as fellow artists, who would collaborate with him in workshop-like settings, shifting between participatory theater and theater of spectacle.¹² While the concept of participatory theater is more often used in a context in which process, rather than the finished object, is the goal, it is important to note that in earlier craft-based performative events, objects remained a steadfast and intentional goal. This

would of course evolve over time, and one critical shift in this discourse with relation to participatory theater occurred in the 1970s with the work of a former student of Voulikos, James Melchert.

Melchert initially studied art history but turned to a studio practice in ceramics soon after meeting Voulikos. Captivated by Voulikos's radical use of the body to create with clay off the wheel and his active engagement with audiences, as well as by his collaborations with others, Melchert soon began working with him. Melchert saw enormous opportunities to integrate concepts such as Jackson Pollock's "action painting" and the principles of abstract expressionism with ceramics as a means of pushing the medium toward more conceptual expression. Soon Melchert was not only doing his own experiments but also working in tandem with Bruce Nauman on projects and exhibitions in the Bay Area.¹³

Fig. 5

Sheila Hicks weaving on a back-strap loom, Oaxaca, Mexico, 1960





Fig. 6
Still from video documenting
James Melchert's performance
Changes, Hetty Huisman's
studio, Amsterdam, 1972

Like those of Voulikos, Melchert's early experiments focused on deconstructing both process and material. By the early 1970s he had begun working on a series of performances involving clay slip. In 1972, while traveling in Europe, he stopped in Amsterdam to visit fellow artist Hetty Huisman, who at that time staged exhibitions and happenings in her studio. It was at Huisman's studio that he performed the seminal work *Changes* (see fig. 6, p. 84). Huisman invited several of her friends, many of whom were notable figures in the city's cultural scene, to participate, including Lilly van Ginneken, Margaret and Claus Beeldman, Wil Bertheaux, Gita Jurians, Guido de Spa, Beno Premela, and Carl Visser. In *Changes*, Melchert displaced the body as the mechanism for the creative process and situated it as the object. The slip as material becomes the active element. Taking turns, the participants dunked their heads in clay slip and sat on either one of two benches (one near ice and the other near a heat source, so that the drying process was either slowed or accelerated). While the slip dried, it encased each participant in a *theater* of the body, in which internal mechanisms such as breathing, the pumping of blood, digestion, and muscle movement, as well as sensory functions such as hearing, were amplified.¹⁴

In *Changes*, the body became the quintessential vessel, the slip a catalyst by which performance enabled engagement. Melchert is significant for this exhibition because he is one tributary through which we can trace the historical antecedents of performativity in craft into the contemporary terrain. One other such tributary is fiber artist Anne Wilson, who, like Melchert, studied in the San Francisco Bay Area. Wilson's presence in the region came more than a decade after Melchert's, but she too has imprinted her own conceptual framework on the genre.

For more than thirty years Wilson has tested the elasticity of fiber and fiber art. Influenced by the work of Eva Hesse, she experimented with material and technique to examine and critique cultural meaning and social boundaries as they relate to "woman's work." In doing so, Wilson has skillfully integrated conventional fine art materials with craft techniques to deconstruct disciplines

and focus attention on the politics of gender, race, and culture. Performance has also been a constant in the artist's work and has ranged from the participatory to the solitary and the collaborative. In *hairinquiry* (1996–99), Wilson simply asked the general public to respond to two questions: “How does it feel to lose your hair?” and “What does it mean to cut your hair?” Receiving hundreds of responses by mail, e-mail, and fax, the artist posted the comments on a Web site. Part Mail Art and part new participatory theater, Wilson's project sought to unravel and demystify the concept of hair loss across gender and racial background to uncover the universal truth of loss. While this project felt estranged from craft and process, it underlined a stronger conceptual framework for Wilson's explorations. For a corollary work, *A Chronicle of Days* (1997–98), the artist undertook a solitary performance of endurance, embroidering human hair onto fabric to create a series of one hundred drawings over a period of one hundred days. The methodical and systematic action of stitching hairs onto fragments of white linen evokes the conceptual framework of On Kawara and other contemporary artists whose work documents a moment in time, while investigating systematic labor and action as performance.¹⁵

More recently, Wilson has embarked upon collaborative performances of labor and endurance. In *Wind-Up: Walking the Warp* (2008; p. 100), which she will adapt and restage for the present exhibition, the artist deconstructs the loom and the process of weaving to engage the entire body in the rhythmic act of weaving. Wilson's work incorporates performance as both participatory theater and spectacle, raising questions about the nature of performance: what it is, who participates, who watches, and what is exchanged. These questions become exceedingly porous and permutable not only in Wilson's work but also in that of other artists whose work is featured in this exhibition.

Contemporary artists working in craft have used, integrated, and employed performance not only as a catalyst for making objects but also as a means to engage the public in dialogue and exchange. Not unlike the artists of the Bauhaus, who almost one hundred years ago generated the contemporary parameters of craft as both utilitarian and autonomous objects and inserted the role of performance into the equation, contemporary artists are still employing performance as a means both to implode tradition and to generate new forms and practices. This is nowhere more obvious than in the work of the now-defunct B Team, which merged the process and technique of glassmaking into extraordinary spectacle events to essentially try to reinvent a five-thousand-year-old tradition. It is also evident in the work of Gabriel Craig, who sets up his jeweler's bench in public spaces to discuss the diminishing role of metal crafting in contemporary society and the cultural significance of jewelry made by hand. And it is equally apparent in the use of handcrafted pieces that replicate and embellish parts of the body in the work of Lauren Kalman. It is evident in the questions of labor and the economy of exchange raised by Cat Chow's *Not for Sale* (2002; p. 48) and Conrad Bakker's *Untitled Project: Book-of-the-Month Club* (2010; p. 40) and in the issues of temporality explored by Sheila Pepe (p. 92), who invites audiences to deconstruct her large-scale yarn installations through their own performance of object making, and in the diminishing work of Yuka Otani (p. 88), whose stemware made from handblown or cast sugar literally dissolves with use and over time.

In a world in which contemporary art and craft converge, performance is no longer a stranger to the craft genre. It is as expansive as the experiences of those who bring their own talents to bear, as in Nick Cave's integration of fiber art and dance. His history as a dancer with Alvin Ailey's acclaimed dance company as well as his profound knowledge of fiber, textile traditions, ritual, and costuming have coalesced in the fantastical body of sculptural works simply titled *Soundsuits*. Cave's *Soundsuits* are intensively and laboriously created and are literally animated through movement (fig. 7, p. 44). The spectacle of these objects in motion, as shown in the artist's documented performances both in the studio and in public places, extends the conceptual framework of craft into the arenas of dance and sound.

Each of the artists featured in this exhibition has made an imprint on craft through the performative impulse. While this exhibition represents only a microcosm, it strongly reflects an array of practices throughout various media that have developed over the years and have continued to propel the genre forward. While the debate over the future of craft in the contemporary landscape continues, craft itself has continued to evolve. Simply put, it is no longer relegated to the binary of functionality and autonomy or, more archaically, to high or low art. And in the context of contemporary art, such delineations have

ceased to be relevant as contemporary artists today fluidly move

between disciplines and genres to create new traditions. This

fluidity serves only to affirm craft as a living, breathing

entity that has found a home among a DIY generation

with an insatiable thirst for reinvention.

Artists working within the genre have never

ceased to experiment with form and presentation or, more importantly, the corporeal,

particularly in light of advances in technology

and its role in commercial craft production. The imprint of the

body within craft and the rhythmic impulse of the body in performance

remain at the heart of craft's persistence and its bold

leap into the new millennium.



Fig. 7

Nick Cave

Untitled (Soundsuit), 2009

Fabric, beads, mixed media

106 x 36 x 28 inches

NOTES

1. Glenn Adamson, *Thinking through Craft* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 4.
2. The imprint of the Bauhaus in the United States was pervasive in the postwar period. Former Bauhaus teachers and students migrated to the United States before World War II and taught at institutions such as Yale University, the New Bauhaus in Chicago, and Black Mountain College. Josef Albers began teaching at the newly founded Black Mountain College in 1933 and served as chair of the Department of Design at Yale from 1950 to 1958. He and his wife, Anni Albers, were seminal figures in the Bauhaus and strongly influenced a number of artists, including Sheila Hicks and Eva Hesse. Peter Voulkos initially taught at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles and then went on to the University of California, Berkeley. John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Willem de Kooning, and many others taught at Black Mountain, and their students included Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, Kenneth Noland, and Dorothea Rockburne. All these institutions, as well as others that are not named here, influenced the integration of studio practices with applied art forms.
3. In viewing the antecedents of this particular integration of craft or decorative objects and performance, I am looking to work that emerges from Cabaret Voltaire and Dada as well as the Bauhaus and the productions of Oskar Schlemmer. These references roughly span the period between the world wars (1916 to 1930s). Concepts of performance that emerged in the United States after World War II are framed in terms of “actions” and “happenings.”
4. See Bruce Metcalf, “Replacing the Myth of Modernism,” in *NeoCraft: Modernity and the Crafts* (Halifax, N.S.: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2007), 8–25. Metcalf laments the “autonomy” of craft during the modernist period but lays a compelling framework to understand the context of craft making in the aftermath of World War II.
5. See John Coplans, introduction to *Abstract Expressionist Ceramics* (Irvine: University of California, 1967).
6. See Tawney’s *Four-Armed Cloud* (1979) and her collaboration with dancer Andy deGroat; Sheila Hicks’s communal weaving in Mexico; Harvey Littleton’s collaborations with low-melt glass and his work in establishing Pilchuck Glass School; and Voulkos’s “workshops” including audiences witnessing the development of his pieces.
7. According to Robert C. Morgan, Nauman “used materials as extensions of his own body.” Essentially, “Nauman wanted his materials to encapsulate his corporeality and to document an impression of physical activity” (*The End of the Art World* [New York: Allworth Press and School of the Visual Arts, 1998], 79, 85).
8. *Ibid.*, 80.
9. See the reference to Douglas Crimp’s discussion of Eva Hesse’s work in Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 83.
10. I am using the definition of participatory theater as outlined in Rudolf Frieling, ed., *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; New York: Thames & Hudson, 2008). I have slightly deviated from the definitions outlined, singling out some aspects of artists’ projects created for this exhibition as spectacle, though they also engage audiences.
11. See Arthur C. Danto, Joan Simon, and Nina Stritzler-Levine, *Sheila Hicks: Weaving as Metaphor* (New Haven: Yale University Press in association with Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture, 2006). Hicks first established a workshop in Mexico in the mid-1960s. Her workshops would later expand to Paris, Morocco, India, Chile, France, Germany, Japan, Sweden, and the United States.
12. See oral history interview with James Melchert, conducted by Renny Pritikin, September 18 and October 19, 2002, Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/Melche02.htm>. Melchert, a former student of Voulkos, discusses his mentor’s work as performance.
13. These exhibitions included *The Slant Step Show* in 1966 at the Berkeley Gallery in San Francisco and *Repair Show* at the Oakland Museum of Art in 1968. See Melchert’s interview with Renny Pritikin (*ibid.*).
14. Judith Schwartz, *Confrontational Ceramics: The Artist as Social Critic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 122.
15. See Valerie Cassel Oliver, *Perspectives 140: Anne Wilson* (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2004).



Sonya Clark

Dryad, 1998 (detail)

Thread, cloth

10 x 14 x 14 inches

Collection James Dozier

In her work Sonya Clark draws upon her diasporic heritage, honoring the craft traditions of West Africa while recognizing and investigating the presence of those traditions in contemporary African American culture. Culture and the effect traditions and objects have on the individual are among her central themes. Integrating beads, hair, combs, copper, fabric, and fibers into her sculptural work, she utilizes techniques associated with women's handiwork, including beading, weaving, braiding, and sewing. In her Wig series, made from crocheted and braided fibers, Clark examines hair as a cultural signifier through the African tradition of braiding and the history of the relationship between hair and beauty. Women "wear" their hair, and Clark's headdresses reflect this attitude. The braids become sculptural and allude to nature, forming shapes like trees (*Two Trees*, 1998), peapods (*Unum*, 1998), and seedlings (*Pepperhead*, 1999). This creates a chain of associations from tree and plant roots to hair roots to cultural roots. Situated on the head, these wigs seem to be antennas, channeling experience into knowledge and cultural awareness.

SONYA

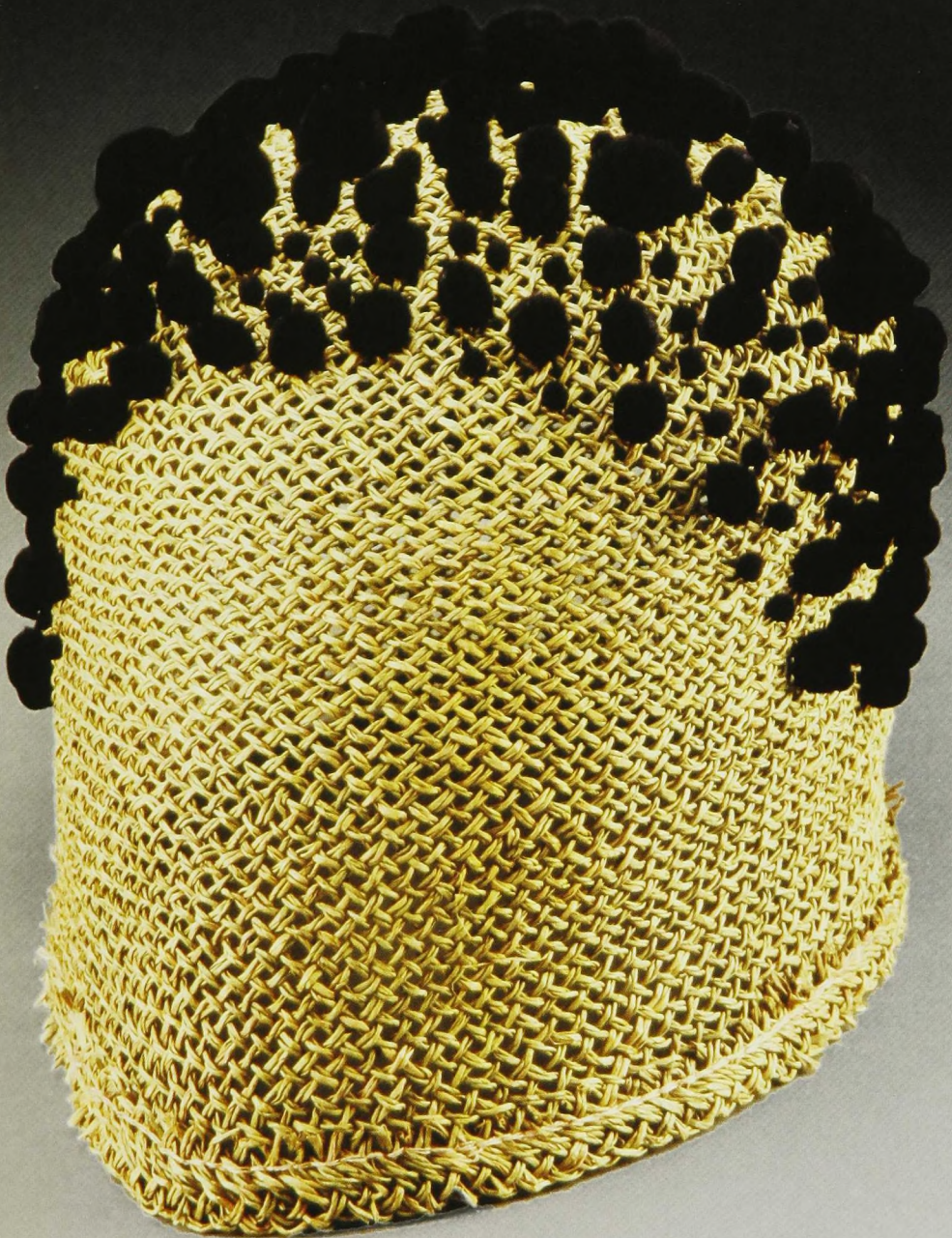
CLARK

Sonya Clark

Pepperhead, 1999

Straw, pompoms

10 x 14 x 14 inches





Sonya Clark

Two Trees, 1998*

Thread, cloth

6½ x 17¾ x 9¾ inches

Indianapolis Museum of Art; Mr. and Mrs. William B. Ansted Jr. Art Fund

Dryad, 1998

Thread, cloth

10 x 14 x 14 inches

Collection James Dozier

Spider, 1998

Thread, cloth

4 x 8 x 8 inches

Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Wisconsin; Purchase, through Rudolph and Louise Langer Fund

Hemi, 1998

Thread, cloth

4 x 8 x 8 inches

Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Wisconsin; Purchase, through Rudolph and Louise Langer Fund

Onigi 13, 1997

Thread, cloth

10 x 14 x 14 inches

