

Martin Puryear

Official U.S. Exhibition, 20th São Paulo Bienal

São Paulo, Brazil, 1989

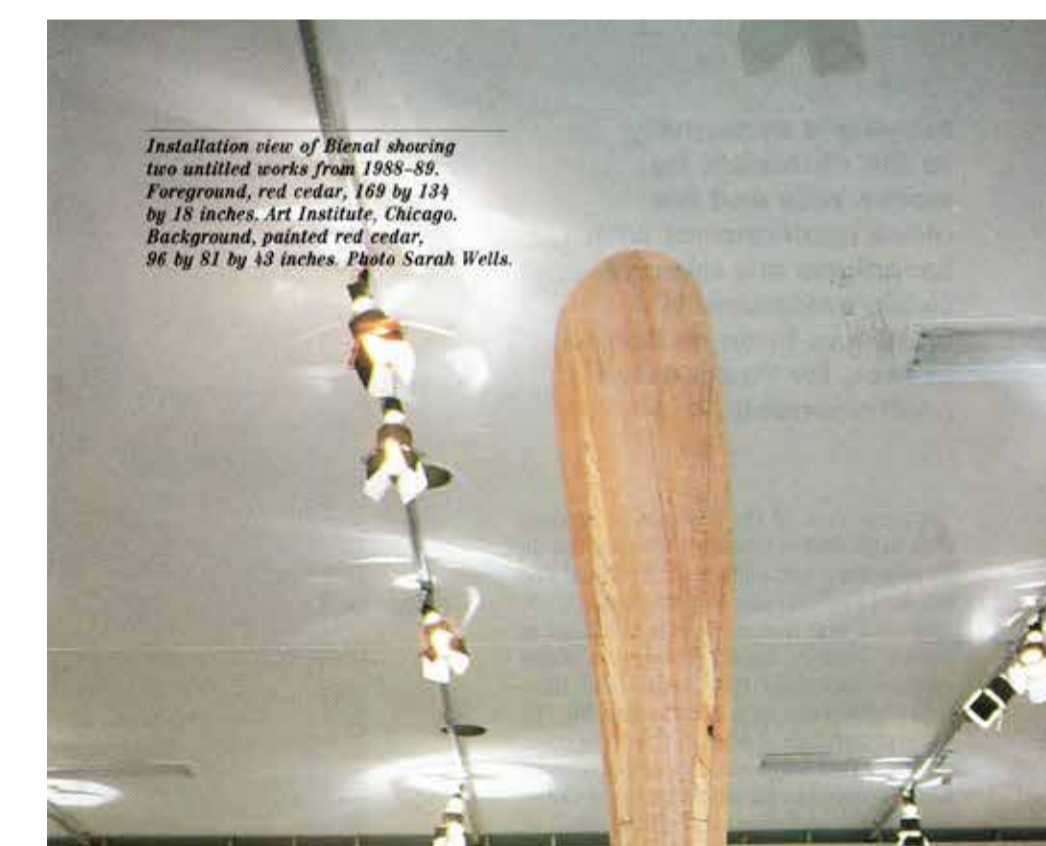
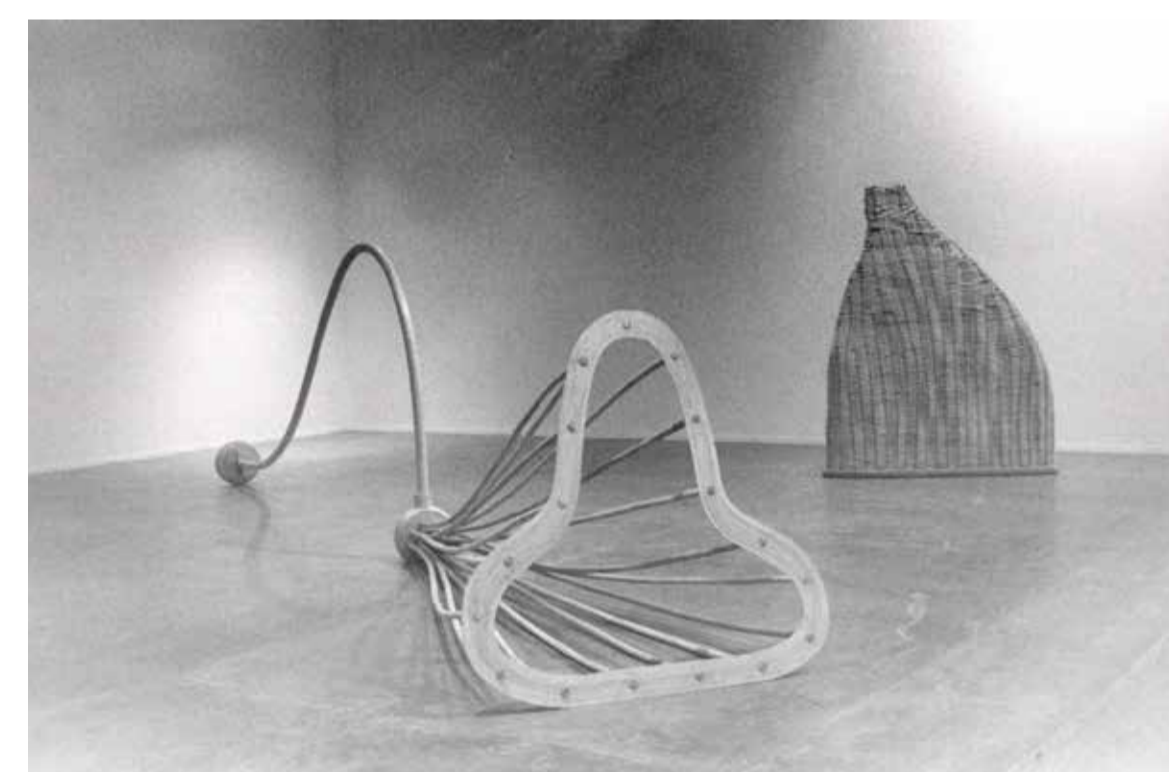
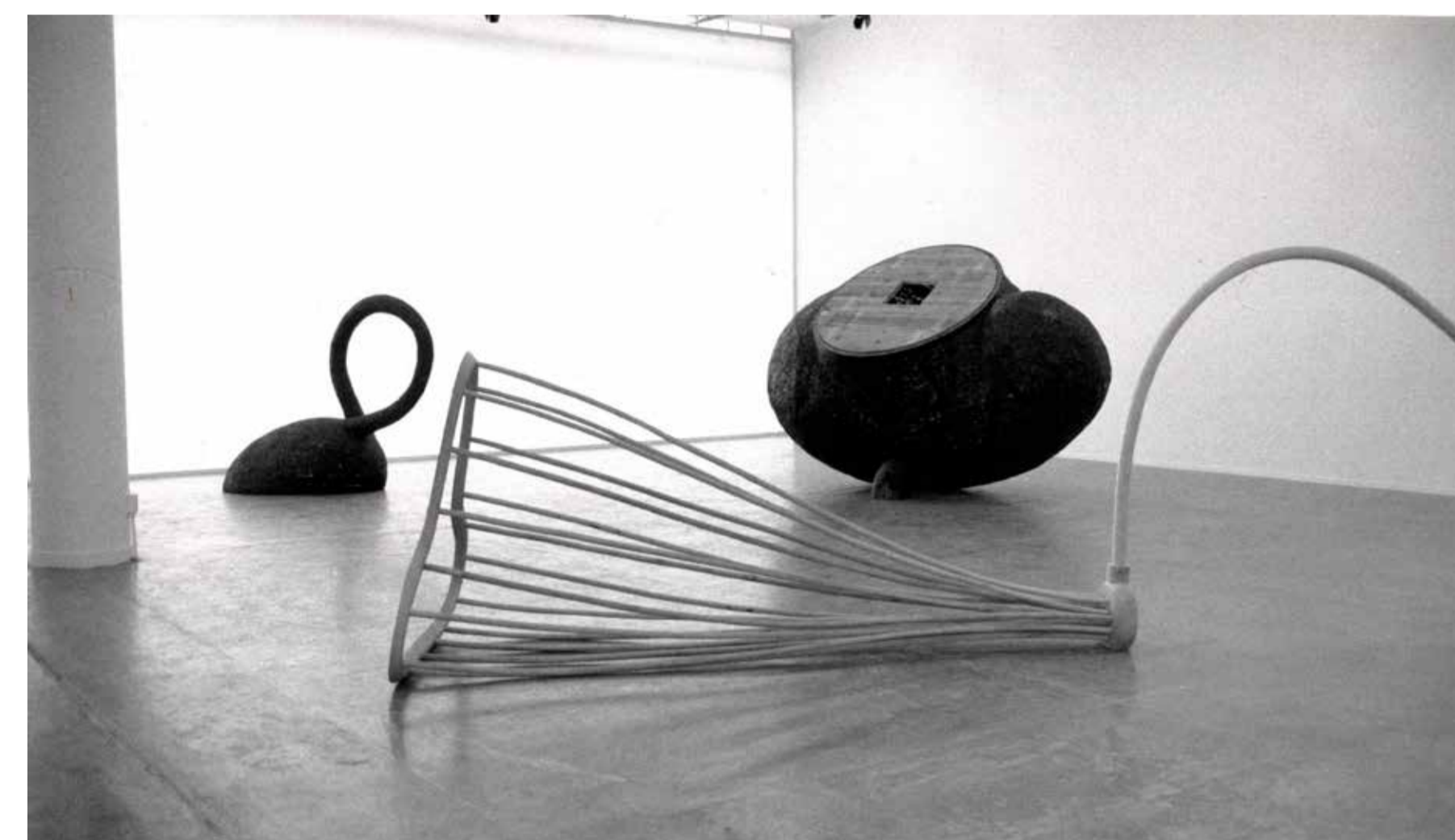
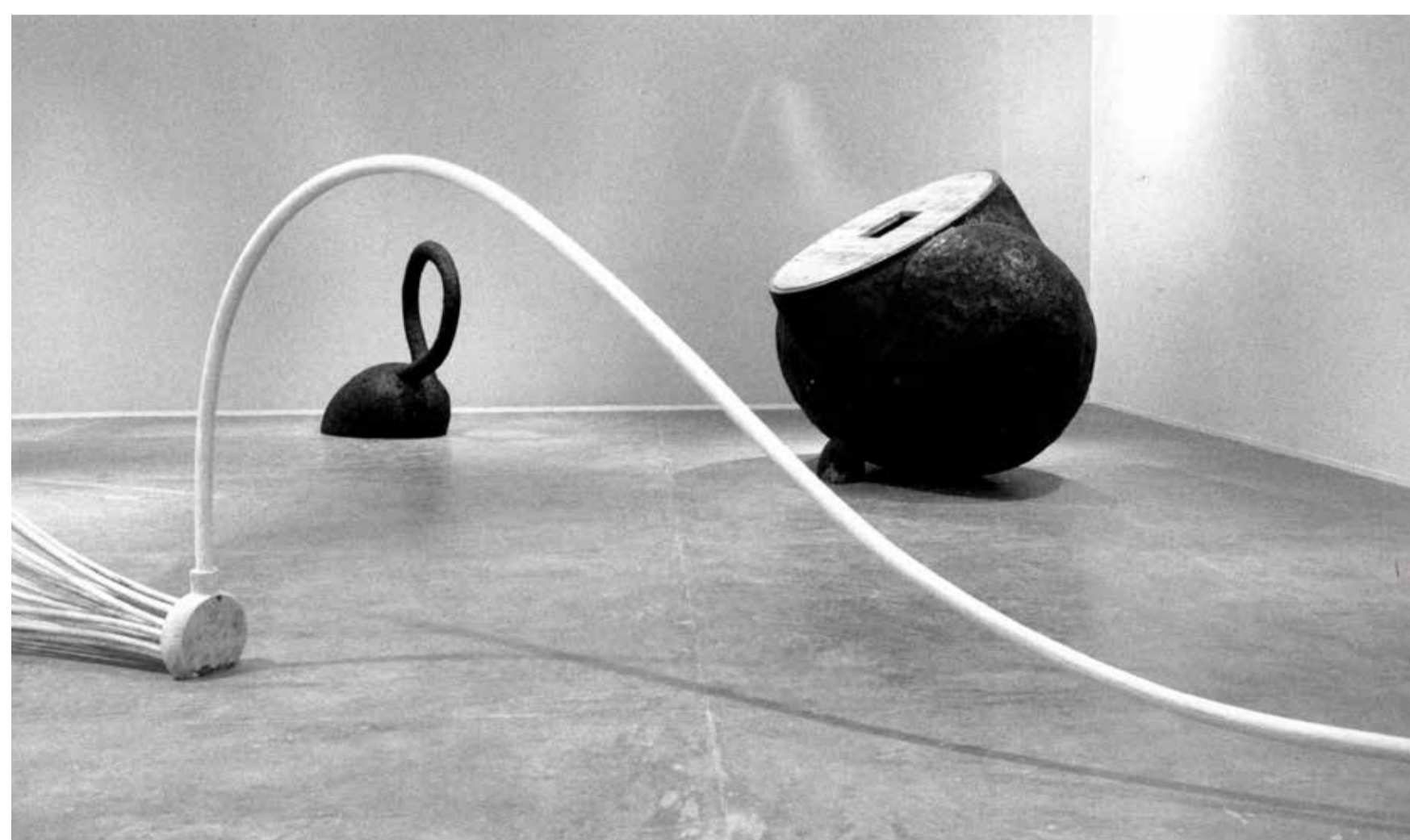
In 1988, Walker was contracted by curator Kellie Jones to design the official United States exhibition at the 20th São Paulo Bienal. The project started with a trip to São Paulo with Jones and the artist to meet with the Bienal team and lobby for the specific location of the installation. Walker was instrumental in choosing an area adjacent to the windows. After learning of frequent power failures at the Bienal site, Walker's idea was to install an extremely large stretch fabric over the windows, covering all the infrastructure to create a clear environment, but allowing natural defused light to flow into the space through the scrim. This accentuated the linear qualities of Puryear's work as one entered the gallery space, which the artist liked very much—and was inspired by a conversation between Walker and the artist while in flight to Brazil. This approach also maintained some light in the gallery space when frequent power outages happened.

The other specific feature of the installation design was the floor treatment and lighting within the space. Realizing the floor was the backdrop for most of the exhibition content, Walker had the cement floor totally stripped and sanded down to a smooth surface, requiring many layers of paint and residue from previous events to be removed. He then had multiple layers of wax—with buffings between coats—applied to the floor. The idea was to allow visitors walking through the space footprints on the waxed floor, creating subtle paths through the installation. Walker also went to great lengths, working with local suppliers, to create a lighting system with specific color temperatures and controllable beam spreads that allowed him to light specific elements of each work, while creating a very warm environment unlike any other installation at the Bienal.

Walker received special accolades from the U.S. Consulate in São Paulo not only for the praised design of the Grand Prize winning artist's installation, but also for the relationship he built with the teams from other countries, and with the teams who managed, maintained, and secured the facilities. With recommendations and assistance from the U.S. Consulate two years later, Walker was awarded an AAM-IPAM partnership grant, enabling him to return to São Paulo to design a new collection storage facility for the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP).



In the images to the left and below left, you can see the impact of the scrim that I installed over the windows. These photos by Sarah Wells were taken at night, when the gallery light dominates. The image below is during the day, when the scrim would create a glowing backdrop, accentuating the linear aspects of Martin's sculpture. (WW)



Installation view of Bienal showing two untitled works from 1988-89. Foreground, red cedar, 169 by 134 by 18 inches. Art Institute, Chicago. Background, painted red cedar, 96 by 81 by 43 inches. Photo Sarah Wells.

The image below, which is on the home page of this website, and the image at right are from a review of the installation in Art in America, January 1990. All photos by Sarah Wells.

Immediate Right:
Martin Puryear's installation, 1989, which won first prize at the 20th Sao Paulo Bienal. Photo Thor Crespi, courtesy USIA

Far Right:
Installation view of Bienal showing two untitled works from 1988-89. Foreground, red cedar, 169 by 134 by 18 inches. Art Institute, Chicago. Background, painted red cedar, 96 by 81 by 43 inches. Photo Sarah Wells.

