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Women, Land Art, and the Social (1978-1983)

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY in
VISUAL ARTS

By

Kris Timken

December 2020

The dissertation of Kris Timken is approved:

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Abstract

Women, Land Art, and the Social (1978-1983)
Kris Timken

This dissertation analyzes three large-scale, land-based, socially engaged artworks by Betty Beaumont, Patricia Johanson, and Beverly Buchanan that manifested at a time when interconnections among art, feminism and the environmental movement were establishing new lines of communication and creativity in the United States. During the late 1970s female artists led a transformation in land art from its roots in isolationism and minimalism to a vision that was activist, connected, and social. This dissertation explores the emergence, intersection, and divergence of the categories of land art and public art during the 1970s and early 1980s, showing how they evolved from monumentality toward an interconnected, relational approach to public artmaking. These three case studies assess the projects' aesthetic worth and also their functionality, whether as social reclamation, a source of food, a strategy for drawing people closer to the natural world, or a marker for lost social histories and economies.

Beginning with an analysis of historical conditions that finally enabled women artists to receive funding for large-scale land art projects, the dissertation then considers how funding influenced the work; the distinctions in foundational practices that women artists brought to this second phase of land art; and why the art world continues to separate out progenitor land art projects made by women artists from the broader field. The artists in this study worked abstractly; however, each woman

maintained a complicated relationship with feminism as a political or artistic imperative. Supported by feminism and greater political awareness, female artists pushed the limits of land art to create public artworks that addressed the era's pressing social and ecological issues. The site-based projects open up into multiple categories, among them public art, landscape design, activist art, and ecological art. Rather than aestheticizing biota, the featured women artists are unified by the desire to integrate art and biota. The dissertation, calling upon the scientific theory of open systems to provide a conceptual bridge between art and science, demonstrates that these artworks are complex ecosystems—social ecologies—through which land artists become understood as engaged citizens.

Key Words:

Public art

Ecological art

Betty Beaumont

Beverly Buchanan

Patricia Johanson

Activist art

Introduction

A Second Wave of Earthworks

The conventional, art-historical canon of land art centers on several iconic "earthworks" and a handful of pioneering male artists who made large-scale, permanent, monumental artworks in remote Western landscapes during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although female artists made contributions to the early movement, and while there have been several revisionist attempts by scholars to expand the genre, those artists who receive most of the attention are men who aestheticized the biotic world during a brief five-year period in the lands of the American West.

My dissertation, "Women, Land Art, and the Social (1978–1983)," moves beyond the necessary impulse to recover forgotten female artists as pioneers in the early years of the land art movement. Instead, I examine large-scale artworks made in the land by women a decade later in the early 1980s, at a moment when women began to make their mark in the field. By the late 1970s, female artists were at the forefront of the land art movement as it transformed from one that was characterized by isolationism and Minimalism to one that was activist, connected, and social.

In my analysis of three large-scale, site-based public artworks by female artists that currently sit at the margins of cultural and historical awareness, I demonstrate how, after 1977, the boundaries within the burgeoning land art movement began to blur. Calling upon the women's movement and the scientific theory of open systems, I argue that in this second phase of land art, women artists

generatively drew upon early earthworks as examples of prefiguration—objects and environs that opened up possibilities in landscape.

Focusing on the New York art world during the 1970s, my dissertation begins with analysis of the sociopolitical conditions that finally enabled women to receive funding for large-scale land art projects.[1] It then considers how the new fact of funding influenced the work; it explores how the women's movement influenced differences in the foundational practices of men and women in the second phase of land art; and lastly—but in perhaps the most significant research question—it investigates why land art projects made by women artists continued to be separated from the broader field by art historians and critics. I question the sparsity of art history's engagement during this era with art that foregrounds the politics of land use, environmental issues, and activist imperative. With a few notable exceptions, this is an area of art history that is largely ignored by scholars.

Whereas the history of the male avant-garde often appears depoliticized and remote from society, female artists, who are culturally conditioned to think and work in a collective manner, were better positioned to push land-based work in more broadly relational directions. Not all men who made earth art made hubristic, large-scale site works in remote landscape. Artists like Charles Simonds and Alan Sonfist received significant recognition in the early 1970s for community-based projects made in urban landscape. However, I feel that it is less productive to try to continue

[1] See Michele Helene Bogart, *Sculpture in Gotham: Art and Urban Renewal in New York City* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018). According to Bogart, during the 1970s, newly established public art organizations overseen by women linked temporary sculptural installations to projects of urban renewal and development.

to reinsert female artists as progenitors in the earliest years of the land art canon than it is to explore an era in which females were arguably at the vanguard of a transforming movement.

Therefore, my examination will fill in the gap existing in art history commencing at what I argue is an important point of transition that begins in the second half of the 1970s. My dissertation examines how female land artists who were affected, consciously or unconsciously, by the women's movement were creating art that addressed the era's pressing social and ecological issues. Art historian James Nisbet articulates the environmental realities that suggested a change in perspective toward those early monumental artworks: "Not surprisingly, when disaster on the scale of Three Mile Island, Bhopal, and Chernobyl arrived in appalling succession in the late 1970s and mid 1980s, earthworks and energy aesthetics from a decade earlier began to appear disconnected from the latest ecological imperatives facing the planet."[2] Supported by feminism and greater political awareness, female land artists pushed the limits of land art in the late 1970s, creating site-based public artworks that were integrated with social ecologies highlighting interdependence and connectivity.

By the late 1960s, earthworks were associated with individualism and geographically remote sites.[3] I discuss how, a decade later, earthworks became

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[2] Michele Helene Bogart, *Sculpture in Gotham: Art and Urban Renewal in New York City* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018), 216.

[3] See Elizabeth Baker, "Artworks on the Land," *Art in America* 64, no. 1 (January 1976): 97. Baker wrote that in spite of the cooperation it takes to enact projects on the land, "Work like Heizer's, De Maria's or Smithson's can also be seen as a very extreme form of artistic individualism, and its isolation in the desert as the apotheosis of the privileges setting-of the ultimate studio setting." In December 26, 1969, *Life* magazine published an image of Michael Heizer's *Rift1*, 1968 between the arial views of a logged landscape and a moonscape. The accompanying text noted, "Artists carved

something altogether different, as they were located within communities and often constituted complex collaborations. The women who made these works did not receive the support of traditional art institutions; by the early 1970s, many were forced to seek out alternative models for funding such as municipal and federal government agencies and corporate sponsors. Although male artists also sought non-traditional funding for their projects, until the late 1970s women, with limited gallery representation and almost no presence in museum collections, had far fewer institutional funding options available to them such as grants or patronage. I consider how the economics of land art played an enormous role in determining which artworks were promoted, and documented, by the art world and beyond. I analyze how funding not only made artworks legible to audiences but ultimately how it continues to shape the enduring legacy of the works themselves

In the 1970s, women artists began to site their work in the public domain without invitation. These self-funded, site-based artworks were temporary and, because they were not funded by traditional sources, many went undocumented and unnoticed by art institutions. For example, in May 1982, artist Agnes Denes planted a 2-acre wheat field on a landfill in lower Manhattan, two blocks from Wall Street and the World Trade Center, facing the Statue of Liberty. For her project called *Wheatfield: A Confrontation*, two-hundred truckloads of dirt were brought in, and 285 furrows were dug by hand and cleared of rocks and garbage. Wheat seeds were sown

giant 'earthworks' out of the desert," signaling a visual connection between industrial, ecological and creative forces shaping landscapes.

by hand and the furrows covered with soil. With virtually no funding, the field was maintained for four months, cleared of wheat smut, weeded, fertilized and sprayed against mildew fungus, and an irrigation system set up all by a group of volunteers. The crop was harvested and yielded over 1000 pounds of healthy, golden wheat. Denes has almost no documentation of the project beyond a handful of photographs. What she recalls most some forty years later about planting and harvesting a field of wheat on land worth $4.5 billion that drew attention to misplaced priorities was making sandwiches every day for volunteers who showed up to help and the insects that crawled up out of the Hudson river attracted by the wheat.[4] Virtually nothing was written about the temporary artwork at the time. It went unrecognized by the artworld. With no publicity, it was little more than a curious attraction for people in the neighborhood.

At the close of the 1960s, the post-war mechanistic systems of the military industrial complex began to shift in the advent of the countercultural revolution. In 1968 Stuart Brand published the first *Whole Earth Catalogue* with a section largely influenced by Buckminster Fuller's ecological ethics titled, "Understanding Whole Systems."[5] Information and systems theory, a scientific concept wherein the notion of systems as subjects was described by spatial and temporal boundaries captured the imagination of many artists in the New York art world. Women artists, and

[4] Author interview with Agnes Denes, February 14, 2019, NYC.
[5] In the decades following WWII, the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) became an important source of funding for ecological research. For a more comprehensive overview of the post WWII connections between Cybernetics, ecology and the military see Joel Hagen, *An Entangled Bank: The Origins of Ecosystem Ecology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

particularly women developing feminist practices, focused on the model of open systems, an example being a living organism such as a human being, as they sought strategies that disrupted institutional hierarchy.

Unlike a closed system, an open system is influenced by external interactions and provided a conceptual model bridging art and science for women artists working in the land. Art historian Christine Filippone writes that in addition to offering a liberatory yet scientific construct through which to incorporate the social, personal, and political, "open systems conferred scientific validation to the developing theoretical priorities of second wave feminism, including the elimination of boundaries and causal relationships in favor of process."[6] In this dissertation, I examine the importance of open systems and the theoretical underpinnings of feminist utopianism as providing an ideological bridge between science and art fostering vibrant collaborations and partnerships.

The Legacy of the Second Wave of Feminism

The political turmoil fostered by the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and the emerging women's movement helped inspire an activist movement in New York City that sought to address gender discrimination in the art world more cogently. Women's coalition building, networking, and consciousness-raising groups through the early and mid-1970s were primarily responsible for the explosion of

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[6] Christine Filippone, *Science, Technology, and Utopias: Women Artists and Cold War America* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 3.

feminist activism in the arts nationwide. Unlike networks among men, which for the most part moved vertically along professional lines, with male artists interacting with other male artists on different rungs of the ladder, women's networks interacted more laterally without as much currency of status or position to define a hierarchy. Information spread quickly among women through personal exchange and friendship.

Because the woman artists featured in this dissertation were treated differently than male land artists, I suggest that their case studies illustrate difference. In defining *difference*, I employ postmodern feminism, which does not essentialize difference in a way that leads to binary oppositional thought; rather, I suggest the validity of multiple readings and difference of opinion. Political theorist Lucy Sargisson suggests that "A postmodern critique of difference can thence interrogate the concept and show the ways in which, for instance, it is employed to serve the construct of sameness. It can further reassess and re-employ the concept by desimplifying it, and removing the vestiges of universalism (totalitarianism)."[7] Each of the following artists whose work I discuss had disparate experiences with the women's movement and political activism in the New York art world during the 1970s.

The popular understanding of the feminist legacy in work made by women artists during this era continues to be somewhat oversimplified. Art historian Abigail Soloman-Godeau examines the nature of feminist art in the 1970s more deeply:

> Feminist art of the early 1970s has come to be identified (negatively) with essentialist notions of femininity (i.e., the belief in an innate, fixed, and fundamental sexual identity), a specious universalism (i.e., the invocation of an ahistorical 'Woman,' a term obscuring all the differences between women),

[7] Lucy Sargisson, *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism* (London: Routledge, 1996), 83.

> and an assumption of the possibility of unproblematic self-expression or, for that matter, self-representation.[8]

In 1977, artists like Martha Rosler pointed to differences, "From the outset, a distinction between 'women's art' and 'feminist art': obviously not all women are feminists. Neither does an identification with the women's artists' movement imply any necessary commitment to feminism (which I see as necessitating a principled criticism of economic and social power relations and some commitment to collective action)."[9] Although the women's movement and feminist art practice were inextricably linked, there was friction. The women's art movement on the east coast, located within the well-established New York art world, was distinct from the Southern California feminist art activities. Far away from the mainstream art world in Los Angeles, there was more freedom to experiment.

The artists whose art I examine in the following chapters worked abstractly. However, each woman maintained a complicated relationship with feminism as a political or artistic imperative. Curator Alexandra Schwartz notes, "their artworks were made when the women's movement was at its peak and consciously or not, they navigated issues of gender in their work."[10] I analyze how feminism influenced their large-scale public artwork in multiple ways. As case studies the site-based artworks

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[8] Abigail Soloman-Godeau, "The Woman Who Never Was; Self-Representation, Photography, and First-Wave Feminist Art," in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Cornelia Butler and Lisa Gabriel Mark (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 337.
[9] Martha Rosler, "The Private and the Public: Feminist Art in California," *Artforum* XVI, no. 1 (September 1977): 66.
[10] Alexandra Schwartz, "Mind, Body, Sculpture: Alice Aycock, Mary Miss, Jackie Winsor in the 1970s," in *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, ed. Esther Adler and Cornelia H. Butler (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 415.

articulate a range of strategies that address issues of social, environmental and personal transformation.

Mary Miss, whose work is discussed in Chapter One, was the artist who was the most personally involved in the New York women's movement. As one of the founders of the Ad Hoc Women Artists' Committee, Miss makes direct connections between emerging feminist principles and a desire to make artwork that was integrated into specific landscapes. The notion of integrating artworks rather than dominating landscape is a significant aspect in the transformation of land art in its second phase.

Whether or not they engaged directly with the women's movement, many women land artists were challenged to become bridge builders and collaborators in ongoing community-based projects. Was their choice to create more socially engaged projects in part dictated by their non-traditional revenue sources? In the mid to late 1970s, municipal and federal governments began to turn to art as a strategy for reinvigorating communities and polluted landscapes. The jurying process for the commission was often more equitable than those of the larger art world. By 1979, the highest levels of the federal government, the scientific community, and the oil and gas industry, specifically Exxon, were concerned about carbon-dioxide emissions and what is now termed global warming. Exxon went so far as to create its own dedicated carbon-dioxide research program. This was an era of possibility wherein some corporations, concerned about their standing in communities as well as their potential for liability, grew more interested in working with artists in complex partnerships.

Unlike the art world, in which women land artists had difficulty gaining a foothold, corporations opened to the possibilities of land art at the same time more women were entering the field in the late 1970s. This brief window of opportunity was easy to miss. Once Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980, corporate sponsorship soon returned to funding more traditional “sited-sculptures,” a category that was still largely dominated by male artists, that prioritized formal aesthetics over ecological concerns.

In the 1980s during the Reagan era, a backlash against environmentalism ensued and women artists took the brunt of the abrupt policy changes. Many land artists who aligned themselves with political environmentalism suffered setbacks, but particularly women, who had become overidentified with environmental art, had more activist concerns. Ecofeminism, a movement that integrated ecological concerns with feminist imperatives coevolved with the women’s during the mid-1970s. “Eco Feminist Art,” a woman-centered branch of the eco-art art movement, aestheticized ecofeminist principles. According to eco-feminist theorist Ynestra King, “in patriarchal thought, women are believed to be closer to nature than men. This gives women a particular stake in ending the domination of nature—in healing the alienation between human and nonhuman nature.”[11] During Reaganism and a third wave of feminism that emerged in the late 1980s, those female artists who had embraced ecofeminism and made attempts to establish exclusively female canons

[11] Ynestra King, "The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology," in *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, ed. Judith Plant (Philadelphia (Pa.): New Society Pub, 1989), 18.

were viewed as perpetuating essentialism and were marginalized by the art world and third-wave feminist scholars alike.

Lacking government funding, cut off from the corporations, and continuously marginalized by the art world, female land artists who had begun to accrue agency in the late 1970s had mostly lost it a decade later. The artworks I explore in this dissertation illustrate the brief period of time in the early 80s when experimentation and collaboration were valued in art circles and beyond. The projects demonstrate the influence of broader sociopolitical issues in very different contexts; however, they also share particular commonalities. For example, the site-based artworks prioritize functionality as their aesthetic, each in their own way. In some cases, the artwork's function is its content.

Moreover, each project emphasizes materialism, such as tabby, coal ash, and swamps. Rather than aestheticizing biota the way earlier earthwork artists did, the women artists featured here are unified by the desire to integrate art and biota. I argue that these artworks are complex ecosystems—they exist as social ecologies that warrant in-depth examination. The feminist anthropologist Anna Tsing, expanding on the concept of the social decades after these artworks were made, writes, "The concept of sociality does not distinguish between human and non-human. 'More-than-human' sociality includes both."[12]

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[12] Anna Tsing, "More-than-Human Sociality: A Call for Critical Description," in *Anthropology and Nature*, ed. Kirsten Hastrup (New York: Routledge, 2014), 27.

Taken together, these projects demonstrate an interconnected, relational approach to public artmaking in the land. They incorporate civil engineering, architecture and scientific knowledge, but unlike the mediagenic earthworks made by their predecessors, the artists discussed in the chapters that follow made artwork that became invisible—both literally and figuratively. Through difference, the artworks comprise a broad survey of the expanding field of land art in its second phase that opens up into multiple categories: public art, landscape design, activist art, and ecological art, to name a few.

A few words about terminology. Although there have been sporadic small-scale land art exhibitions, it wasn't until 2013 that curator Philipp Kaiser and art historian Miwon Kwon staged "Ends of the Earth and Back: Land Art to 1974," an attempt at a large-scale revisionist exhibition in Los Angeles. The expansive exhibition examined a fifteen-year period (1959–1974) of heterogenic art practices and included work by men and women from the United States and around the world. In the exhibition catalogue, the curators note that the terms "land art," "earth art," and "earthworks" have for the most part been used interchangeably. Kaiser and Kwon define land art as the most encompassing term of the three, with earth art and earthworks as subsets.

Additionally, in this dissertation, I employ the term "environmental art" to describe the projects I discuss because during the 1970s, in the early history of the movement, site-based public artworks in landscapes were generally referred to by that term. Originally, the term environmental art connoted aesthetic works located in the

environment that related to their external conditions or surroundings. Gradually, the term encompassed more activist work that focused on ecological concerns. Eventually environmental art morphed into the category of ecological art.

Methodology

In this dissertation, ethnography was an important research method. Three of the four artists I feature are still living and are in their mid to late seventies. Additionally, all three are still in possession of their personal archives either by choice or lack of interest by the art world. The fourth, Beverly Buchanan, died in Michigan in 2015. Buchanan's archives at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art in Washington, DC were made available to the public in late 2019. Mary Miss and Betty Beaumont both still live in Manhattan in the same studio lofts they have inhabited since the 1970s. Moreover, Patricia Johanson still lives in the same home she retreated to in upstate New York when she left Manhattan in the mid 1970s. I conducted extensive interviews with each of these artists as I spent time with them in their archives. Additionally, they provided me with contact information of people involved with their large-scale projects from nearly forty years earlier.

Originally, I was concerned that my inability to interview Buchanan might limit my capacity to understand some of her personal motivations. In the end, the opposite proved true. Miss, Beaumont, and Johanson, as was to be expected, naturally struggled to remember details of their artworks and their creation, occasionally causing them to default to project narratives or the few articles that had been written

about their artworks. With the exception of Buchanan, the archives were located in the homes of the artists. In the space of domesticity, at kitchen tables and in living rooms, the boundaries sometimes blurred between the artist and the archive. The ability to unearth a long-forgotten document or letter in their archive, one that complicated or enhanced the narrative in their presence, was a rare and wonderful opportunity. Ultimately, however, the artists had control over what was to be discovered and how it was to be presented in these pages.

In researching Buchanan's work, I traveled to both Macon and Brunswick, Georgia, the cities where she worked during this time, where I met with friends and colleagues. Their various accounts of the artist painted a compelling, intimate portrait of a wonderfully complex woman. The most poignant moment of my research trip to Georgia was meeting with the contractor, now retired and in his late 70s, who helped fabricate Buchanan's *Marsh Ruins*. In forty years, he had never spoken to anyone about the project, and he was able to provide important insights about the work that no one else knew. At the Archives of American Art, while researching Buchanan, I was able to read her papers and journals uncensored. Additionally, Lucy Lippard generously shared with me her personal Buchanan file, which remains in her possession. I was able to directly match up correspondences, letter for letter, that the two women exchanged while Buchanan was fabricating the two companion artworks that I selected for the case study.

Miss, Beaumont, and Johanson are still actively making art. They still must struggle to get funding for their innovative work. With climate change having become

a central global issue, the art world and its gatekeepers are just now finally beginning to recognize the contributions these artists have made.

Chapter Outline

My dissertation focuses on three case studies that take place within a narrow window of time that I argue demonstrates a period of change in the land art movement. However, in Chapter One, to provide cultural, political, and aesthetic context for those three case studies, I employ several public artworks by Mary Miss from 1973-1983 as a lens through which to explore the differences in the foundational practices of men and women during the 1970s. Miss, who coined the term "social reclamation" in order to distinguish her art from the work of her male contemporaries, developed her ideas for public sculptures based on extensive site research. By the time Miss and her female contemporaries began to make large-scale public works in the mid 1970s, it was more difficult to approach a landscape as a tabula rasa. Her artwork as site-based did not impose ideas on the land, but rather engaged with what was already present in the land. The arc of Miss's career throughout the 1970s lays a foundation for the redefinition of public sculpture that emerged in the early 1980s and is illustrated by projects in the following chapters.

Over the course of the 1970s in and around Manhattan, Miss and the other artists studied in this dissertation created temporary large-scale works in public space that played a role in dissolving the standard practices of public art and redefining the role of artist in the public domain. In 1979, Miss's work was featured in critic

Rosalind Krauss's influential text "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," in which the author argued against the blending of sculpture, architecture, and land art. Krauss makes a call for a return to "purity" within the three fields, making clear what she thought distinguished the practice of each one. Focusing on the work of a female artist as she denounced heterogeneity and pluralism, Krauss inadvertently demonstrates the way that, over the course of a decade, feminism had made a lasting impact on American art, like it or not.

In Chapter Two's inquiry into a project by Betty Beaumont at the close of the 1970s, the notion of art as a reclamation tool was generating interest beyond traditional art institutions. Government agencies and corporations, unlike the art world, appeared more willing to accept proposals by women in order to facilitate ecological remediation projects. More and more women entered into the land art field via the environmental pathway. Perhaps no one up to that point had done so with as big a splash as Beaumont, with her three-million-dollar project co-sponsored by the US Department of Energy, The Smithsonian Institution, and Bell Labs, among others. Her *Ocean Landmark* is as an underwater work that is located 40 miles from the New York Harbor. It is composed of 500 tons of processed coal waste, a potential pollutant that according to the artist has provided the foundation for a new ecosystem that continues to evolve. The work is listed as a "Fish Haven" on the coastal navigation charts of NOAA (National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration). This chapter explores how over a two-year period, Beaumont collaborated with a team of

scientists and engineers experimenting with stabilizing the industrial byproduct coal waste, called coal ash, in water.

Ocean Landmark is remarkable not only for its location, but also for its complex network of partners and collaborators. In my examination of the project, I question how a relatively unknown young female artist navigated bureaucratic systems, multiple state and federal agencies including the EPA, the Department of the Army, the Marine Sciences Research Center, the NEA, and more, to fund, win permits for, and enact a multi-year, three million-dollar, groundbreaking environmental artwork.

Ocean Landmark did not fit neatly into narratives of feminist collaboration that were often associated with community art projects during that era. Even within the broad definition of art embraced by feminist publications at the time, Beaumont's bold, ambitious, hybrid project, which deployed a pocket barge to shape tons converted coal ash on the ocean floor into a large-scale living sculpture, in several ways more closely resembled an earthwork than a community art project. There was no established channel for this artwork, and yet in contrast to the artwork of Beaumont's male predecessors, the success of the earthwork rested on transformation and integration— qualities that link it directly to the case studies that follow it.

Chapter Three examines Patricia Johanson*'s Fair Park Lagoon* as a case study that challenges the boundaries of art, architecture, landscape design, and restoration ecology, and which foretells the role that artists and designers play in land use and environmental change. Unlike the first generation of earthworks, *Fair Park Lagoon* is

a landscape sculpture that foregrounds natural systems, collaboration and usefulness—sharing an aesthetic of function with the other case studies.

Between 1981and 1986, Johanson also worked with a variety of scientists, engineers, city planners, and local citizens groups to restore a badly degraded lagoon and make it a functioning ecosystem in the center of Dallas. Unlike the other early experiments in public art and the role art can play in the public realm, Johanson took an unusual approach by not aestheticizing the space. "*Fair Park Lagoon* is really a swamp—a raw functioning ecology that people are normally afraid of," Johanson said. "It affords people access to this environment, so they can find out how wonderful a swamp really is." Although bio-remediation and public art may seem like common practice in the present day, Johanson's work was a highly experimental, groundbreaking public sculpture.

A painter before she made her first earthwork in 1968, Johanson held a Bachelor of Arts in civil engineering and then obtained a master's degree in architecture from the City College of New York, all while pursuing motherhood and an art career. Although *Fair Park Lagoon* was originally commissioned by the director of the Dallas Museum of Art, the artwork was abandoned by the museum when it moved to a different location midway through the project. Ultimately it was funded by an environmental nonprofit agency. Johanson, who studied and worked with some of the most prominent members of the New York art world, and was married to one, nevertheless was willing to relinquish control to budgets and community processes, making hers a very different trajectory than that pursued by the

genius artist. In her collaborative work, she understood that “in order to have a complete ecosystem, you also have to incorporate the parts you don’t like.”[13]

Chapter Four focuses on two large-scale companion public artworks by Beverly Buchanan in the southern landscape. A decade earlier, male artists like Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson made earthworks in the vast, remote landscapes of Nevada and Utah. Heizer resisted ecological interpretation emphasizing art over landscape—reducing earthworks to “art on the land” projects, depoliticized works that merely deploy the phenomenological experience of landscape as an expansive venue that heightens the experience of the work. Buchanan inverts this dynamic deliberately, choosing to site her work in Georgia on land charged with the legacy of slavery, where in most cases that violent history has been ignored.

Buchanan sited her artworks in one of the most fraught of American terrains, one that differs distinctly from another resonant region, the desert. The American southwest is one of the most mythologized of American landscapes with its supposed emptiness that makes it prone to abstraction, and where projection plays an enormous role in land art. Buchanan, a queer black woman, chose to strike out into a very different yet equally coded and violent landscape—the American South—that is as dense and dark as the desert is vast and open. Buchanan often referred to her artworks as “ruins,” causing them in some instances to be identified within the context of

[13] Xin Wu, *Patricia Johanson and the Re-invention of Public Environmental Art, 1958-2010* (London: Routledge, 2017), 53.

prehistoric and Neolithic work such as Stonehenge, but as I demonstrate, this is a misreading of her work.

In the fabrication of her sculptures, Buchanan employed tabby, a historically charged material used in many plantation buildings, particularly slave quarters and sugar houses throughout the South. Just as with the other case studies, Buchanan's choice of material allowed her to seamlessly integrate her artwork into the surrounding environs.

"Women, Land Art, and the Social (1978–1983)" examines large-scale collaborative artworks made by women artists in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a period largely unexamined by scholars, when women land artists, ignored by the art world, found unique strategies and collaborations for getting their projects funded and out into the public realm. Foregrounding the women's movement and connecting it to the burgeoning environmental movement and the politics of urban renewal, I indicate how the following projects challenge the previous decade's boundaries of land art as apolitical and isolationist and instead link land art to social change and activism, through which land artists become understood as engaged citizens.

Chapter 1

Toward a Redefinition of Pubic Art: Mary Miss, American Feminism, and Social Reclamation

> The art world at that time still felt very exclusionary, and although it is not often discussed, the women's movement was extremely important in expanding the range of art practice.[1]
>
> –Mary Miss

Untitled, Battery Park Landfill

The redefinition of public art by American women artists during the 1970s begins in 1973 in a landfill, one of the few unregulated spaces that still existed in Manhattan. The shoreline jutting out from the west side of the southern tip of Manhattan was historically a thriving dockyard. By the late 1950s, as commercial air transportation gained popularity and the passenger ship business declined, the piers fell into disrepair. In 1968 the city established the Battery Park Authority to revitalize the nearly 100-acre abandoned site. The first phase of the revitalization plan was to create a landfill with the rock and soil excavated during the construction of the original World Trade Center and several other major construction projects that took place during the early 1970s.

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[1] As quoted in Ed Spyros Papapetros, *Retracing the Expanded Field: Encounters Between Art and Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 180.

Figure 1. Mary Miss, *Untitled*, Battery Park Landfill, NY, 1973, photographs, http://marymiss.com/projects/battery-park-landfill/.

On this desolate sliver of land between the Hudson River and Manhattan—acre upon acre of sandy soil sprayed with oil to keep it from blowing away—artist Mary Miss chose to locate one of her early outdoor temporary sculptures, *Untitled* (Figure 1). Although the waterfront landfill slated for development was still largely vacant unlike the bustling Battery Park District just below it, Miss initially received some resistance from officials. Eventually, she garnered support from several women working for the Department of Cultural Affairs in the administration of New York City Mayor John Lindsay. Responding to the rise of the women's movement, the administration had established public art organizations that were predominantly staffed by women to promote the installation of temporary public sculpture as a form of urban renewal.[2] The emerging network of agencies run by women hired many female artists for their various urban renewal projects. Women artists, contending with limited opportunities to exhibit their work, were willing to be flexible and work

[2] Michele H. Bogart, *Sculpture in Gotham: Art and Urban Renewal in New York City* (London: Reaction Books LTD, 2018), 95.

for cheap. Like many artists at that time, Mary Miss wanted to experiment in a large space that breached the traditional boundaries of art venues.

Miss's sculpture, comprised of a series of five flat, wooden, fence-like fragments that the artist referred to as "insubstantial billboard-like structures" equally spaced fifty feet apart, was difficult to fully appreciate unless it was viewed head on. Each "fence" had a circle cut out of its center which produced five concentric circles. The top of the first circle was set high enough to create a thin line of fencing that separated it from the sky. The circles that followed gradually descended until the last was just an arc resting against the dirt. Someone approaching the sculpture from the north could miss it entirely. Although Miss intentionally placed the sculpture where it could be accessed by anyone, it took physical engagement and a discerning eye to fully appreciate the work.

In her 1973 review of Miss's *Untitled* for "Art in America," Lucy Lippard, an art critic who had experience viewing abstract sculpture placed in urban sites, noted her displeasure at having to "slog through weird pale sand" to find the sculpture. As she came upon the piece, her disappointment persisted. She was underwhelmed by "a row of serial shapes, a familiar and for the most part exhausted idea." It wasn't until Lippard stood directly in the front of the piece that she could appreciate Miss's intentions:

> You are standing outdoors; you have approached something that appears flimsy and small in its vast surroundings, you are now inside of it, drawn into its central focus your perspective aggrandizing magically. The plank fences, only false facades nailed to support posts on the back, become what they

> are—not the sculpture but the vehicle for the experience of the sculpture, which in fact exists in thin air, or rather in distance crystallized.[3]

As it turned out, Lippard's only real disappointment with the artwork lay in how few people would come to see it.

For present-day viewers, the existing photographs of the temporary artwork fail to capture Lippard's physical experience of the sculpture. The moment when the materials fall away to reveal something more does not translate in the images that are the only preserved trace of the sculpture. In several black and white aerial views, the structure reads as robust—not flimsy. Its formal, geometric shapes stand starkly in the landscape in sharp relief against the pale sand. Situated within an urban desert, the piece might reference earthworks made in remote landscapes; however, in contrast to projects by Smithson and Heizer created during that era, *Untitled* is decidedly inorganic and more closely aligned with Minimalism. *Untitled* is distinct from the work of Miss's contemporaries who came out of Minimalism. Although the sculpture's forms are geometric and serialized, in closeup reproductions of the artwork the common planks and posts do not suggest purity of form and realization of artistic vision, but rather something unfinished—under construction and open to possibility. The characteristic of something left unfinished or under construction recalls another more well-known artwork also made by a female sculptor in 1973 when Nancy Holt created the *Sun Tunnels*, a permanent earthwork in the Great Basin Desert (Figure 2).

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[3] Lucy Lippard, *Mary Miss; An Extremely Clear Situation*, reprinted in *From the Center* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976), 212.

Figure 2. Nancy Holt, *Sun Tunnels*, Utah, 1973-76, photographs.

Located in the Utah desert, *Sun Tunnels* is a four-hour drive away from Holt's husband Robert Smithson's iconic earthwork *Spiral Jetty* in Wendover, Utah. The sculpture consists of four cast-concrete cylinders that are eighteen-feet long and eight-feet in diameter lying horizontally. The seven-inch thick walls of each tunnel are pierced with holes of different sizes in the patterns of four constellations: Capricorn, Draco, Columba, and Perseus. It is the constellations that establish the coordinates for marking and locating the site-specific artwork. The four tunnels are arranged on the desert flat so as to capture the rising and setting of the sun during the equinox. They form an open cross so that the view framed from one tunnel is in direct alignment with its mate (Figure 2). *Sun Tunnels,* unlike her husband's more sublime *Spiral Jetty,* but similar to Miss's *Untitled,* could easily be mistaken for debris in the Utah desert as the possible remains of an abandoned large-scale drainage project. Depending on the weather, time of day or month of the year, the artwork could be experienced as an arresting encounter or a muddy mess.

Untitled, similar to *Sun Tunnels*, has a congruent spirit. It could also be mistaken for a ruin. Lippard's embodied description of how the viewer must approach

Untitled in a specific way to attain the desired perspective can only be imagined. However, *Sun Tunnels* serves as a comparable example offering the viewer the chance of a similar encounter. If approached in the right way, the elements of *Sun Tunnels* become what they are, in this case drainage pipes and not boards and nails. As Lippard describes, when drawn into its central focus your perspective aggrandizes magically. Both sculptures deploy common construction materials that foster the possibility of a magnificent perspective without relying on monumentality. It is left up to the viewer to discover the reveal—or not.

At the edge of the built urban environment with the New Jersey skyline framed in the distance, *Untitled* read less as a sculptural object and more like the remnants of a structure. Relying on the physical engagement of viewers, the disaggregated sculpture as an improvised series of fences fostered a sense of intimacy within the vast open space. Integrating the sculptural elements within the environment, Miss's experimental piece not only referenced the urban buildings in the background but also explored aspects of landscape architecture within the liminal zone. Miss's approach marked a departure from the clearly demarcated boundaries of a universal notion of sculpture. *Untitled* was a transitional artwork that drew on aspects of landscape architecture and architecture in what became known several years later as the "expanded field." It operated in an arena that critic Rosalind Krauss would describe as between "not-landscape" and "not-architecture."[4]

[4] Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* (Spring 1979): 31-44.

Beyond Earthworks

In this chapter, I examine the second phase of land art, a period during the 1970s that opens up into multiple categories including public art, landscape design, outdoor sculpture and ecological art. This was a decade in which the issue of land art as reclamation emerged. In 1973, Smithson wrote a proposal for the reclamation of a Utah coal pit. In the proposal, Smithson asserted, "A dialectic between mining and land reclamation must be developed. Such devastated places as strip mines could be re-cycled in terms of earth art."[5] Smithson's expansive view of the role of art inadvertently benefitted female artists. Opportunities for female artists that began in the form of urban renewal projects in New York City early in the decade progressed into art functioning as land reclamation that engendered millions of dollars in sponsorship on the part of local, state and industrial funding across North America for a brief window of time from the end of 1970s into the early 1980s.

Unlike art world institutions, governments and industry, seeking ways to remediate abandoned or toxic sites, were more amenable to sponsoring female artists to rehabilitate or restore land. The second phase of land art, one that offered opportunities for women in the public realm distinct from the earthwork movement, marks a shift in focus from pure aesthetic concerns to thinking more critically about the role of art in the public realm and questions of land use.

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[5] Robert Smithson, *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: NYU Press, 1979), 20.

An abstract sculptor, Miss was among the first cohort of female graduate students studying sculpture in the late 1960s. I focus on the work of Miss specifically because she saw no separation between her artwork, feminist principles and her political activism in her effort to intervene on a universal notion of sculpture. As she explained, "For me, the 1970s were about dismantling things, about taking structures apart, whether these structures were the role of women, the idea of sculpture, or the notion of appropriate content."[6] The most discussed art that emerged from the feminist movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s focused on women's bodies and domestic spaces.[7] There has been much less examination of how the women's movement influenced the work of artists like Miss who worked abstractly. Although Miss's sculpture fits within modernist abstraction, according to art historian Sarah Hamill, Miss's sculptures "open up onto an alternative history of feminist art in the late 1970s that eschewed fixed or universalizing concepts of identity to instead hinge on a viewer's individual associations, memories and experiences."[8]

Untitled was the culmination of Miss's previously tentative efforts to explore ways of integrating artworks into the context of a site—to create work that "would change form as necessary to relate to a specific situation."[9] Growing up in the American West, Miss developed an early fascination with the relationship between the built and unbuilt in the natural world:

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[6] Mary Miss et al., *Mary Miss* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 9.
[7] Lynda Benglis's nude photographs holding a double headed dildo, Martha Rosler's, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, and Carolee Schneeman's performance of *Interior Scroll* serve as several examples.
[8] Sarah Hamill, "The Skin of the Earth: Mary Miss's Untitled 1973/75 and the Politics of Precarity," *Oxford Art Journal* (August, 2018), 277.
[9] Spyros Papapetros et al., *Retracing the Expanded Field* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 180.

> As a child, we moved every year until I was thirteen and I was constantly driving from one place to the next. My experience was you are in a city, then in the town that peters out, and then you are in the land and there are things like fences that seem to keep going on forever—just these subtle structures marching off in the distance. It was looking out the window in the backseat of my father's Chevy, that I became interested in the scale of a person in relationship to the land.[10]

The fencelike imagery of *Untitled* recurred repeatedly in her early interior pieces. When she began to build on an extended scale outdoors, wood—the dominant material in her sculptural vocabulary—held up to exterior elements and was fairly inexpensive. This was public art that did not demand the viewer be conversant with the rubrics of the art world.

Whether she did it intentionally or not, Miss situated her experimental artwork in the middle of a landscape that was created by men with bulldozers. Essentially, she was building atop a giant "earthwork." Earthworks were large-scale, monumental artworks made by a handful of pioneering male artists in the late 1960s and early 1970s often in remote Western landscapes. Although Miss was frequently compared to earthwork artists such as Robert Smithson and Robert Morris (the latter of who said he "would like to use a bulldozer" to make his artwork) and Michael Heizer, who did use a bulldozer as his paintbrush in a vast desert landscape, she felt little kinship with the men who erected such grand and monumental works.[11] The first generation of earthwork artists who made their large-scale pieces from geologic and biotic material in the late 1960s were avant-garde in their rejection of the commercial

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[10] Author interview with Mary Miss, February 11, 2019, NYC.
[11] Robert Smithson and Jack Flam, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 56.

gallery system. They worked in remote landscapes and created artworks that few people experienced in person—artworks that could never be sold. Up until the early 1970s, earthworks were mostly privately funded pieces. The critic Elizabeth Baker observed that although earthworks are often "dramatically sited, they are not involved with 'landscape' in any pictorial sense. Rather they stem from self-reflexive sculptural sensibilities preoccupied with structure, materials and scale."[12] Miss regarded earthworks as perpetuating a longstanding artistic tradition of the monolithic, singular perspective in an authoritarian way that dominated the design of modern sculpture. Like several other artists of her generation, many of them women, Miss felt earthworks referenced a nineteenth-century romantic tradition of the American West—the colonization of land—and treated the environment as an extension of the artist's studio. The wide-open spaces allowed for large-scale projects. Empty landscapes and open skies served as extensions of the white walls of galleries and museums. Local ecologies were ignored, co-opted, or in some cases, disrupted by the artworks.

Miss's artwork for the most part aligned more with Minimalist and Conceptual art, two contemporaneous movements of the 1960s that also attempted to disrupt the New York gallery system. Minimalist art was a deliberately restrictive reaction to the expressive movement known as Abstract Expressionism that became the dominant stylistic trend during the 1950s in American art. Minimalism is often characterized by the use of industrial materials and the deployment of a formal

[12] Elizabeth Baker, "Artworks on the Land," *Art in America* (January-February 1976), 93.

radicalism, geometric shapes and austere pallets emphasizing concept over object. Miss was a female sculptor working outside the mainstream who was preoccupied with deconstructing the monolithic forms associated with modern sculpture. Through her experimental, fragmented, and layered approach, Miss investigated methods for creating a connection between public space and interior space. In a conversation with critic Elizabeth Heartney, Miss notes:

> My central concerns were creating elemental or essential experience of place and a means of engagement with the viewer: focusing on his or her experience, I sought ways of involving the individual in physical, visceral, or emotional ways. Setting up a situation that required movement from one part or place to another added the element of time. Building more and more projects in the landscape, I initiated a process of examining how the relationship between our built environment and the natural world would be reconfigured, redefined, or exposed.[13]

Miss's desire to engage viewer's temporally within landscapes that were neither remote nor pristine but rather in transition, liminal or marginalized set her apart from her contemporaries. Some sculptors were working in remote natural landscapes, others in urban setting, but very few were working outside of the gallery space deploying architectural strategies as a way to engage viewers and push their artwork in new directions.

The New York: Politics and Art and a New Decade

Before moving to New York in 1968, Mary Miss attended the Rhinehart School of Sculpture in Maryland. Her experience in graduate school was similar to

[13] Papapetros et al., *Retracing the Expanded Field*, 2014, 180.

that of many female artists of her generation as the only women in her program and almost no female teachers at that time. While Miss was at Rhinehart, traditional sculptural practices, for example bronze casting and modeling in clay, still dominated art schools. However, Miss had little interest in making traditional sculpture. She was sparked by the work of artists like Robert Morris, a key figure in the New York Minimalism movement with a polymorphic practice that included conceptualism, experimental performance art, process art, and land art. Minimalism is generally characterized by large-scale geometric forms and smooth, hard surfaces, but Morris introduced into his sculptural practice such non-traditional materials as felt. Additionally, he began to experiment with temporality and ephemerality. This style of art became known as Process art or Anti-form, a movement that emphasized the process of making the artwork over the resulting object. Miss first met Morris when he came to Rhinehart as a visiting artist, and she was deeply influenced by the conceptual aspect of his practice. Morris would often focus on Miss's work, which up to that point had been largely ignored, during critiques. After a while, "the bronze-casting guys" finally realized their work was just not interesting to Morris and they began to pay attention to what Miss was making.[14] It was the first time Miss felt she was taken seriously as an artist, particularly by someone with power in the art world.

Miss arrived in Manhattan late in 1968, during a time of enormous social upheaval. New York, the postwar center of the global art world, had begun to lose its autonomy. Just as longtime social categories were breaking down in the wider

[14] Author interview with Mary Miss, February 11, 2019, NYC.

culture, the various art world "isms" of Abstract Expressionism, Modernism and Minimalism became entangled with a host of social "isms"—war activism, feminism and environmentalism. In the late 1960s, Minimalism and Process art, the sanctioned styles, were viewed by activist artists as largely useless for social protest. "Art was art and politics was politics" went the predominant aphorism. The belief that art transcended sociopolitical issues still held, but the divisions were beginning to break down.[15]

By 1969, Miss, like many New York artists, became radicalized. Activist artists formed the Art Workers Coalition (AWC), an open coalition of artists, filmmakers, critics, and writers who wanted to combine art and politics. The AWC attracted many conceptual artists who were already protesting the Vietnam War. In addition to serving as an antiwar vehicle until its demise in 1971, the AWC had as its principal goal pressuring the city's museums into implementing social and economic change and challenging the institutionalization of art. As Julia Bryan-Wilson notes, "some of its members wanted to reform, if not dismantle, conventional museums, for-profit galleries, private dealers, art schools, art magazines and the commodity nature of art itself—in short, to rethink or revolutionize the entire industry of contemporary art."[16] As one of its first actions, the AWC presented the director of the Museum of

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[15] For more detailed discussions, see Lucy Lippard, *A Different War* (Bellingham: The Whatcom Museum of History of Art and the Real Comet Press, 1990), Introduction; and Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
[16] Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Still Relevant; Lucy R. Lippard, Feminist Activism and Art Institutions," *Materializing Six years, Lucy R. Lippard and the Emergence of Conceptual Art*, ed. Catherine Morris and Vincent Bonin (Cambridge; MIT Press, 2012), 74.

Modern Art with a list of thirteen demands promoting the civil, economic and legal rights of artists.[17]

Many artists and writers considered art—specifically Minimalism and non-representational artwork and by extension the art institutions that exhibited it—as irrelevant and inadequate to the sociopolitical urgency of the times. Artists and writers often had day jobs in the Museum of Modern Art (they referred to themselves as "artworkers"), and Lippard observed that "the AWC evolved rapidly into a vehement learn-while-you-act-consciousness raising arena for artists (and all artworkers; this is where I received my own political education)."[18] Early goals included increasing the representation of black and Puerto Rican artists in museums, but by 1971 some of the members had more radical agendas. For those artists, the relevance of art was inextricably linked to revolutionary politics that reached out beyond the art world. Unfortunately, the AWC dissolved almost as quickly as it formed. Many of the male members were celebrated figures in the art world. Perhaps it was naïve to think that artists who benefited from a system would advocate for its total destruction.

Lippard, an academically trained art historian and respected art critic, spent her early years as a critic championing the work of male artist before making the conscious decision in 1970 to committing herself to exclusively promoting the work of women artists. She curated the first exhibition of conceptual art by women entitled,

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[17] Erica Janko, "Art Workers' Coalition Demonstrates for Artists' Rights, 1969," *Global Nonviolent Action Database*, last modified May 11, 2015, https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu.
[18] Lucy Lippard, *A Different War: Vietnam in War* (Bellingham, Wash: The Whatcom Museum of History of Art and the Real Comet Press, 1990), 21.

“26 Contemporary Women Artists, 1971.” Mary Miss was included in this groundbreaking exhibition that featured work by women artists such as Alice Aycock and Howardena Pindell who had never before exhibited their work in New York. As a leading advocate for feminist politics within the art world, Lippard, reorienting her critical practice, channeled her voice and energy to open up the art world gates for women. Aycock, a sculptor like Miss recalled years later that in 1970, “Lucy was very prominent as a writer and an art critic, so when she decided to focus on the work of women, it registered with the art world. She made up her mind that she would devote herself to opening doors, to forcing doors open. And the guys didn’t like it, because it meant that there was more competition.”[19]

Unlike the earthwork artists, many young female sculptors living in New York at that time like Miss, Aycock, Jacqueline Winsor and Harriet Fagenbaum had little interest in making solid or monumental objects that would last forever. In particular, Miss and Aycock focused on transition and ephemerality. As Aycock described it, “You set up the situation which was the structure and the event was either the viewer’s interaction with it or whatever process would take place.”[20] Their public sculptures disrupted the long-standing practice of observing a work from specific views, instead encouraging engagement generating multiple viewpoints.

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[19] Alice Aycock in conversation with Alexandra Schwartz, *From Conceptualism to Feminism; Lucy Lippard’s Numbers Show 1969-74* (London: Afterall Books, 2012), 275.
[20] Alice Aycock, "Oral History Interview with Alice Aycock," by Avis Berman, Archives of American Art, last modified March 25, 2009, accessed January 22, 2020, https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-alice-aycock-15676.

In addition to Nancy Holt, both Miss and Aycock, who was a former student of Robert Morris's while at Hunter College, were singled out for their "highly formalized yet wholly participatory" artworks in the land in a 1978 essay entitled "Six Women at Work in the Landscape."[21] Critic April Kingsley suggests that in an emerging second phase of earthworks, "Women seem to want to build the kind of places they'd like to be in themselves, and to build them with their own hands if possible."[22] And this was true for Miss and Aycock as they began to focus their attention to building large-scale site-based constructions.[23] In the early 1970s, there was still a sense of novelty around a woman picking up a hammer and building a structure. According to Kingsley, "Miss's persistent use of untreated wood or metal in their natural states encourages the visual disappearance of the works as handmade objects. Despite her good craftsmanship and her love of materials, she denies you the possibility of being seduced by their surface appearances."[24] Miss and Aycock used common building materials to fabricate their temporary structures

Aycock's 1975 piece *A Simple Network of Underground Walls and Tunnels*, a temporary artwork made of cinder blocks and plywood, illustrates several themes that female sculptors working in the land were engaging with at the time such as architecture, anti-monumentality, fragmentation, viewer engagement, scale in relationship to the human body, and interiority and exteriority (Figure 3).

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[21] April Kingsley, "Six Women at Work in the Landscape," *Arts Magazine* 52, no. 8 (April 1978).
[22] Kingsley, "Six Women," 109.
[23] Alice Aycock, "Oral History Interview with Alice Aycock," by Avis Berman, Archives of American Art, last modified March 25, 2009, https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-alice-aycock-15676.
[24] Kingsley, "Six Women at Work in the Landscape," 111.

Figure 3 Alice Aycock, *A Simple Network of Underground Walls and Tunnels*, New York, 1975, photograph, https://www.aaycock.com/simplenetwork.

In contrast to *A Simple Network of Underground Walls and Tunnels*, Michael Heizer's *Complex One* (1972-76), a tomb like mound of compacted earth with two concrete columns, was phase one of a secret city Heizer is still building at an undisclosed site in the Nevada desert. Heizer also explores architecture but in a monolithic, inaccessible way. Far from being a temporary sculpture, *Complex One* represents civilization at this moment in time in perpetuity according to Heizer (Figure 4). The surrounding landscape in the Nevada desert is meant to highlight the sublime nature of the artwork. The project, enormously expensive in its remote location, is inherently exclusive and will be seen by the very few who can locate it.

Figure 4. Michael Heizer, *Complex One*, 1972-76, Undisclosed Location, Nevada, photograph, https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2012/march/01/michael-heizers-rock-begins-to-roll/.

Figure 5. Richard Serra, *Shift*, 1972, King City, Ontario, photograph, https://ryersonimagecentre.ca/exhibition/simone-estrin-a-shift-in-the-landscape/.

Another representative example of artwork made during this time is Richard Serra's *Shift* (1972). For *Shift,* Serra inserted six massive slabs of concrete into what was at the time a working cornfield. As Serra describes it, "The work establishes a measure: one's relation to it and to the land."[25] The sculpture is not monumental, and it offers the viewer an opportunity for spatial engagement (Figure 5). However, Aycock's artwork (Figure 3) sparks more possibility for intimate personal connection. Integrated into the surrounding landscape rather than demarcating it, the minimal

[25] Richard Serra, "Shift," *Writings, Interviews* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), 12.

exterior elements serve more to tempt one into the interior spaces. The architectural aspects of the sculpture provide a more complex experience in relationship to the landscape. Is this a space where someone could hide or seek shelter? Perhaps it feels more a space of containment or even a trap. The use of common building materials relies on personal memory and imagination. It does not fully reveal its potential without active participation on behalf of the viewer.

Both Aycock and Miss were influenced by the work of Russian Constructivists who in the early 1920s tried to create work that actively engaged spectators through disruption or made what was perceived as traditional seem strange. Moreover, like the Constructivists in their time, Miss, radicalized in the ferment of sociopolitical activism during the 1970s, felt strongly that artists had a wider public role to play. Whereas during the 1970s the work of Miss and Aycock aligned in many ways, materially, psychologically and formally, by the early 1980s Miss's desire to collaborate on large-scale public projects with landscape architects set them apart. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Miss, as a female artist working in the public realm, continued to try to push the boundaries of what constituted art and who could make it.

By the end of the 1960s and well into the 1970s, Americans increasingly developed a suspicion of government and grew disillusioned with the corruption and inefficiency of public institutions. Rather than show deference to established leaders and institutions, they "constructed and relied on alternatives to the public sphere and the national community. The decade unleashed a frenzy of new associations and

affiliations."[26] According to one contemporary critic, "The dominant thrust of American civilization, was a quest for personal fulfillment within a small community."[27] Such an observation rang true for the city of New York, with its myriad of ethnic communities and associations. By extension it was true for the once homogenous art community as well. Networks, groups, and affiliations helped shape the social fabric for the lives of New Yorkers and especially feminist artists like Miss.

American Feminism; The Art World and Beyond

By 1970, the American women's movement was in full swing. National periodicals like *Newsweek* featured multiple cover stories on the movement, such as the March 23, 1970 issue "Women in Revolt," which pictured a red-tinged silhouette of beautiful, naked woman who looked very much like feminist Gloria Steinem with her power salute breaking through the symbol of the female sex. The same morning the issue came out, forty-six female *Newsweek* staffers filed a lawsuit against the magazine for gender discrimination.[28] The women's movement that was emerging in the wider culture permeated the New York art world already protesting the Vietnam War.

Lippard, Miss, and other women artists in New York affiliated with the AWC found it difficult as women to get their voices heard in meetings. In 1969 they formed

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[26] Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies; The Great shift in American Culture, Society and Politics* (Cambridge: De Capo Press, 2002), xvi.
[27] Schulman, *The Seventies*, xvi.
[28] Newsweek Staff, "'Women in Revolt': A Newsweek Cover and Lawsuit Collide," www.newsweek.com, (October 28, 2016).

their own group, Women in Revolution (WAR). WAR got nowhere in their talks with museums about increasing the number of women in exhibitions and decided to pursue direct action. In 1970, the Ad Hoc Women Artists' Committee was formed to encompass members from WAR, the AWC, and the Women Students and Artists for Black Liberation (WSABL). The collective was organized specifically to protest the precursor to today's Whitney Biennial, called the Whitney Painting and Sculpture Annual. They also faked a Whitney Museum press release on stolen letterhead stating that the annual show would include 50 percent women and people of color, forged invitations to the opening, staged a sit-in, and projected slides of women's art on the Museum's exterior walls. Each Saturday the women, wearing red armbands and blowing whistles, picketed the show demanding that the exhibition include 50 percent women artists. The demonstrations garnered international press attention. Their activism also provoked the attention of the FBI, which came in search of the anonymous core group (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Jan van Raay, *Jay Van Raay, Michelle Wallace and Faith Ringgold at the Art Workers Coalition Protest*, 1971, photograph, Whitney Museum.

The Ad Hoc Women Artists' Committee had a measurable impact, increasing the number of women in the exhibition from 4.5 to 22 percent in the following biennial. Ad Hoc became a venue for women artists who found the support, skill-sharing, and freeform discussions beneficial to their careers. The meetings rotated among artists' studios and revealed the broad spectrum of what constituted "women's art." Coalition building, networking, and consciousness-raising groups continued in New York through the early and mid-1970s. Resisting the claims by art institutions that there just was not enough work by female artists, members of the newly established Ad Hoc Committee's Woman's Art Registry amassed a slide collection in 1970 that wound up housed at Rutgers University. The registry served as a bank of women's work, useful to exhibition organizers and the artists themselves. Miss recalls women artists organizing exhibitions in their lofts or the empty storefront windows of

their buildings in Soho. The collaboration across disciplines became significant particularly between art and dance.

Male artists dominated the era's movements including Minimalism, conceptual art, and earthworks. Many of the more well-known artists associated with these movements such as Donald Judd, Robert Morris and Walter De Maria sought to disrupt the New York gallery system whereas women artists had different reasons for challenging a system that did not value them. Lack of visibility and funding for women artists during the late 1960s and early 1970s was not a new issue, but the political turmoil fostered by the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War and the emerging women's movement helped foster activism in the art world to address those deficits more cogently.

As the 1960s came to a close, women artists in the New York art world with little to lose and everything to gain began to explore alternative possibilities. According to Miss, "It's really about going back to that period in the early '70s and being lucky enough to be in New York City when all these young women were coming together."[29] With little choice but to circumvent traditional venues, Miss began to establish networks with other women artists and literally created the frameworks, exhibitions spaces, and publications that brought their work into public view. "In the early 1970s, the paths open to men, were not open to us," Miss explained. "We were figuring out our own paths forward, our own ways of working. I've always said the word 'deconstruction' should have been applied to the 70s

[29] Author interview with Mary Miss, February 11, 2019, NYC.

because we were taking everything apart—it wasn't working for us."[30] The tension between deconstruction and construction as a simultaneous process is notable in the work of women sculptors working in the public realm during this era (Figures 7 & 8).

Figure 7. Jacqueline Winsor, *Burnt Piece,* 1977-78, photograph, The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum.

Figure 8. Harriet Feigenbaum, *Cycle Series II*, 1977, photograph.

Networking was primarily responsible for the explosion of feminist activism in the arts across the country. Unlike men's networks which for the most part moved vertically along professional lines with male artists interacting with other male artists on different rungs of the ladder, the early era women's networks with limited status or positions to effect interacted more laterally. Information spread quickly through personal exchange and friendship, as artist Beverly Naidus states:

> When I was living in New York I wouldn't have gotten anywhere without the women's network. I got all my gigs from women. I got my grants from women supporting me and they actually stretched to make sure I would be

[30] Author interview with Mary Miss, February 11, 2019, NYC.

> part of this or part of that and then within those women group shows, I began finding my own people because I wasn't really as interested in making it in the art world as some people were. For me opportunities were coming from these networks. Feminism wasn't just a movement or a style. It was a way of life—possibility.[31]

The effort to break with authoritarian and hierarchical methods was a technique to build community.

In 1972, Howardena Pindell, an American painter and mixed media artist whose conceptual work addressed the intersection of racism and feminism, and Agnes Denes, a conceptual artist who abandoned painting to become a pioneer in land art, were among the twenty artists who co-founded the not-for-profit A.I.R. (Artists in Residence, Inc).[32] A.I.R. was the first all-female artist run cooperative gallery that provided exhibition space in the United States exclusively for women. The non-profit organization emerged in response to the male-dominated commercial gallery scene at the time in New York. The gallery doors opened on September 16, 1972, with a group show of ten gallery artists. The event was covered by a broad spectrum of publications from the New York Times to Ms. Magazine.[33] Originally located in SOHO, its current location is in Brooklyn. Although by this time the work of many female artists shared some identifiable themes, addressed sexuality, and worked with anthropomorphic or natural forms as well as decorative or devalued subjects and media, the goal of the gallery was not only to exhibit "feminist art," but to

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[31] Author interview with Beverly Naidus, August 23, 2018, Tacoma, Washington.

[32] For more information on the history of A.I.R see Joanna Gardner-Huggett, "Artemisia Challenges the Elders: How a Women Artists' Cooperative Created a Community for Feminism and Art Made by Women," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 33, no. 2 (2012): 55-75.

[33] "Guide to the A.I.R. Gallery Archives Ca. 1972-2006," 2007, The A.I.R. Gallery Archives, Fales Library and Special Collections: Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, New York City, NY.

demonstrate that art by women was wide-ranging and worthy of inclusion in the mainstream (i.e., male) art world. Other organizations and art efforts arose at the same time.

The *Feminist Art Journal* was a bimonthly magazine founded in 1972 that provided information on women's exhibitions. In 1976, the Heresies Collective was formed. *Heresies*, a feminist publication on art and politics, was published from 1977 until 1993. Miss was one of the collective's founding members. The group, with its non-hierarchical method of working, was extremely time consuming for Miss and she eventually dropped out. Women artist activists living and working in New York City were protesting against the war and advocating for civil rights, sexual rights, abortion rights, gay and lesbian rights, and much more. They also had to contend with a firmly entrenched art world system, working to create new spaces and pathways within and around long-established male networks. All of this took time and energy.

"Women's art" was for better or worse established as a category during the early 1970s. "Woman artist" and "feminist" quickly became conflated. According to artist Martha Rosler, "the women artist' movement in fact owes its genesis, its rhetoric and its goals to the women's liberation movement."[34] Feminist art in California had its own particular features. At Cal Arts in Valencia, California, artists Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro developed the Feminist Art Program, the first program for the making of art by and about women, in 1971. Educational

[34] Martha Rosler, "The Private and the Public: Feminist Art in California," *Artforum,* (September 1977), 2.

programming also took place at The Women's Building, a space founded by Chicago and Shapiro, that opened in 1973 in downtown Los Angeles that housed galleries, theaters, a bookstore, coffee house and the offices for the National Organization for Women. Early on there was little need for fine distinctions, but for many women artists that moment quickly passed. Whereas the New York movement was more activist and confrontational, in California the movement was largely educational and based in art schools.

Much of the art that emerged from the North American feminist movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s focused on the body and female sexuality—what is it and who gets to define it. For Lippard, one of the very few critics to begin reviewing the work of women artists, these new female-centered subjects and styles demanded she completely rethink what constituted art and how she evaluated it. She proclaimed, "Five years after the birth of my feminist consciousness, I still have to question every assumption, every reaction I have in order to examine them for signs of pre-conditioning."[35] The tensions between quickly engendering power as a collective group in the art world and the restrictions that ensue in defining a specific category were problematic in the first wave of feminist art.

Should women's art really be a separate category? Similar to the dilemma faced by African American artists decades earlier during the Harlem Renaissance, establishing a classification for work by marginalized artists could help create

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[35] Lucy Lippard, "Changing Since Changing," *From the Center; Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: EP Dutton, 1976), 5.

visibility and provide a framework for valuing it. But after a point, that energizing effort may outgrow its own imperative and become restrictive and essentializing. Scholars like Darby English have recently argued that "the respective emergences of the concepts 'black art' and the 'black artist' are seen as events in need of a new understanding." English refutes the contention that African-American art is a distinct form of expression and a lens through which all art made by black artists should be viewed.[36] Much like "black art," the category of female art that served an important purpose in the 1970s became problematic in the 1980s when a backlash against feminism ensued.

Most significantly, over the course of the 1970s, interdisciplinary interactions within the arts and sciences disrupted a culture of specialization. Not only did painters now compose music and sculptors create dance compositions, but artists began to partner with geologists, geographers and historians on long-term and large-scale projects. Female artists like Miss, Holt and others I will explore in ensuing chapters were at the forefront of these changes. In an effort to break down hierarchies, the women's movement helped open up "the expanded field."

[36] Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 7.

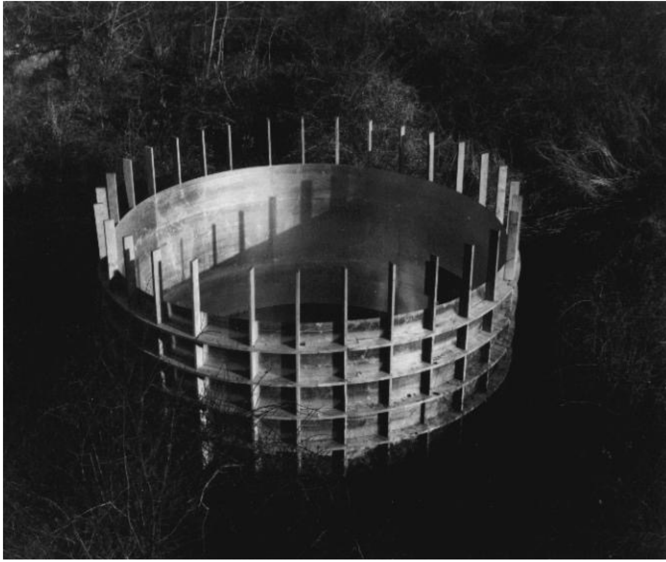
Figure 9. Mary Miss, *Sunken Pool*, Greenwich, CT, 1974, photograph, http://marymiss.com/projects/sunken-pool/.

Miss's outdoor projects came to demand viewer engagement, both physical and psychological. Like her contemporaries, sculptors Alice Aycock and Jacqueline Winsor, Miss made a break with Minimalism to focus more on interiority, intimacy and relationship to human scale. Miss's *Sunken Pool* (1974) serves as an example of this shift (Figure 9). The temporary artwork was commissioned by and located on the grounds of the Greenwich Country Day School in Connecticut where it remained for one year. Miss built a cylinder out of metal and wood with openings on the bottom of either side of the structure that allowed for water draining from the surrounding hillsides to be captured. Viewers approaching the sculpture on a trail surrounded by brush could only see the top of the artwork. Once in front of the sculpture they could look down into the dark water pool of water at the bottom. The mysteriously ambiguous piece was simultaneously peaceful and potentially menacing.

Resonating with the times, the women's movement, attempts to breakdown hierarchical structures, and sexual and racial barriers, it is unclear if the enclosure was in a process of deconstruction or under construction—or if it was even an artwork at all— but rather some type of water infrastructure. As she began the commission, Miss thought about how to connect with the surrounding environment. It wasn't until after she had constructed the circular form, that she realized she wanted groundwater captured at the bottom when you looked down into the center of the sculpture. She had to "build in the groundwater, so we had pumps going all the time."[37] Many of the cues that signaled it was a piece of sculpture were missing. *Sunken Pool* was a built structure integrated seamlessly into the landscape. It was something someone might encounter unintentionally along their pathway.

The everyday materials and the framework surrounding the cylinder recall the hand of the artist or builder. The artwork referencing utilitarian infrastructure was familiar and yet in its seemingly perpetually unfinished state—it remained strange. According to Miss, "the imagery of *Sunken Pool* was taken from the built environment. All of us are affected by the complex visual elements of our surroundings; my interest in focusing on them took me to construction sites, mines and power plants as sources of imagery."[38] Embedded in the piece were levels of relationship. First, the relationship of the piece to the site, then the relationship

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[37] Oral history interview with Mary Miss, 2016 July 18 and 20. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
[38] Mary Miss, "On Redefinition of Public Sculpture," in *Mary Miss*, by Mary Miss et al. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2003), 234.

between the piece and its maker, and finally through its human scale, the viewer in relationship to the other two.

Figure 10. Christo and Jean-Claude, *Valley Curtain*, Rifle, Colorado, 1972, photograph, https://christojeanneclaude.net/projects/valley-curtain.

Referencing architecture, *Sunken Pool* differed from other temporary works of that period in that it pressed up against the edge of functionalism. The temporary sculpture could have been mistaken for a drainage system. Although it was not actually functional, Miss was exploring with a functional aesthetic, pressing up against the boundaries of sculpture. At that time, art was not functional nor did it pretend to be—if it was, it became something such as design, landscape architecture or architecture. *Valley Curtain* (1972) by artist Christo and his partner Jean-Claude provides an example of a more conventional temporary artwork from that period. A partition of bright orange fabric was suspended between two mountains on private land (Figure 10). Strong winds naturally tore the fabric, and after nearly two years of design and fabrication, it was removed within twenty-eight hours.

Valley Curtain followed in the tradition of many of the early iconic earthwork projects with its ambitious, large-scale expensive impractically arresting work

imposed upon on landscapes. Sunken Pool was no more practical than *Valley Curtain*—it simply looked practical thereby making its definition of art more challenging. The functionalism and the artist in relationship to creating something functional became increasingly important aspects of Miss's investigations.

Miss's artwork employed intimate engagement and vernacular materials to stir memory and imagination. The work contains within it seeds of the American feminism that were beginning to take root in the art world, but the work didn't fit into narrow categories of early feminist visual art practices. But Miss herself eschewed the narrow definition of American feminist art. "The women's movement in the art world brought me contacts, friends, and opportunities to be seen," she said in 1981. "I certainly benefited from the picketing for better representation at the Whitney. Yet there was also a sense ten years ago of being criticized for not doing something with specific female content, requested to make feminist statements in our art. I feel that phase has passed."[39] Miss continued to formally make work that was not conventionally feminist artwork, but according to Miss the work that she made during the mid-1970s reveals the formal approach she and others took that, "was less authoritarian than former styles of sculpture. There was more of an effort to establish an accessible visual language."[40]

How did the first wave of feminism play a role in fomenting change in the art world? This issue remains difficult to tease out in the case of abstract artists like Miss.

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[39] Avis Berman, "A Decade of Progress, But Could a Female Chardin Make a Living?," *ARTnews,* (1981), 78.
[40] Mary Miss, "On a Redefinition of Public Sculpture," *Perspecta* 21 (1984): 52-69.

As one of the active participants in the women's movement and few art critics addressing this question in the 1970s Lippard observed, "Some women have realized how unsatisfying success can be in an alien world with an alien value structure." The desire on the part of many feminist artists was to change the system.[41] According to Judy Chicago, part of many feminist artists was to change the system:

> The whole notion of feminist art, as I was trying to articulate it, is the form-code of contemporary art has to be broken to broaden the audience base in order to reconnect art to the fabric of the human community. What I have been after from the beginning is a redefinition of the role of the artist, a reexamination of the relation of art and community, and a broadening of the definitions of who controls art, and in fact, an enlarged dialogue about art, with new and more diverse participants.[42]

Chicago, in articulating a more complex understanding of feminist art, presents a perspective that resonated with Miss's experience of how the women's movement was extremely important in expanding the range of her art practice in the context of community and the relationship between the built an unbuilt in relationship to the natural world.

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[41] Lucy Lippard, *Get the Message: A Decade of Art for Social Change* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984), 35.

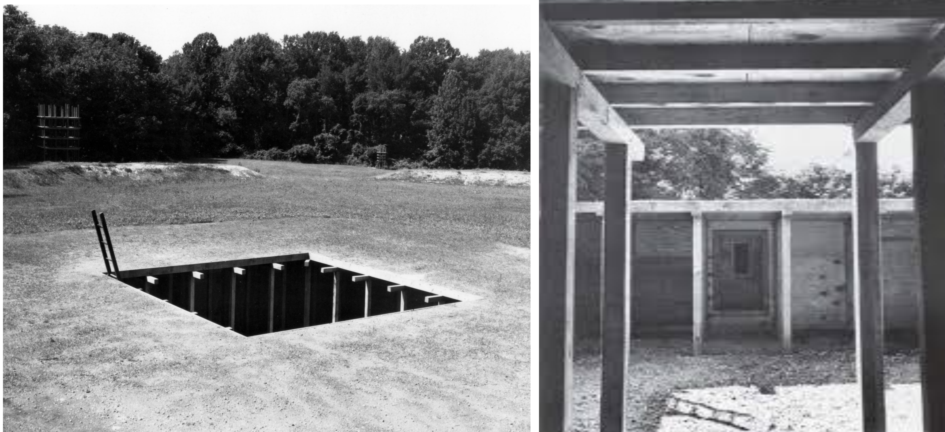
[42] Norma Brode and Mary D Garrard, "Conversations with Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro," *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s History and Impact* (New York: HNA, 1994), 67.

Figure 11. Mary Miss, *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys*, Roslyn, New York, 1977, photograph, http://marymiss.com/projects/perimeterspavilionsdecoys/.

Throughout the 1970s, Miss continued to pursue a perceptual dialogue with viewers, one that occurred both above and below the land with multiple elements evoking layers of implication and meaning. She began making her most ambitious temporary artwork in 1977, *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys* (Figure 11). Located on a former Long Island estate now owned by the Nassau County Museum and used primarily as a local park, the installation was accessible by walking down a dirt road through a dense screen of trees and underbrush. No signage indicated that the viewer was encountering an artwork. Immediately visible from the initial vantage point at the edge of a grassy slope in the lower field were three wooden structures, the largest of them eighteen feet tall. Sited throughout the four-acre field, each one a different size, were three "wooden and screen towers of various sizes supporting multi-level cage-like platforms situated in the near, middle, and far distance" (Figures 12-14). In his

introduction to the exhibition catalogue Ronald J. Onorato describes how Miss "places the largest tower closest to the point of entry and a middle-sized tower in the middle distance. At the lower edge of the slope, the smallest tower rises farthest from our vantage point."[43]

The second set of constructed elements were two dirt embankments or "earth mounds" as Miss called them. An inconspicuous excavation pit in the upper field was visible by the top of a ladder inviting people down into the third element, a subterranean courtyard which was a partially covered structure that was about seven feet deep (Figures 12-14).



[43] Ronald J. Onorato and Mary Miss, *Mary Miss: Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys* (Rosyln, NY: Nassau County Museum of Fine Arts, 1978), 5.

Figures 12-14, Mary Miss, *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys*, Roslyn, New York, 1977, photographs, http://marymiss.com/projects/perimeterspavilionsdecoys/.

The elements of the project are fragments with multiple entry points and various modes of engagement. Viewers could climb up a tower or go down into a pit—two of many radically different spatial and perceptual experiences the artwork offered. In a note in her journal under the heading “another kind of construction,” Miss wrote, “[p]utting several short sequences together, so that a total narrative comes thru. This avoids having to come up with a single construction/structure.”[44] There was no way to experience the project in totality. It was, to use Miss’s word, “accumulative.” The structures were confusing. Were they ruins or works still in progress? The exposed framing and carefully excavated passageways suggested layers of excavation and required the viewer’s imagination to reconstruct possibilities. Internal and external, vertical and horizontal, open and closed, and light and dark, the elements were accessible to anyone who happened either randomly or deliberately to come upon them in the park.

[44] Onorato and Miss, *Mary Miss*, 7.

In 1977, the same year that Miss constructed *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys*, Lippard, still one of the few critics to write about this work at the time, wrote an essay for the catalogue of an exhibition titled, “Women in American Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective.” Her essay, “Center and Fragments: Women’s Spaces,” suggested that “fragmentation need not connote explosion, disintegration. It is also the component of networks and stratification, interweaving many dissimilar threads, and a de-emphasis on imposed meaning in favor of multiple interpretations according to the viewer’s/reader’s own experience.”[45] Lippard’s identification of fragmentation leading to the possibility of multiple interpretations as a central role in work by women is consistent with both a formal and conceptual reading of Miss’s *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys*. Whereas fragmentation suggests a pulling apart, accumulation is additive—the act of layering. Although the complex artwork offers the viewer alternate pathways and individual access points through the landscape, it expands upon what is already exists. Miss clarifies, “I’m more interested in expanding on the meaning of a form rather than limiting it to its function—reintroducing the importance of place, scale, content and providing the individual with access points to these elements.”[46]

One of the goals of the women’s movement was to find alternatives methods to disrupt hierarchies. The work can be understood as reflecting in a material way, the efforts within various women’s collectives and offshoots to demonstrate that

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[45] Lucy Lippard, “Centers and Fragments: Women’s Spaces,” *Women in American Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective*, ed. Susana Torre (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1977), 195. This text included an illustration of a work by Miss.
[46] Deborah Nevins, "An Interview with Mary Miss," *Princeton Journal* 2 (1985): 96-104.

resistance could be reconfigured in different ways. Comprised of open space and dead ends, *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys* offers no central point or singular, uniform way to measure one's body against the landscape. The artwork strays from Minimalism in its unfinished, unresolved state.

Figure 15. Walter De Maria, *The Lightning Field*, New Mexico, 1977, photographs, https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/lightning-field.

A celebrated artwork created in 1977, the same year as *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys*, was Walter De Maria's *The Lightning Field*, a work near Quenmado, New Mexico comprised of four-hundred steel poles two-inches in diameter and approximately twenty-feet high (Figure 15). Compositionally arranged in a grid, the work aligns with the serial uniformity of Minimalism but goes a step further. Lightening completes the work. Fabricated in an era when an interest in energy systems and environmental issues permeated popular culture, the work requires embodied spectatorship to be fully realized. According to art historian James Nisbet, "The *Field's* foremost state, the work that viewers encounter the vast majority of the time, is a sculpture that unfolds gradually during the full diurnal cycle of one's

stay. De Maria's work must be explored traversed and perambulated."[47] The poles do not require the lighting, they stand alone autonomously as a sculptural piece reflecting shifts in the sunlight throughout the day, and yet they also have a function—to capture lightening. De Maria first conceived of the work in 1972 and over the course of the five years it took to buy the land and fabricated the artwork by 1977, the earthwork movement had already begun to shift toward a quality of extra-ness—aesthetics plus something more—in this case providing a system for visualizing energy.

Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys was a re-examination of aspects of how art was made, exhibited and viewed, a project pressed firmly up against the bounded fields of art, building architecture, and landscape architecture. The unfinished aspects of the sculpture including the framing and dead tunnels that dead-ended disrupted an expectation of resolution. The materials and multiple structures signaled architecture rather than art. The artwork, situated in a clearing that must be entered by first navigating heavy brush defied the traditional setting of public sculpture. Moreover, an artwork that required climbing up and down ladders, existing both above and below the ground offered a more comprehensive and intimate level of physical engagement in the landscape. And finally, the spatial encounter was accessible to any and all who entered the park.

[47] James Nisbet, *Ecologies, Environments, and Energy Systems in Art of the 1960s and 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 187.

In her influential 1979 essay titled "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," Rosalind Krauss deployed *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys* as an example supporting her argument that sculpture, landscape architecture, and architecture had become problematically entangled over the course of the postmodern 1970s:

> Toward the center of the field there is a slight mound, a swelling in the earth, which is the only warning given for the presence of the work…. Closer to it, the large square face of the pit can be seen, as can the ends of the ladder that is needed to descend into the excavation. The work itself is entirely below grade: half atrium, half tunnel, the boundary between outside and in, a delicate structure of wooden posts and beams. The work, *Perimeter/Pavilions/Decoys*, is of course a sculpture, or more precisely, an earthwork.[48]

Midway through the text, as she recounts staring into the pit, Krauss articulates that she no longer knows what sculpture is. "We had thought to use a universal category to authenticate a group of particulars, but the category has been forced to cover such a heterogeneity that it is, itself, in danger of collapsing."[49]

Coming nearly a decade after the original "Earth Works" exhibition at the Dwan Gallery and the subsequent emergence of the land art movement, Krauss's choice to describe *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys* as an earthwork is both notable and telling. Although women had been making earthworks since the late 1960s alongside men, their work up to that point, with the exception of Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels*, had received little or no recognition. Whether she was conscious of it or not, Krauss chose an artwork by a woman to illustrate the dissolution of the "universal" category of sculpture. She goes on to make a call for a return to "purity" within the three fields,

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[48] Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October*, (Spring, 1979), 30-44.
[49] Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," 30-44.

making clear what she thought these practices were and what they were not. But by seeing Miss's work as literally and symbolically groundbreaking, Krauss inadvertently makes a case for how Miss's art played a significant role in break dissolving traditional, fixed categories.

By focusing her attention for better or worse on the work of a female artist as she denounced heterogeneity and pluralism, she demonstrates that over the course of a decade the way feminism, like it or not, had made a lasting impact. If all art made by men through the ages could be generalized as more of a monologue, then art influenced by feminism—made by both male and female artists—could now be considered more of a dialogue, one that was incomplete and open-ended and, for Krauss and others, disconcerting.

According to earthwork scholar Suzaan Boettger, "Whereas women did not make Earthworks, by the 1970s they had the interest, assertiveness, and support systems to engage in the demands of constructing Land Art."[50] In recent years, critics and art historians, many of whom like Boettger are female, have begun to recognize a distinct contingent of female sculptures from the 1970s within the genre of land art. Boettger argues that "the historical view of the early to mid-'70s sculptural zeitgeist as being female-coded or conceptual/disembodied seems to have swept women sculptors who used architectural and landscape procedures to focus on phenomenological issues into a kind of Bermuda Triangle of historical invisibility."[51]

[50] Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties*, 241.
[51] Suzaan Boettger, "Excavating Land Art by Women in the 1970s," *Sculpture,* (November, 2008), 41.

These artists were not working with feminist iconography but rather transforming a land art movement previously characterized by isolationism and Minimalism artworks into one that called for engagement and connection. Arising out of a decade shaped by a feminist value system that strove for connection and attempted to eschew hierarchy, this new version of the movement was collaborative and connected and would even sometimes become anonymous or invisible.

Miss began to tire of making large-scale temporary works. By the late 1970s, only one of her outdoor pieces was permanent. With the hopes of creating another permanent work, during the final summer of the decade—the same year Krauss's "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" essay was published—Miss agreed to participate in an exhibition and symposium called "Earthworks: Land Reclamation as Sculpture" curated by the Seattle Art Museum. This groundbreaking but largely forgotten show was composed of artists' proposals made for a collaboration between Seattle's Arts Commission and the King County Department of Public Works. Together the agencies sponsored what was declared to be "the most ambitious Earthworks project this country has ever seen."[52] The central theme of the project was land reclamation. Miss was invited as one of eight artists—two women and six men—to create a proposal for one of eight environmentally degraded sites: four gravel pits, a creek with drainage and erosion problems, a garbage landfill, an abandoned strip alongside a runway, and an ex-naval air station. "In addition to the D.P.W. the list of supporters included government groups on local, state, and federal levels as well as architectural

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[52] Nancy Foote, "Monument—Sculpture—Earthwork," *Artforum* (October, 1979), 34.

and engineering firms, conservation groups, private industry, and of course Seattleites."[53]

The scale of the exhibition may have been groundbreaking, but the concept of art as reclamation had been percolating in New York for almost a decade. Artists were playing a considerable role in urban renewal efforts, and by the end of the 1970s this avenue was a viable pathway for women artists, after years networking and collaboration, to gain some public visibility.[54]

At the *Earthworks Design Symposium* held at the Seattle Art Museum, several of the artists were asked to present their proposals to the community. The lead artist, Robert Morris, whose project had already been greenlighted, was not present at this public event. During the symposium, a popular local landscape architect, Robert Haag, invited to sit on the panel on stage with the artists, confronted the two women artists Miss and Beverly Pepper. Haag accused the women of being New York artists who lacked functional understanding of landscape and design. Egged on by the audience, Haag contended that the interlopers would need to divorce themselves from their "self-expressionistic little exercise made in the studios" in order for the project to be successful.[55]

Both Miss and Pepper, who had plenty of experience making large-scale works in the public realm, were taken aback by Haag's tone and by the hecklers. It

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[53] Foote, "Monument—Sculpture—Earthwork," 34.

[54] In 1971 Artforum published Mierle Laderman's "Maintenance Art Manifesto 1969." As a "maintenance artist," her public artworks during the 1970s foregrounded not only household maintance (women's work) but additionally addressed public maintenance and earth maintenance.

[55] *Video Tape of the Design Symposium*, Seattle Art Museum, 1979.

quickly became apparent that the interdisciplinary atmosphere in New York where artists, architects and landscape architects, both men and women, met together informally to share their work was not a mainstream practice. Curator Nancy Rosen discussed how in the mid-1970s she began a monthly tradition where artists, landscape architects, and architects would come to her apartment near Central Park with three slides and a bottle of wine. The slides were placed in a slide projector that sat atop a ladder in her apartment. When an artist's slides were projected, he or she had a few minutes to discuss a current project. In the present day this is called a Petcha Kucha. The event became so popular that it became more frequent and was held in various locations.[56] The moment illustrates the barriers and prejudice women artists, particularly those who wanted to work across disciplines, continued to endure.

Miss, who never identified with earthwork artists or advocated for deploying art as a form of reclamation, was nevertheless thrilled by the possibility of making a large-scale permanent public artwork on the seven-acre site she selected. Her proposal, "Airport Free Zone," centered on an abandoned strip of land at the edge of the Sea-Tac airport south of Seattle. Once a part of the small neighborhood, the liminal space bordered the edge of the runway and was controlled by the airport authority. Miss describes her process to curator Nancy Rosen as the two walked the site together, "I am taking all of my information about what I am going to build from the site itself. I am not going to be doing any earthmoving or changing of the

[56] Author interview with Nancy Rosen, New York City, February 12, 2019.

landscape because there is no ‘reclamation’ that needs to be done unlike the other sites—this is ‘social reclamation.’”[57]

Social reclamation, a compelling neologism first uttered by Miss, simultaneously distinguished her art from the male-centric earthworks movement and distanced her project from the problematic practice of land reclamation in American history. Earthworks were generally regarded as isolationist projects in remote environs. Moreover, on occasion earthworks critiqued anti-ecological or relegated the land as backdrop for the artwork.[58] Land reclamation has a long fraught history in the American landscape—one too complex to address comprehensively within this chapter however artist Robert Morris specifically addresses the role of art as land reclamation at the end of the 1970s:

> In a complex society, where everything is interconnected…It might then seem that to practice art as land reclamation is to promote the continuing acceleration of the resource-energy-commodity-consumption cycle, as reclamation—defined aesthetically, economically, geophysically—functions making acceptable original acts of resource extraction.[59]

While it is not clear that Miss employed the term social reclamation beyond this project proposal, while describing her practice in 2008 she articulated a description of the neologism:

> My experience and ideas as a feminist surfaced in some of the following ways: rather than creating the monolithic standing tall, establishing its

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[57] Mary Miss, interview by Nancy Rosen, Seattle Art Museum Archives, Seattle, WA, 1979.

[58] Art historian Emily Eliza Scott notes “The disrupted or pulverized sites Smithson favored reflected his resistance to all things expressionistic, humanistic, and romantic, while simultaneously operating as a counterpoint to the increasingly streamlined and systematized American landscape.” See Emily Eliza Scott, "Desert Ends," in *Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974*, ed. Philipp Kaiser and Michelle Piranio (München, Germany: Prestel, 2012), 85.

[59] Robert Morris, "Notes on Art as Land Reclamation," in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 226.

> presence and signature dominion over the surrounding territory, I was interested in making work that was integrated into context, that changed as necessary to relate to a specific situation. I was interested in an art of engagement; focusing on the viewer's experience, I sought ways of involving the individual in a physical, visceral, or emotional way with the work of art. I wanted to change where art appeared and how artists functioned—creating a truly public, visible role for artists in our culture outside of the art world.[60]

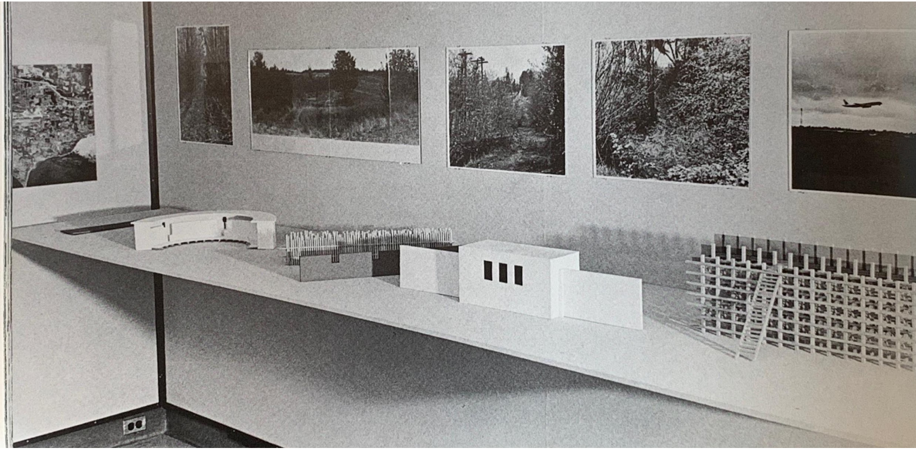

Figure 16. Mary Miss, *Detail of Proposal from Earthworks as Sculpture Exhibit*, Seattle Art Museum, 1979, photograph from the King County Archives.

On one side of the proposed site was an existing community of single-family homes and on the other side was a landing strip. Miss intended to create a buffer zone between the two while at the same time integrating the site into the community by making it a community space that people could walk through and engage with various structures. Similar to *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys*, it engaged in a process of layering and accumulation. She designed elements that blended into the existing landscape, including the road and overgrown shrubbery and oak trees, and some that stood apart such as a tall fencelike structure that could be climbed and that allowed a better view of the runway (Figure 16). One of the drawings for a proposed structure, *Concrete*

[60] Mary Miss, "The History of the Gap" (speech, The Sculpture Center in New York, 2008).

Viewing Corridor, clearly references Miss's artwork *Untitled* (1973) (Figure 17). Miss's proposal explored the liminal space between the built and unbuilt and expanded the notion of the relationship between viewer and artwork as she sought to create an emotional connection to the landscape. In doing all this, she complicated the perceived roles of artist, architect, and landscape architect (Figure 18).

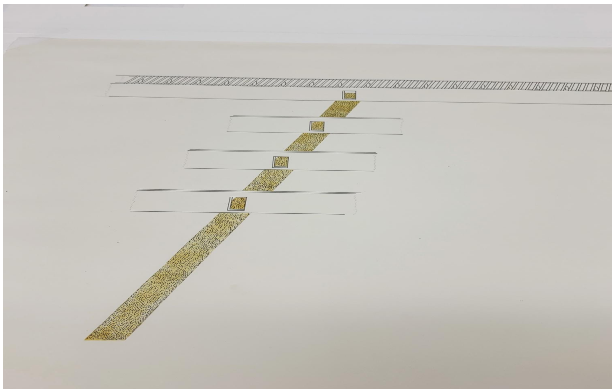

Figure 17. Mary Miss, *Concrete Viewing Corridor*, Pen and Ink, 1979, photograph by Kris Timken.

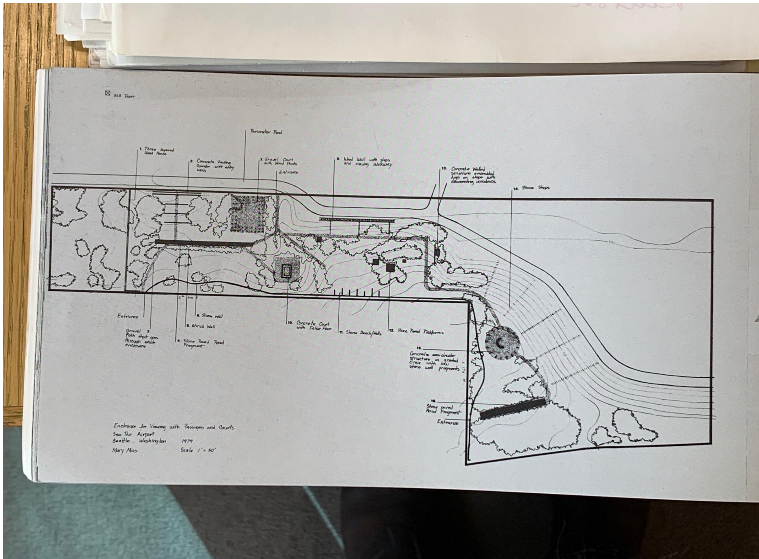

Figure 18. Mary Miss, *Airport Free Zone*, Scale Drawings, 1979, photograph by Kris Timken.

Although only one other project was ultimately funded after the symposium, a work by Herbert Bayer, Miss contends that she and several other American female artists helped transform the role of the artist in the public domain. As more scholars

begin to focus attention on the site-based works made by women during the late 1970s their impact on public art comes more clearly in to view. Male and female artists no longer treated landscape as a blank canvas. Rather, they viewed it as a space of engagement, one that fostered intimate awareness and interaction with the natural world. Over the decade, collaboration and the crossing of disciplines transformed artistic practice. While men often received the more traditional commissions, female artists continued to find creative outlets for this work. It was during this era, according to Miss, "[t]he artist took on the role of engaged citizen, not just the outside cultural commentator."[61]

Miss had to wait almost five more years until she received the commission she had been working toward throughout the 1970s. Almost ten years to the day that she made *Untitled* in a landfill alongside the Hudson River without any invitation, Miss was selected as the artist to participate in the development of a master plan for the area now called Battery Park City in lower Manhattan in collaboration with an architect, Stan Eckstut, and the landscape architect Susan Child (Figure 19). Several prominent female figures from the art world, such as art historian Linda Nochlin and curator Nancy Rosen, were on the board of the project and involved in the process of artist selection. The commission, *South Cove* completed in 1987, was one of the first spaces in the complex that fostered public access to the river. Moreover, the

[61] As quoted in Ed Spyros Papapetros and Julian Rose, eds., *Retracing the Expanded Field: Encounters between Art and Architecture*, 183.

commission set a precedent for including an artist in a large-scale urban development project (Figure 19).

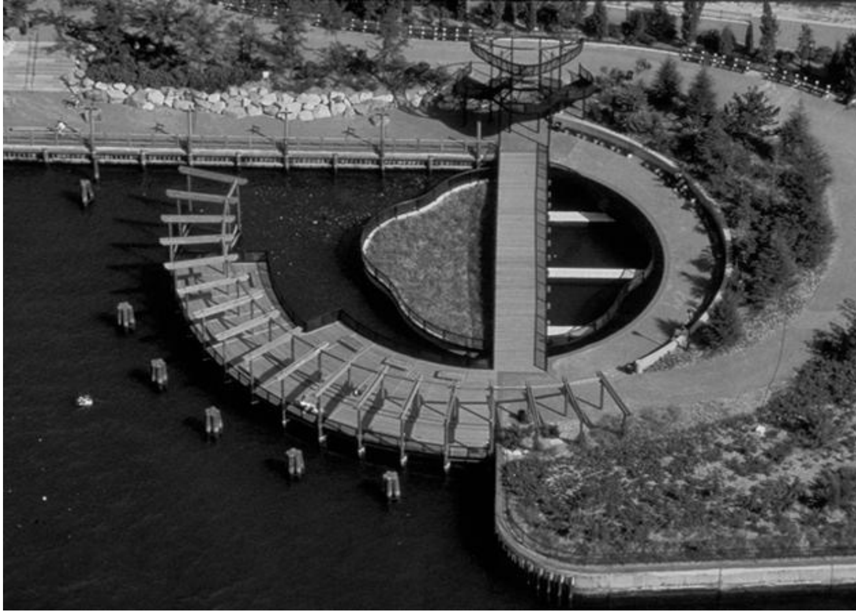

Figure 19. Mary Miss, *South Cove*, Battery Park City, New York, 1987, photograph, http://marymiss.com/projects/south-cove/

South Cove, composed of a series of informally linked park landscapes set in an artificial inlet of the Hudson River, enabled Miss to further explore her notion of social reclamation—the creation of a space for intimate engagement at the intersection of the built and unbuilt within the public sphere. Similar to her proposal for *Airport Free Zone,* Miss integrated existing elements in the landscape such as the wooden piling along the water's edge with formal elements, motifs from her earlier work that included wood, trellises, grids, walkways and an overlook. As in earlier works, Miss played with scale and created numerous viewing positions, but the heart of the project came in the form of a spiral ramp that descended from the traditional esplanade down to the edge of the river, enabling people not just to view of the water but actually dip their feet in it. According to Daniel M. Abramson, "For Miss the core

of the experience at *South Cove* was focused at the water's edge, on the connection between the built and the natural. There are opportunities to experience both solitude and sociability."[62]

Unoccupied for many years, the 360-foot-long-cove was a landfill created by the excavation of the World Trade Center Towers. It was a harsh empty landscape that in reality was the physical edge of the city. The 3.5-acre park near the tip of Manhattan next to the Hudson River was attached to an existing esplanade constructed by the Battery Park City Authority. As with most public works, the project was fraught with many challenges, not the least of which was how to create an independent semi private space that remained connected to the larger plan of development for the public.

Unfortunately, over the years the ramp, Miss's centerpiece, became a maintenance issue. Storms would bring in debris that would get caught under the ramp or damage it completely. More than once it had to be replaced. Miss's inspired effort to create a closeness with the river was an element that the architect and landscape architect with whom she collaborated with on the project, under different circumstances, may have chosen to redesign or leave off altogether. Architects and builders became frustrated with the impractical ideas of artists. Partnerships with artists on public projects outside of the artworld became less popular in the second half of the 1980s.

[62] Daniel Abramson, "Mary Miss and the Art of Engagement," in *Mary Miss* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 41.

Miss's public art projects, structures temporary and finally permanent made throughout the 1970s and early 1980s navigated space between the built and unbuilt and the functional and symbolic. With her large-scale site-based works, she propelled the radical reconceptualization of sculpture by predecessors like Robert Morris into new directions. Her distinct approach of deploying common materials to unfinished large-scale constructions that demanded active physical engagement both on her part and that of the viewer assisted in expanding the definition of sculpture and the relationship of women and landscape.

Chapter 2

Art in Unestablished Channels: Betty Beaumont, Ocean Landmark (1978-1983)

> Everybody kept asking where is the art?[1]
>
> -Betty Beaumont

In 2016, the artist Betty Beaumont received an article from The Village Voice in the mail from a former assistant with a note asking, "Have you seen this?" She had not. Beaumont, still living in her loft studio in lower Manhattan where she had lived for the past forty years, was preoccupied with trying to get funding for an art project.

In 1979, Beaumont had created *Ocean Landmark*, a monumental public artwork that virtually no one will ever have the opportunity to see. An underwater sculpture, it is a fish habitat on the continental shelf of the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Long Island made out of coal waste encased in concrete bricks. The article discussed how Kate Orff, the founder of the award-winning New York-based landscape design studio SCAPE, had recently won a "Rebuild by Design" competition sponsored by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy in 2016, the competition was created in a quest to protect Staten Island and the New Jersey coastline from future storm surges. The foundation of SCAPE's proposal was a series of protective barrier reefs comprised of "ecological concrete armor units," or to put more simply—concrete bricks. The

[1] Author interview with Betty Beaumont, May 4, 2019, NYC.

bricks, according to SCAPE, are “structural armor units specially designed to promote biological activity and promote recruitment of marine species. This is achieved through both the specialized concrete mixture and the design of the textured surfaces of the units.”[2]

SCAPE’s plan, called “Living Breakwaters,” provided a protective barrier for humans and a habitat for marine life. Kate Orff’s approach illustrated the expanding notion of a more-than-human engagement emerging in contemporary landscape architecture projects. This approach conceives of projects as ecosystems in which humans integrate with nonhumans. Rather than employing a top-down approach in which the design team generates a solution and presents it to the community, the terms of the project are determined through community engagement with people. In this case, those affected by hurricanes. “Kate has reconceived the ‘public’ in public space to include nonhuman as well as human life,” declared Elizabeth K. Meyer, “In doing so, she has formed new links between urban design, landscape ecology, and landscape architecture.”[3]

Orff’s practice, along with like-minded artists, designers, and engineers, emerged not in a vacuum, but from a specific history that can be traced back to New York in the 1970s, a time when interconnections among art, feminism, and the environmental movement were establishing new lines of communication and

[2] New York State, “Learn More About the Living Breakwaters Project,” Governor’s Office of Storm Recovery, https://stormrecovery.ny.gov/learn-more-about-living-breakwaters-project.
[3] Brad McKee, “Kate Orff Wins MacArthur Grant,” *Landscape Architecture Magazine*, October 11, 2017, https://landscapearchitecturemagazine.org/2017/10/11/kate-orff-wins-macarthur-grant/#more-13961.

creativity in the United States while women artists like Beaumont were transforming the concept of public art.

Figure 1. Betty Beaumont, *Ocean Landmark*, New York, 1980, satellite photograph.

Figure 2. SCAPE, *Living Breakwaters*, 2020, digital rendering of the project, http://www.rebuildbydesign.org.

It is easy to see the connections between "Living Breakwaters" (Figure 2) and *Ocean Landmark* (1978-80), a project that took place forty years earlier, with its reef made from neutralized coal waste bricks and designed to function as an ecological habitat for marine wildlife (Figure 1). The multi-million-dollar, two-year collaboration with scientists from the Marine Sciences Research Center is listed as a "fish haven" on the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) coastal navigation map. Beaumont recalls how, in the late 1990s, she made a presentation at a Columbia University seminar for architects and landscape architects about *Ocean Landmark*, describing it in the context of social responsibility and sustainable strategy. Afterward, according to Beaumont, a young Kate Orff approached Beaumont to introduce herself and discuss the project.[4] Orff's award-

[4] Author interview with Betty Beaumont, May 4, 2019, NYC.

winning design projects continue to draw from interdisciplinary, collaborative, large-scale art projects like Beaumont's that emerged after a decade of environmental protection legislation during the 1970s. In the present day, some refer to SCAPE's more-than-human model as a new way of working. However, *Ocean Landmark* serves as one of the earliest manifestations of the complicated interactions between ecology, art and environmental activism.

Orff has noted how difficult it was to complete SCAPE's large-scale urban project. Even though she is a landscape architect who oversees a well-respected firm, it took many years to complete each of the firm's socially engaged projects. Although the design firm's projects vary in scope and size, with their commitment to community engagement, the "Living Breakwaters" project required not only years of contending with multiple government agencies with varying jurisdictions and conflicting priorities but also negotiations with property owners, business leaders and communities. What were the conditions forty years earlier that allowed a relatively unknown young female artist to navigate bureaucratic systems, multiple state and federal agencies including the EPA, the Department of the Army, the Marine Sciences Research Center, the NEA, and more to fund, win permits for, and enact a multi-year, three million-dollar, groundbreaking environmental artwork? (Figure 3).

Figure 3. "Mayor Edward I. Koch Throwing in the First Coal Waste Block of *Ocean Landmark*," New York, 1980, photograph from Beaumont Archives.

From Santa Barbara to Manhattan

Born in Canada in 1946, Betty Beaumont grew up in Southern California during the late 1950s and acquired an early interest in technology while spending summers as a teen diving with the Underwater Motion Picture Society, an organization comprised of divers that tested equipment for Hollywood films. Most weekends she dove on the backside of Catalina Island, riding devices like underwater scooters that would be used in James Bond movies. She loved the underwater world and night dives in particular. "What I loved about diving was that it was like being in a dream state because as humans we are oriented to be vertical or horizontal but underwater, none of that matters—there is not up or down."[5]

Beaumont came of age during an era of environmental crisis and ecological awakening in North American. Drawn in particular to bodies of water, as a young

[5] Author interview with Betty Beaumont, May 4, 2019, NYC.

adult Beaumont was deeply influenced by the Santa Barbara oil spill that occurred in 1969 when a tanker capsized in the Santa Barbara Channel spilling oil into the Channel and onto the beaches of Santa Barbara County fouling the coastline from Goleta to Ventura. Beaumont photographed the disaster extensively (Figure 4). Many of the images documented the high-pressure hoses ejecting steam in attempts to rinse the rocks along the shoreline. During her college years she established her lifelong focus on the relationship among materiality, particularly industrial waste, technology, and the environment.

Figure 4. Betty Beaumont, *Steam Cleaning the Santa Barbara Shore in California*, 1969, photograph.

Beaumont was accepted to the graduate architecture program at the College of Environmental Design at the University of California at Berkeley in 1969. Jim Melchert, a faculty member in the art department who was known as a maverick with a disregard for disciplines and canons, was Beaumont's advisor. Melchert later went on to become the visual arts head of the National Endowment for the Arts.

Beaumont spent the bulk of her time on campus making art in isolation. She created large-scale minimalist fiber constructions from recycled material like fire hoses and netting in the (otherwise unused) wind tunnel used for aerospace design and inside a two-story glass model building room. Even though she was living in midst of the anti-war movement, her focus remained on her sculptural work. "I took my entrance very seriously and worked eight hours a day," she says.[6] According to Beaumont, during that period, her only real connection to the outside world of art and design was through a subscription to *Domus*, an international design publication magazine, which meant she had almost no connection to the New York art world. She began exhibiting internationally while still in graduate school, which necessitated learning how to build crates in order to ship her work. One day in the carpentry shop in 1972, Beaumont had a conversation with a technician who told her about "people doing things in the landscape." She was intrigued. Her fascination stayed with her when she headed to New York the following year.

When Beaumont arrived in New York on the fourth of July, 1973, she settled in the emerging neighborhood known as the Garment District. The downtown blocks felt largely vacant because, as Beaumont remembers, "hardly anybody went below Canal Street. It was populated mostly by Chinese and Hispanic women who worked in sweatshops."[7] Very few art galleries existed in Manhattan below Canal street during the early 1970s. At the time, the center of the "art world" was the 420 Building

[6] Author interview with Betty Beaumont, May 4, 2019, NYC.
[7] Author interview with Betty Beaumont, May 4, 2019, NYC.

at 420 West Broadway, anchored by the Leo Castelli and Sonnabend galleries that had opened annexes in 1971. Conceptual art was the predominant movement within the New York art world.

Beaumont recalls going into the galleries and seeing work like Richard Tuttle's simple wire pieces that she considered "practically nothing," pinned to empty white walls. While Minimalism and Conceptual art were the hot new thing, materiality—the quality of the substance—was very important to artists in the movement, like the renowned sculptor Carl Andre. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Andre worked with industrial materials: bricks, lumber, and metal plates. He refused to sculpt or alter them in any way. Instead, he created plain surfaces on the floors of galleries with materials such as lead or magnesium that viewers could touch and walk across. Critic Philip Leider noted on Andre's literal approach to materials:

> The work made of lead, for example, looks the same as the one made of magnesium, but it weighs three tons, while the magnesium work weighs only 450 pounds. It sounds different when you walk on it; it feels different when you touch it; each is warmer or colder that the others; each is more or less lustrous or dull than the others…. If materials could be presented in such a manner as not to be overwhelmed or belied by form, it might be possible to introduce into art a new kind of truth.[8]

For Andre, there was truth to raw material, which was politically bound to the human labor that forged it or used it in construction. (Andre was a traditional Marxist and a New Left member of the Art Worker's Coalition). Beaumont did not find her truth in the purity of raw materials that were for sale in the New York galleries.

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[8] Dominic Rahtz, "Indifference of Material in the Work of Carle Andre and Robert Smithson," *Materiality: Documents of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 67.

Regarding art as a field of inquiry, the focus of her research became the heterogeneously complex processes, both natural and manmade, that transformed materials and landscapes.

While the emerging downtown gallery scene in SOHO was still quite small and dominated by several handfuls of white male artists, alternative spaces were beginning to arise, some of them inspired by the women's movement. Beaumont recalls being "blown away" by Judith Bernstein's *Big Screw* drawings exhibited at the women's collective A.I.R gallery in Soho. There was also a vibrant cross-disciplinary scene emerging in experimental venues. "Painters were making music and sculptors were performing dance compositions. I met Yvonne Rainer and would go sit in on her classes at NYU."[9] Beaumont soaked it all in. But it was the outdoor spaces like Art on the Beach and ArtPark where artists, many of them women who made temporary siteworks, that most piqued Beaumont's interest.[10]

Opened in 1974, Artpark in Lewiston, New York, was a 200-hundred-acre site on the Niagara gorge in the Niagara River. The location coexisted alongside engineering and refinery industries such as Bell Aerospace Laboratories, Hooker Chemicals Plastics Corporation, and Carborundum Company, and provided an outdoor venue for large-scale site works. Funded by the state of New York, the program mandated inclusivity; artists were selected based on a variety of "regions, styles and sexes."[11] Women like Mary Miss and Nancy Holt made significant pieces

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[9] Author interview with Betty Beaumont, May 4, 2019, NYC.
[10] For a more thorough history of the park see Barbara Baracks, "Artpark, The New Aesthetic Playground," *Artforum* 15, no. 3 (November 1976): 28-33.
[11] Ibid., 28.

during their residencies at Artpark. By 1977, however, when Beaumont was offered a residency, the art preserve had fallen victim to its toxic ecology. After some heavy rains, artists began to notice their excavation holes were filled with colored water created by chemicals like liquid sulfur. Between 1944 and 1965, the state allowed a chemical company to dump their waste in the area. By 1978, the Artpark was at the epicenter of the Love Canal environmental disaster, a 70-acre landfill that caused massive pollution in the entire surrounding area. Rather than create a sitework at Artpark, Beaumont became involved with the Love Canal ecological activism, documenting the toxic landscape. Although her early works had been conceptually driven, the Love Canal calamity was a turning point. From this point on, Beaumont's environmental artworks became more responsive to ecological issues, pollution, industrial waste, and sustainability.

Systems Thinking and the New York Art World, 1968-72

Beaumont worked on large-scale minimalist constructions that were composed primarily of recycled materials such as rope, firehoses and sheathing while she was at Berkeley during the second half of the 1960s. Although she was unfamiliar with the New York art world prior to moving there, she recalls with enthusiasm a moment that stuck with her. The late 1960s was a time when artists in New York began working in the landscape. Many were also under the influence of systems theory and the entanglement of systems theory with the military industrial complex during the height of the Vietnam era. By 1969, books like Buckminster Fuller's

Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth introduced the notion of systems theory to the wider public. Systems theory was based on several specific ideas, the most significant being that all phenomena can be viewed as a web of relations and that all systems (whether, electrical biological, or social) have common properties and behaviors that are predictable.

In scientific thinking, there are closed and open systems, a closed system is an isolated system that has no interaction with its external environment. The second law of thermodynamics states that a closed system has entropy, a theme that fascinated Robert Smithson.[12] Discussing the work of earth artists, art historian James Nesbit contends, "These artists were in search of sites seemingly unaffected by civilized hands, while at the same time they operated in accord with the planetary vision of the whole earth as an interconnected spaceship. In this respect, these monumental earthworks are closely tied to the related impulse to treat ecosystems as self-contained entities capable of being observed in separated and observed in isolation."[13] In other words, whether or not the earthwork artists were ecologically motivated in the late 1960s, they were likely influenced by a mode of scientific thought inculcated in the artworld during the Cold War era—the idea of closed systems. In Systems theory, a

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[12] In a 1966 essay for *Artforum* entitled, "Entropy and the New Monuments," Smithson attempts to set for a new model for the function of time in art. In his view art objects, those made by his contemporaries like Judd and Flavin, are simultaneously charged with time and as static. He writes "In a rather round-about way, many artists have provided a visible analog for the Second law of Thermodynamics, which extrapolates the range of entropy by telling us energy is more easily lost than obtained, and that in the ultimate future the whole universe will burn out and be transformed into and all-encompassing sameness." See Robert Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments," *Artforum* 4, no. 10 (Summer 1966): 27.

[13] James Nisbet, *Ecologies, Environments, and Energy Systems in Art of the 1960s and 1970s* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 94.

closed system does not transfer energy with its surroundings. A spaceship is an example of a closed system.

An open system on the other hand, is defined as a "system in exchange of its matter with its environment, presenting import and export, building-up and breaking-down of its material components."[14] Artist were becoming increasingly influenced by system theory. Many art historians tend to focus their attention on the profound impact that mathematician Norbert Wiener and engineer Buckminster Fuller made on art practices in the late 1960s. But in 1968, the critic and curator Jack Burnham published an influential text in *Artforum*, "General Systems Theory," which was extremely popular with the New Left, particularly artists and those in the New York art world. The text introduced the theory of open systems developed by Austrian American biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy in the 1930s. Bertalanffy pitted his open systems against cybernetics, a system science of engineering and military technology he characterized as "the nucleus for a new technocracy." Burnham, in his "Systems Esthetic," essay offered a construct, a systems esthetic that provided a contrast to closed, Cold War conformist society. He argued that "In systems perspective there are no contrived confines such as theater proscenium or picture frame. Conceptual focus rather than material limits defined the system. Whereas the object almost always has a fixed shape and boundaries, the consistency of a system may be altered in time and

[14] "Open and Closed Systems in Social Science," *Wikipedia*, https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_and_closed_systems_in_social_science.

space, its behavior determined both by external conditions and its mechanisms of control."[15]

The process of object-making, rather than producing a sellable product, for example a painting or sculpture, garnered the attention of several New York artists in 1968. Non-traditional materials such as felt and beeswax were deployed in performative ways, such as hanging, dripping, and cutting by artists like Robert Morris in a movement that became known as Process Art. Artists involved with the another movement in that era, Conceptual Art, a movement heralded by Lucy Lippard and John Chandler as a "dematerialization" of the object were also influenced by Burnham's essay. Moreover, women artists involved in the burgeoning feminist movement seeking alternatives to hierarchy identified with the ideas of open systems, for example organisms that transferred energy with their surroundings as offering new possibilities for the artist as change-maker.

According to art historian Christine Fillipone, "Open systems theory provided an empirical description and heuristic model for open-ended, process-oriented multisensory sculptural, land and performance art that engaged social and political contexts."[16] For the artists involved in the women's movement, open systems theory offered a conceptual bridge linking art, technology, and science. Burnham's essay discusses Smithson's work as "putting engineering works into their natural settings and treating the whole as a time-bound web of man-nature relations."[17] Although

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[15] Jack Burnham, "Systems Aesthetics," *Artforum*, (September 1968), 31-35.
[16] Christine Filippone, *Science, Technology, and Utopias: Women Artists and Cold War America* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 2.
[17] Burnham, "Systems Aesthetics," 31-35.

Beaumont was not directly influenced by Burnham's essay, the seeds of his ideas about systems, technology and art sewn in this generation of artists living and working in New York informed her approach to art-making. Perhaps more than any other artists of that generation, she carried these ideas into the real world. *Ocean Landmark*, an artificial reef, expands on the notion of open systems thinking and the idea of nonhuman agency. Beaumont pushed the boundaries far beyond the prevailing aesthetics of the male-dominated artworld.

Public Art and Environmentalism

Figure 5. Ana Mendieta, *Untitled* (from the Silueta Series), Iowa, 1976-78, photograph.

Early earthworks were largely known through photographs and the media. Audiences who saw the actual works in their locations were tiny. Women also made

earth art but without funding by wealthy patrons, such as the gallerist Virginia Dwan who funded and promoted Smithson, Heizer, and Walter De Maria's enormously costly projects. The early earth art made by women differed in several ways. Until Beaumont's bold project, most notably, work made by women (if for no other reason than financial) did not involve moving tons of earth. Some of their earliest artworks were performative, figurative and self-evidently gendered—clearly influenced by feminism and the women's movement.

Ana Mendieta's *Silueta Series, Iowa* (1976-78) that integrated the artist's body into the surrounding landscape rather than displacing it (Figure 5). Judy Chicago's *Atmospheres* (1969-1974), a series of firework performances meant to disrupt masculinized landscapes by transforming and softening them (Figures 6 & 7), were an ongoing temporary series that involved no displacement of earth. They were human-scale and comparatively inexpensive to enact. Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* (1973-76) did not displace or shape earth but rather added elements to it.

Figure 6. Judy Chicago, *Smoking Holes*, Santa Barbara, California, 1969, photograph.

Figure 7. Judy Chicago, *Purple Atmosphere*, Santa Barbara, California, 1969, photograph.

Although Beaumont was in New York at the time, she still did not know about Smithson until obituaries and assessments appeared in magazines and newspapers after his unexpected death in 1973. Much like other women artists at the time, once familiar with their work, she felt men like Smithson, Heizer, and De Maria made works that "used landscape like a large blank canvas," bending it to their will.[18] Prior to *Ocean Landmark,* several women artists attempted to push the boundaries of earthworks, moving the movement from a purely formal aesthetic one to one that was more political, or included at least aspects of site-specificity. Michelle Stuart's momentous work called *Niagara Gorge Path Relocated* (1975) was one example. The artwork was a 460-foot-long roll of paper that descended down a gorge. In her research, Stuart discovered that the gorge had been the original location of Niagara Falls during the last Ice Age approximately 12,000 year ago (Figure 8). While Stuart's site-based earthwork acknowledged a deep history in the land where it was located, in the tradition of the first wave of earthworks, it was not integrated into the surrounding environs.

[18] Author interview with Betty Beaumont, May 4, 2019, NYC.

Figure 8. Michele Stuart, *Niagara Gorge Path Relocated,* Lewiston, NewYork, 1975, photograph.

Not all men who made earth art made hubristic, large-scale site works in remote landscapes. Artists like Charles Simonds and Alan Sonfist gained recognition in the early 1970s for community-based projects made in urban landscapes. Simonds, who was Lucy Lippard's partner when she reviewed his work for *Artforum*, became known for creating dwelling places for an imaginary civilization of "Little People." Alan Sonfist focused more on the materiality of the natural world, framing vignettes of nature in urban locations in order to make nature visible to city dwellers. Critic Robert Joseph Horvitz noted, "Sonfist especially wishes to bring out those patterns of behavior which recur endlessly in nature: the transmutability of matter and energy,

the hierarchical layering of forces, feedback and self-regulation, multiphase equilibrium, etc."[19]

Although Sonfist's early work was exhibited in gallery settings by 1973, at the time Beaumont moved to New York City, he already had begun his Time Scape project. Sonfist partnered with students from the Parsons School of Design in New York City, as well as a biologist, a botanist, a geologist, an ecologist, an historian, and an architect to analyze a parcel of land behind the school museum. They sought to depict its morphology from early human settlement to the present day. Sonifist's research-driven environmental project intrigued Beaumont both for its interdisciplinary approach and its focus on the processes of the natural world.

Figure 9. Agnes Denes, *Rice/Tree/Burial,* New York, 1969, photograph, http://www.agnesdenesstudio.com/works2.html.

Up to that point, very few artists had made work that would later be categorized as environmental art. At its inception, environmental art did not imply

[19] Robert Joseph Horovitz, "Nature as Artifact: Alan Sonfist," *Artforum* (November 1973), 32.

ecologically driven work. It was considered formal and aesthetically driven. Ecological art, a sub-genre of environmental art and a movement that emerged in the early 1970s, centered on ecological activism. According to art historian Peter Seltz, Agnes Denes' 1968 artwork *Rice/Tree/Burial*, a three-act performance/installation made on the land in Sullivan County, New York, was one of the first site-specific artworks with ecological concerns (Figure 9).[20] Beaumont identified as an environmental artist from the outset in part because she attended graduate school at the Berkeley College of Environmental Design. Her research driven focus and interest in technology aligned her more with artists working with a system theory approach.

Figure 10. Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison, *Shrimp Farm, Survival Piece #2*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1972.

Newton Harrison and Helen Mayer Harrison were two of the earliest practitioners of "ecological art" who garnered attention in the early 1970s. Ecological art became an art practice that focused on remediation and restoration that applied the

[20] Dan Mills, ed., "The Visionary Art of Agnes Denes," (2011) http://www.agnesdenesstudio.com/writings.html.

principals of ecological systems.[21] The Harrisons, as the couple came to be known in the art world, left the New York art scene for California in 1967. Although they came out of Minimalism and Conceptual art movements, within their collaborative studio practice at UC San Diego they explored technology and Cybernetics and developed self-regulating sculptures that engaged real-world ecological situations. From 1970 to 1972, the couple created several works known as the *Survival Piece Series*. Survival Piece II was made for the 1971 Los Angeles County Museum of Art exhibition "Art and Technology" (Figure 10). In collaboration with scientists from the Scripps Institute of Oceanography Algology group in La Jolla, California, the Harrisons created three water ponds of varying salinity in which they placed brine shrimp. They were interested in the salinity influence on algae, organisms and color of the water. At the end of the exhibition, the salt was harvested from the ponds in a performance. Newton Harrison argued that their work was distinct from the earthworks of such artists as Smithson and Heizer: "They used earth as material; we feel our works were among the first to deal with ecology in the full sense of the word."[22] Their early experimental research-based artworks existed in the gallery or remained conceptual during the 1970s, and they did not make work in the land-engaging real eco-systems. Like Smithson and other early earthwork artists, the Harrisons explored closed systems and made work primarily for exhibitions. It was Beaumont's project, a

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[21] *Linda Weintraub, To Life! Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).*
[22] Craig Adcock, "Conversational Drift: Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison," *Art Journal* (Summer, 1992), 35.

massive undertaking that would push ecological art out of the gallery and museums ecosystem into the Atlantic Ocean.

Testing the Waters

Beaumont arrived in New York with an NEA grant for $3,000 to create a complete underwater project. During the summer of 1973, she scoured map stores in the region and discovered Teddy Bear Island, an island that had been flooded by a dam several years earlier in Connecticut. Beaumont, who was opposed to damming, realized this was a location that stimulated her activism. She rented a small house in Connecticut and in a local dive shop she posted notices seeking a diving partner. Once she secured a partner, together they encircled the sunken island three times with plastic cable delineating its circumference underwater. Beaumont conceived of the work as both conceptual and activist (Figure 11).

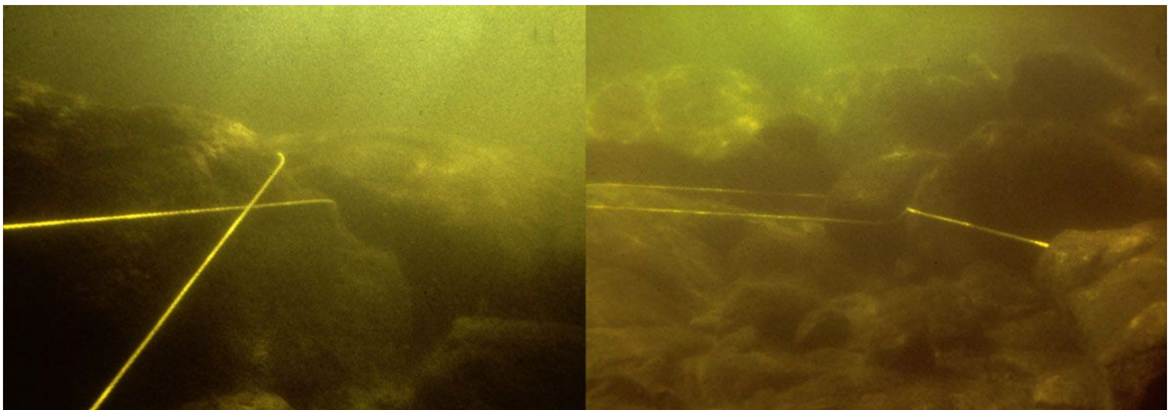

Figure 11. Betty Beaumont, *Teddy Bear Island*, Connecticut, 1973, photographs.

Although Beaumont documented the process with an underwater camera, the images have never been exhibited. Earth art has challenged curatorial tradition as far back as the landmark Robert Smithson "Earth Works" exhibition at Dwan Gallery, New York, NY in 1968 and the subsequent "Earth Art" gallery show at the Museum

of Art at Cornell University, Ithaca, NY in 1969. The “Earth Art” exhibition attempted to visualize a burgeoning international environmental art movement. Nine male artists, several from Europe, were commissioned to make interventions in the campus landscape and install elements of those works in the museum. This “site/non-site dialectic,” as Smithson called it, was an issue that earth artists grappled with from the beginning of the movement. What exactly was the art work—the performance, the existing work, or the recreation/documentation for the gallery exhibition? Beaumont felt strongly that her documentary photographs were not the artwork, and she grappled with how to address making art where no one could see it or purchase and own it.

By 1976, while teaching at the State University of New York at Purchase, Beaumont decided it was time to make a large-scale underwater project in New York. She proposed installations at three sites at the Gateway National Seashore (Staten Island, Queens, and New Jersey). She would cut a channel or groove in the granite breakwater and insert titanium-fabricated musical instruments at each site. According to Beaumont, the instruments would be cradled in jetties but exposed to the wind. “The acoustical wind-toned instruments, the material for their construction and the physical sites together embody a way in which modern technology can harmonize with nature.”[23] The project would continue her exploration on a larger scale and consider ways to incorporate natural forces in her work. While researching the

[23] Emily Rubin, “Betty Beaumont’s Sonic Gateway Project,” *Ear: Magazine for New Music*, January, 1986.

artwork, Beaumont worked with several collaborators, including a physicist named Donald White at Bell Labs in New Jersey, who worked in ultra-sonics, optics, and liquid crystal displays. Together, Beaumont and White probed the possibilities of using the new visual medium of holography and other potential forms of technologically mediated imaging to document her projects.

Although she acquired permits from the National Park Service, Beaumont was never able to secure the necessary funding or the support she needed from the art world for the Sonic Gateway project to be realized. According to Beaumont, the NEA and other potential funders considered the project to be "too ambitious."[24] Ever since she was a student at the College of Environmental Design at the Berkeley School of Architecture, Beaumont had not thought small—and she was about to start thinking even bigger. Extensive research and the connections she made with scientists like physicist Dr. Donald White established the framework for her next project, *Ocean Landmark*.

With the exception of Teddy Bear Island, Beaumont's early environmental artworks were conceptually driven. However, by the late 1970s, Beaumont's artwork became more overtly responsive to environmental issues. Influenced by her emerging interest in energy and inspired by the gas crisis in the mid 1970s, Beaumont began to research the continental shelf, an area of relatively shallow water, as a location for an aquaculture project. In 1978 she came across an article in *National Geographic* magazine titled, "Man's New Frontier-The Continental Shelf" that piqued her

[24] Author interview with Betty Beaumont, May 4, 2019, NYC.

curiosity.[25] In the article which would eventually serve as inspiration for *Ocean Landmark,* the author, Luis Marden, proposed the ten million square miles of undiscovered country and resources beneath the ocean as the new frontier—the landscape for a 20th century manifest destiny and the answer to the unrestrained growth of overpopulation and dwindling resources. In 1945 President Harry S. Truman signed a long forgotten executive order decreeing "…the natural resources …of the continental shelf beneath the high seas but contiguous to the United States [are] declared… to appertain to the United States and subject to its jurisdiction and control…"[26] By the 1960s, burgeoning technology had finally caught up to Truman's aquatic imperialism. In the advent of the energy crisis, undersea oil production moved into deeper waters.

Additionally, the *National Geographic* article featured information and imagery about practices in aquaculture. One photograph illustrates how German U-boats were blown up and their debris was repurposed to form an artificial reef designed to increase marine life (Figure 12).

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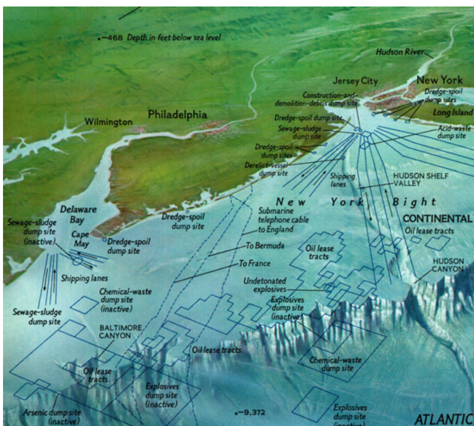
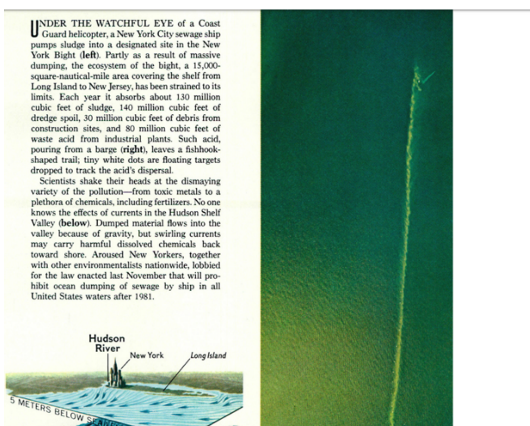
[25] Luis Marden, "Man's New Frontier--The Continental Shelf," *National Geographic*, April 1978.
[26] Ibid.

Where German U-boats failed, fisheries scientists succeed, as 642 pounds of plastic explosives sink the World War II Liberty ship *Edgar E. Clark* (**left**) off Cape Henry, Virginia. The vessel that once hauled aircraft and tanks slides toward the bottom (**below**) to join three other ships as part of an artificial reef designed to increase marine life. Mussels growing on the wrecks are relished by sea bass and tautog; eventually, fishermen hope, the new reefs will draw big billfish like marlin. Similar projects dot the continental shelf off North Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Texas, and California.

Figure 12. Ira Block, *Where German U-boats* Failed, Cape Henry, Virginia, 1978, photograph with caption from *National Geographic*.

Beaumont also discovered information about the long-standing practice of "ocean dumping" in the New York Bight, along the Atlantic coast. The influential article identified specified zones within the continental shelf which included a region called the New York Bight, a triangular indentation that encompasses the New York-New Jersey Shore that extends to the eastern limit of Long Island. Materials such as munitions, construction debris, medical waste and even atomic waste had been dumped in this location for almost a century (Figures 13 & 14).





UNDER THE WATCHFUL EYE of a Coast Guard helicopter, a New York City sewage ship pumps sludge into a designated site in the New York Bight (**left**). Partly as a result of massive dumping, the ecosystem of the bight, a 15,000-square-nautical-mile area covering the shelf from Long Island to New Jersey, has been strained to its limits. Each year it absorbs about 130 million cubic feet of sludge, 140 million cubic feet of dredge spoil, 30 million cubic feet of debris from construction sites, and 80 million cubic feet of waste acid from industrial plants. Such acid, pouring from a barge (**right**), leaves a fishhook-shaped trail; tiny white dots are floating targets dropped to track the acid's dispersal.

Scientists shake their heads at the dismaying variety of the pollution—from toxic metals to a plethora of chemicals, including fertilizers. No one knows the effects of currents in the Hudson Shelf Valley (**below**). Dumped material flows into the valley because of gravity, but swirling currents may carry harmful dissolved chemicals back toward shore. Aroused New Yorkers, together with other environmentalists nationwide, lobbied for the law enacted last November that will prohibit ocean dumping of sewage by ship in all United States waters after 1981.

Figures 13 & 14. *National Geographic, Dumping Sites Diagram* (Left) and *80 million feet of acid waste* (Right), 1978, diagram map and photograph.

In 1970, partly in response to crises like the Santa Barbara oil spill and the Cuyahoga River fire, the Nixon administration established the Environmental Protection Agency. The Clean Water Act followed shortly thereafter in 1972, giving the EPA the authority to initiate and implement pollution control programs and set waste-water standards for industry. According to Rich Cahill, who joined the EPA in 1976 as a press officer and a staff writer for the communications division, "Momentum in the administration particularly in the marine division of the EPA were determined to end dumping in the New York Bight. The laws started coming. The regulation was impressive and this was because there was a lot of support from Congress."[27]

It was during this era of federal support for environmental protection and recovery that Rich Cahill met Beaumont. She frequented the Region 2 office of the Environmental Protection Agency near her studio and spent hours reading reports and the monthly publication, "EPA Today." The publication was essentially a magazine based out of Washington, DC that focused each issue on single topics, such as waste disposal, chemical waste, and ocean dumping. According to Cahill, he and his colleagues in the Region 2 office often "fed stories to the 'EPA Today' staff writers with regional perspectives that could also be considered national in their scope."[28] Sparked by the *National Geographic* article she head read earlier that spring and

[27] Author interview with Rich Cahill, June 20, 2019, NYC.
[28] Author interview with Rich Cahill, June 20, 2019, NYC.

reports on ocean dumping in the New York Bight, Beaumont began to wonder "What was going on down there," in the waters off the coast of the New Jersey Shoreline.[29]

Around this time, in a fortuitous set of circumstances, including volunteering for a herpetologist at the Staten Island Zoo, Beaumont met some barge workers from New Jersey who allowed her onto one of the vessels that dumped waste for eight municipalities in the Atlantic Ocean, twelve nautical miles off Long Island's coast. The Marine Protection Research and Sanctuaries Act (MPRSA), passed in 1972 as part of the Clean Water Act, established the EPA as the lead agency creating regulations to control dumping. However, the municipalities that used the New York Bight as a disposal site had limited options in finding cost effective, environmentally sound alternatives and continued off-coast ocean dumping until the 1980s. Through her research, Beaumont discovered that "short dumping" was still a common practice as late as 1977, and barges would go out at night filled with waste material bound for lawfully designated dumping sites depicted in the *National Geographic* article a year earlier. On these trips Beaumont discovered that for various reasons, the haulers did not always make it to the permitted zones and dumped the material wherever it was convenient.

Apart from the EPA's "Documerica Project," in the mid-1970s, few artists chose to engage with or collaborate with federal agencies, but Beaumont, through her interactions with the staff at the Region 2 office, recognized that the people she met

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[29] Author interview with Betty Beaumont, May 4, 2019 NYC.

there had a true passion for the environment.[30] Cahill recalled: “For a lot of people who were recruited early into the EPA, the environment was really a cause. Some had older siblings who had been involved in the civil rights movement, anti-war demonstrations, and the women’s movement. Everything had been taken up by the previous generation. Protecting the environment became our mission.”[31] Beaumont appreciated the fact that the EPA had “spent a fortune of our tax dollars on excellent research that was available to anyone who took the time to read it.”[32] For Beaumont, according to art historian Nancy Princenthal, “industries, technologies and sciences were not formative or coercive elements but simply ‘raw materials.’”[33] She had ambitious ideas and was always making connections and following research leads that were of interest to her.

In the fall of 1978 Beaumont spent most of her time reading EPA reports, hanging around Bell Labs discussing holographic imaging with Dr. White, looking for snakes in nature, and floating on a barge in the dead of night. She was also still frequenting the Gateway National Park in the hope of enacting her project. One day a park ranger with whom she had become friendly told her about several scientists doing research on potential uses for coal waste from hydroelectric plants at the Marine Research Science Center (MSRC). The MSRC was the center for research

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[30] Shortly after the inception of the Environmental Protection Agency, the agency hired freelance photographers to record the state of the environment and efforts to improve it.
[31] Author interview with Rich Cahill, June 20, 2019.
[32] Author interview with Betty Beaumont, May 4, 2019.
[33] Nancy Princenthal, “Synthesizing Art, Nature and Technology,” *Heresies #22, Art in Unestablished Channels* (1987), 68.

and graduate education for the State University of New York at Stonybrook, and it offered the only SUNY graduate program in oceanography and marine environmental sciences, which had access to extensive laboratories, boats, and most significantly, funding.

Beaumont, who had taught at a SUNY campus, pursued the lead and called the MSRC. Through a series of phone calls, she learned of a fairly large research program experimenting with efforts to stabilize the industrial by-product known as fly ash. In an interview, Beaumont recalled an awkward but productive first meeting at the center with its three lead scientists. During the meeting she presented a slide show of her images and projects to give context to her work as an artist interested in the environment. Although she did not generally identify with the earthworks, she referenced the large-scale works so as to give context to the idea of artists working out in the land. Fortunately for Beaumont, the scientists recognized their overlapping interests and concerns about pollution and ecological issues and agreed to let her observe their work. She spent about a year observing a test site where coal waste blocks were being monitored. Then she decided to propose a project.

A tireless researcher with insatiable curiosity, Beaumont was already familiar with the history and properties of coal as the product of millions of years of decomposing vegetable matter. More significantly, she well understood its byproduct: coal waste. Several years before, Beaumont had determined that the electricity in her Manhattan studio came from a hydropower plant in Ohio, and when she was invited to give a lecture at a university in Ohio in 1977, she took the opportunity to visit a

nearby power plant and documented the visit. She was simultaneously disturbed and fascinated by the lunar landscape of coal waste that surrounded her in the coal mining areas of Ohio she visited (Figures 15 & 16). Although it would be another decade before industrial ecology—the study of how material and energy flows through industrial systems— became a recognized science, Beaumont was already thinking about how coal waste could be transformed into a nontoxic material.[34]

Figures 15 & 16. Betty Beaumont, *Coal Ash Plant*, Ohio, 1978, photographs from Beaumont Archives.

In 1977, Congress passed the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act, which gave states funds to close abandoned toxic mines and restore the land. Several years earlier Robert Smithson, who had corporate connections and high-powered friends in the financial industry, had sent out proposals to fifty executives of mining and related industries. Smithson was not an environmentalist; in fact, he was well known in the art world for his criticism of conservationists and their concern about the destruction of nature. He had little patience for those who idealized nineteenth-century landscapes. Instead, he viewed disrupted landscapes as an opportunity for

[34] Industrial ecology was popularized in 1989. Life cycle thinking is an important aspect that takes into account raw material extraction, processing, manufacture, waste and disposal.

partnership between industry and artists.[35] In a letter sent to Allan Overton Jr., president of the American Mining Congress, Smithson wrote, "Earth art could become a visual resource that mediates between ecology and industry. He also wrote, "I am developing an art consciousness for today free from nostalgia and rooted in the process of actual reclamation…a dialogue between earth art and mining operations could lead to a whole new consciousness."[36]

Some scholars have speculated that Smithson's efforts were unrelated to any environmental remediation concerns, but rather driven by a need for new funding opportunities.[37] With the early 1970s push toward environmental regulation, unpopular industries like mining might have been more motivated to partner with artists. Not only was it an inexpensive strategy for remediation, but art partnerships were also a possible way to garner some positive publicity. But Smithson received only one commission, from the Minerals Engineering Company. He proposed a project that would "consist of a semi-circular dam 75 feet high and the tailings"—sludge residue from the refinement of the ore—"arranged in broad semicircular terraces within it."[38] In Smithson's scenario, whether through dialogue or some form of partnership, the works would rely on the narrative of the heroic artist and mythic genius now both as creator and savior

[35] "With his alignment with innovation and affiliation with the downside of natural forces, Smithson ridiculed the environmentalists' concern for the destruction of nature." See Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties*, 232.
[36] Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties,* 2002, 232.
[37] Boettger makes the case for this assertion in *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties*, pages 231-233.
[38] Ibid., 232.

Beaumont's focus was not on remediation. She was not interested in cleaning up or covering over "somebody's mess."[39] Although coal ash was a waste product, Beaumont wanted to transform it into a new useable material. Her exploration as an artist was the uncharted space between the excess generated by the industrial-technological revolution and emerging ideas around waste. Moreover, her partnerships were focused more on creative interdisciplinary associations with scientists to achieve sustainability and less on artistic genius. Beaumont did not participate in the late 1970s trend of artists transforming wasted landscapes into aesthetically pleasing recreational spaces. As mentioned in the previous chapter, as Beaumont began to research *Ocean Landmark*, the King County Arts Commission in Seattle invited artist—all men with the exception of Mary Miss and Beverley Pepper—to create proposals for transforming polluted and abandoned sites for an exhibition titled "Earthworks: Land Reclamation as Sculpture." Beaumont was wary of the idea of reclamation. She felt that the hiring of artists to make work in disturbed landscapes was problematic. She was not alone; artists like Robert Morris who wrote about the issue questioned the ethics of deploying aesthetics as remediation.[40] Beaumont's interest was in transforming material waste into something new and sustainable, placing her outside the most visionary approaches to public art. Beaumont's progressive partnerships with men outside of the artworld allowed Beaumont to realize her innovative public artwork.

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[39] Author interview with Betty Beaumont, May 4, 2019, NYC.
[40] Robert Morris, "Notes on Art as Land Reclamation," in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).

Government scientists, such as the team Beaumont met with at the MSRC, were tasked with the mission of how to turn coal waste, which would eventually become the earth's largest industrial waste byproduct, into a new material that could provide structural and economic benefits as a building material. For the larger public, the project was considered to be purely based in science. It would be up to Beaumont to convince the artworld that this monumental undertaking, inaccessible to anyone without diving equipment, was an artwork.

At the time Beaumont began to observe the team, the scientists determined the meter sized square blocks crumbled too easily and were not suitable as building material. Their attention turned to how the coal waste could be stabilized in water when mixed with concrete—fly ash. The fly ash, a fine particulate matter, was encased into concrete blocks that were reduced in size to 12" x 12" to cure and harden more easily in the water. The quality of fly ash can vary, and the scientists came to d discover the kind produced in a power plant was compatible with concrete.

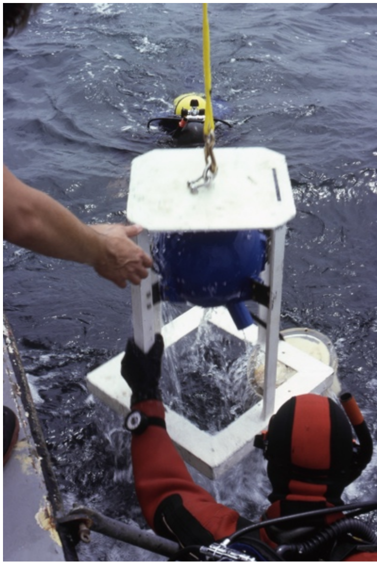

Figure 17. Betty Beaumont, *Scientists testing hand-built bricks of the Atlantic Ocean*, 1978, photographs from Beaumont Archives.

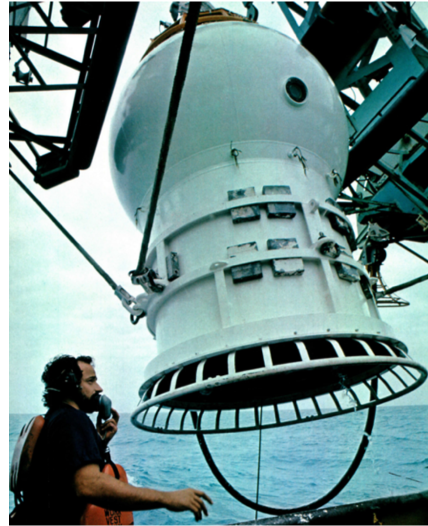

Figure 18. Ira Block, *National Geographic Article Image,* 1978, photograph.

The experimental blocks, formed with varying ratios of fly ash to sludge, were first cured in a steam kiln and then dropped into the Atlantic Ocean. The blocks were closely monitored by scientists over the course of a year (Figure 17). Beaumont's experience with diving allowed her to join many of the oceanographic study cruises. She made dives with the scientists and graduate students to observe test block experiments. It is noteworthy to compare Beaumont's photographs to those she saw *National Geographic* article (Figure 18). Several images are remarkably similar. Visual documentation in a variety of forms was integral to the *Ocean Landmark*. Beaumont's overall approach to visuality was a hybrid techno-aesthetic approach that fused scientific imagery with formal aesthetics in various mediums from photography to schematic drawings.

Over time, the experimental blocks were found to be stable, their emissions within EPA standards. According to one of the lead scientists, Ivan Duedall, "trace elements stay absorbed to the fly ash in the block material. You can only get them out by strong acid leaching, which does not occur in seawater."[41] Once it was determined that the blocks were stable and would not pollute, Beaumont proposed to the team of scientists to use them to create a reef sculpture that could provide habitat for marine life and would also indirectly provide food for people (Figure 19).

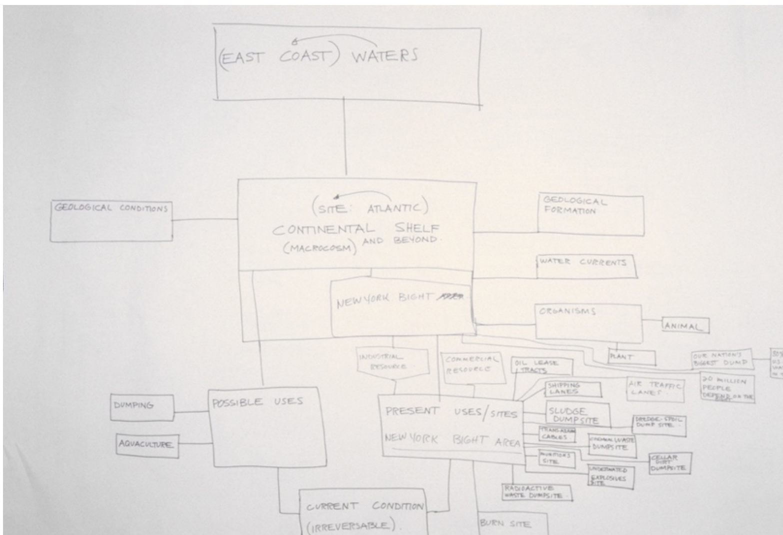

Figure 19. Betty Beaumont, *Developing Diagram*, 1978, photograph from Beaumont Archives.

According to Beaumont, the scientists who were frustrated by the realization that the crumbly muck they had been tasked to work with would not transform into a stable building material on dry land, became energized by her discussions about earthworks and the possibility of a sculptural reef (Figure 20). From her past research in aquaculture, Beaumont knew that the Japanese had a long history of developing

[41] "Marine Science Research Center Newsletter," *Research in Ocean Engineering. University Sources and Resources Volume 1, Number 4*, (Winter 1979).

fishing reefs. Historically in Japan, rocks were placed in shallow waters to create fish habitats, and in 1952 the government began to subsidize artificial reefs as a way to increase catches. According to Jeffrey J. Polovina of the NOAA, "By 1976, the government saw artificial reefs as one way to increase fish catches in their local waters and in 1976 initiated a six-year program with about $40 million a year to be spent on construction and deployment of artificial reefs."[42] In Japan, research and funding went into developing reef technology to determine the way different species were attracted to and used reefs. Some marine animals employed the reefs as a foraging site and others for spawning.

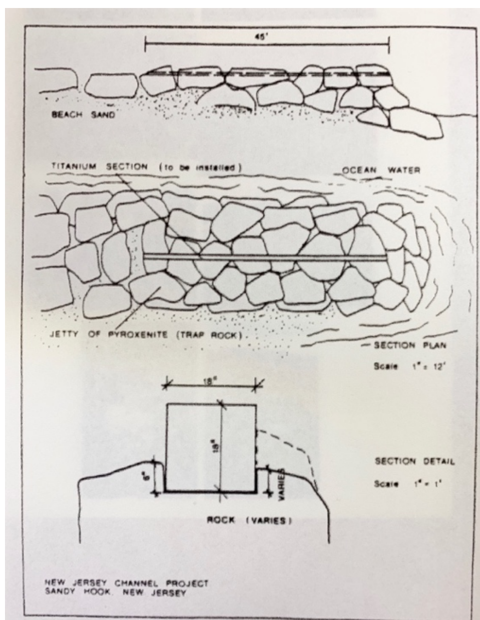

Figure 20. Betty Beaumont, *Diagram for Reef*, 1979, photograph from Beaumont Archives.

The MSRC team began calling the project a "coal-waste artificial reef program" and created their own test reef on the flat sandy bottom of Long Island

[42] Jeffrey Polovina, *Artificial Reef Technology in Japan*, 1986, https://swfsc.noaa.gov/publications/CR/1985/8578.PDF.

Sound. In a few short months in 1979, the reef became visibly covered with organisms, and bait fish moved in to graze on the aquatic life growing on its surfaces. The small fish, drawn to the irregular shaped crannies, eventually attracted larger fish.

In the spring of 1979, she received a letter from the executive director of the MSRC allowing her "co-operative use of ship time and blocks to establish her project." The letter continues, "Please note this is subject to the approval of our lead funding agency NYSERDA. I anticipate no difficulty in obtaining their approval—pleased to have you aboard."[43] The scientists were able to generate the majority of the funding and publicity for the project by positing that coastal communities might be able to safely rid themselves of power plant wastes by compacting them into cement-like blocks and dumping them into the ocean to create reefs.[44] The project garnered nearly three million dollars in funding. Beaumont wrote several of her own grants and eventually received funding from the NEA as well as some environmental groups. In her proposal descriptions, *Ocean Landmark* was a sculptural reef — "a lush underwater garden." The scientists were mentioned in a long list of collaborators in the proposal's documentation. As a sculpture, the invisible work was made legible to the funding agency in an era of scientific collaboration, environmentalism and experimental partnerships with government agencies, however it received absolutely no attention or sponsorship from any other art institutions (Figure 21).

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[43] Woodhead to Betty Beaumont, "Letter from Professor Woodhead, Co-director of the Scientific Research Project," June 19, 1979, Beaumont Archives.
[44] Bayard Nverster, "Coal Wastes Used to Construct Reefs," *The New York Times*, January 30, 1979, https://www.nytimes.com/1979/01/30/archives/coal-wastes-used-to-construct-reefs-marine-life-flourishes-blocks.html.

Figure 21. *Beaumont at her desk with map of New York Bight*, 1979, photograph from Beaumont Archives.

Beaumont needed to select and obtain permits for a site that was close enough to shore so that it could be fished. This was when her connection to the EPA and Rich Cahill became such an important one. When Beaumont told Cahill about the project, he started strategizing with the lawyers and scientists who would do the permitting. Everyone involved thought it was a fascinating project—and it turned out to be a timely one.

During the summer before the project began, there had been several fish kills due to low concentrations of dissolved oxygen, which made the idea of an artificial reef providing a habitat for marine life an appealing idea. "The powers that be thought it could be a beneficial project," Cahill says, and he alerted the director of surveillance, T. Richard Dewling.[45] At that time, the EPA was tasked with monitoring the water quality through coastal surveillance with boats and helicopters. Dewling, a scientist who "loved the ocean and the project," according to Cahill, was one of the first people to support Beaumont, and the people in field operations followed his lead. Dewling directed his staff to allow use of helicopters and boats in order to establish

[45] Author interview with Rich Cahill, June 20, 2019.

the location and enact the project. After several surveillance flights, based on nearby dump sites and tidal currents, a site was selected three miles off the coast of the Fire Island National Seashore, the site is listed on the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) coastal navigation map. Cahill recalled that the men (they were all men) in field operations "all loved Betty." Whenever he dropped by, they would ask, "Where is Betty? When is Betty coming back— she was like a movie star."[46]

The team determined they would need approximately 17,000 blocks, or 500 tons, to create a 150-foot reef. Based on her research of the Japanese fishing reefs, Beaumont felt although the number sounded monumental, it was the amount needed to create something that functioned in the real world. Because it was too many blocks to manufacture by hand, the team located a factory in Trevose, Pennsylvania. Trucks picked up the coal waste from a plant in Ohio and transported it to the fabrication plant. During fabrication, Beaumont stayed with artist friends nearby while scientists stayed in hotels. It took several days to get the correct mixture of materials, which included a combination of aggregate and a concrete formula determined by the scientists. Beaumont recalls that there were a few panicky moments when the aggregate material became stuck in the mixing hoppers. Ultimately, the blocks were made smaller to create nooks and crannies for fish habitat. The blocks were put on huge racks to dry and eventually transported by truck to New Jersey (Figure 22). Beaumont had no idea what 500 tons of blocks would look like, so she created 17,000

[46] Author interview with Rich Cahill, June 20, 2019.

tiny blocks out of Styrofoam in order to build a material maquette in her studio (Figure 23).

Figure 22. Betty Beaumont, *Test Block*, 1980, photograph from Beaumont Archives.

Figure 23. Betty Beaumont, *Styrofoam Blocks (¾" x 3") for Ocean Landmark*, New York, 1980, photograph.

For the installation of the reef, Beaumont drew on her experience with garbage barges. She knew that the barges had two giant doors that were designed to abruptly swing open in order to create enough momentum to scatter the waste material onto the ocean floor. This was precisely what Beaumont did not want to happen. She needed the 500 hundred tons of blocks to pile up, not scatter. Through her Staten Island barge connections, she discovered a specific type of vessel called a pocket barge which would help build up the height and enable better distribution of the blocks. Pocket barges have eight small doors, each one swinging open individually (Figure 24). Beaumont determined that they would need a tugboat to pull the barge while each door opened one at a time (Figure 25).

Figure 24. Betty Beaumont, *Loaded Pocket Barge*, New Jersey, 1980, photograph from Beaumont Archives.

Figure 25. Betty Beaumont, *Barge Operator from helicopter*, New Jersey, 1980, photograph from Beaumont Archive.

Beaumont understood early in the project that she needed to find a way for the sculpture to sit submerged 70 feet underwater, but due to water visibility issues, it could never be seen by the naked eye in its entirety. Seeking to go beyond the traditional method of photographic documentation, she consulted her physicist friend, Dr. White, about ways to represent the work. He put her in touch with Dennis Carmichael at the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory in Palisades, New York. Carmichael had built hydrophone systems that detected acoustic signals underwater that monitored humpback whales. With leftover parts found in the laboratory, Carmichael fashioned a special hydrophone system for *Ocean Landmark*. He also made a device that used sound waves to make echograms of the 150-foot-long reef. Although as curator and critic Barbara C. Matilsky put it, "[f]undamental to the original concept of the work was the belief that its integrity resided in its invisibility—it could only be imagined," Beaumont went to great lengths to document the installation.[47] In addition to the hydrophone, echograms, and underwater

[47] Barbara C. Matilsky, *Fragile Ecologies: Contemporary Artists Interpretations and Solutions* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 100.

photographs, a professional film crew shot aerial and underwater footage of the actual installation.

The day of the installation in September 1980, a cavalcade left from the New Jersey docks, including a party boat with the mayor of New York City Edward I. Koch, a boat of scientists recording underwater sound from the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, a dive boat with the film crew, the tugboat, and the pocket barge. Beaumont flew overhead in one of the EPA's surveillance helicopters with another film crew (Figure 26). Mayor Koch tossed in the first block as the captain of the tug boat and the pocket barge operator coordinated by walkie talkie the distribution of 500 tons of coal waste blocks onto the floor of the Atlantic Ocean.

Figure 26. Betty Beaumont, *The Party Boat for Ocean Landmark*, 1980, photograph from Beaumont Archives.

The festive spectacle was coordinated entirely by Beaumont, whose archive reveals the extraordinary lengths she went to in order to facilitate the project and installation. The extensive documentation includes letters and permits from the US Corp of Army Engineers, NOAA, The MSRC, the EPA, Bell Labs, The Lamott Doherty Earth Observatory, and film crews; receipts from dive shops, boat shops and

camera shops; grant proposals; and the numerous letters Beaumont sent to scientists and a multitude of organizations throughout the country. Considering that this all took place decades before the internet, the scope and breadth of the two-year art project is impressive. Despite all her efforts, when the celebration came to an end that September day, and the boats returned to the New Jersey harbor, although the event garnered attention by the local press, without a gallery or an art patron or art institution backing the project, the real work for Beaumont was just beginning.

Invisible or Illegible

Ocean Landmark was installed less than a year after Rosalind Krauss's hugely influential essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" was published in *October* magazine. One could only imagine what Krauss would have thought about *Ocean Landmark* if she had been aware of it, but almost nobody from the art world was. Although Beaumont managed to receive a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, her artwork was so far afield from the prevailing styles and schools of the era that she garnered absolutely no attention from the art world. Shortly after the installation, she edited the footage taken by the film crew and created a short piece to screen in her studio for colleagues and members of the art world. Although people were intrigued and somewhat in awe of the project, the most asked question during the screening was "where is the art?"[48]

[48] Author interview with Betty Beaumont, May 4, 2019, NYC.

Art is art because someone deems it so. Art becomes visible when it is contextualized. *Ocean Landmark,* ahead of its time, remained largely invisible not because it was at the bottom of the ocean but because it was illegible. Earthworks were invisible to the general population located in remote landscapes. Moreover, two years after its creation Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* became completely submerged in the Great Salt Lake and was invisible for more than thirty years, but this condition did not impact its reputation as an iconic artwork. Earthworks are visible because they were made legible to the public through the promotion of powerful backers, gallerists and critics. With the exception of Holt's *Sun Tunnels* during this era, male land artists were championed to the exclusion of female artists regardless of the artwork itself.

Unlike Beaumont's earlier proposal for the Gateway National Park project that was deemed too ambitions, she received funding by the National Endowment for the Arts for *Ocean Landmark*. There could be many reasons for the approved funding but it seems likely that the NEA, a government funded agency, was more impressed by Beaumont's relationship with the EPA and her collaborations with government scientists, the Corp of Army Engineers, NOAA, The MSRC, Bell Labs, and The Lamott Doherty Earth Observatory, than her status in the New York art world. Unlike other institutions affiliated with the arts such as galleries and museums, the gatekeepers of the canon, the NEA had fewer reasons to discriminate against female artists and more likely the women's movement helped incentivized the funding agency to be more inclusive. Unfortunately, the NEA funding did not translate to exposure. Beaumont's project and her unusual collaborations were formed well

outside the boundaries of the traditional art world institutions and even the progressive public art reclamation projects such as the King County Arts Commission "Earthworks: Land Reclamation as Sculpture" which incidentally, was in part created and promoted by *Artforum*'s Editor-in Chief, John Coplans. The thesis for the ground-breaking exhibition was exploring the ways art could serve as a strategy for remediating disturbed landscapes but the driving force was aesthetics not functionality.

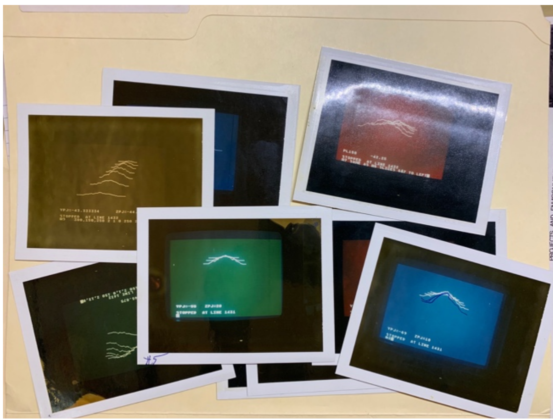

Figure 27. Betty Beaumont, *Polaroid Echograms of Ocean Landmark*, 1980, photograph from Beaumont Archives.

Beaumont's reef, a sinuous, curving mound that evoked minimalist sculpture was different (Figure 27). As utilitarian, it became, according to critics like Krauss, something other than sculpture—landscape architecture or environmental design but it was not art. The open system sculpture was a living organism, produced by a woman artist out of life-denying industrial waste, a protective life-sustaining reef ecosystem that was very much alive. Over the years, Beaumont continued to document her project that thrives on the ocean floor (Figure 28). Beaumont, who up to this point seemed to be capable of convincing anyone of just about anything, for

many years was unable to convince the art world that *Ocean Landmark* was art (Figure 29).

Figure 28. Betty Beaumont, *Monitoring the Reef of Ocean Landmark*, 1982, photograph from Beaumont Archives.

Figure 29. Ira Bloc, *National Geographic New Frontier Underwater Photo,* 1978, photograph.

It took nearly seven years for the project to be exhibited in an art gallery context. *Ocean Landmark* was first shown in an exhibition organized at the Bronx River Gallery by the feminist collective journal Heresies in 1987 in conjunction with an issue titled "Art in Unestablished Channels." In a brief announcement, *The New York Times* referred to Heresies as "[t]he feisty feminist publication of art and politics" and described the exhibition as "[s]omething like a living version of the wave-making magazine."[49] The issue, number twenty-two, focused on new strategies for making "community art" and included several reclamation and garden projects. Princenthal featured *Ocean Landmark* in a review of Beaumont's work, in an essay titled "Synthesizing Art, Nature and Technology."

[49] William Zimmer, "Art; A 'Living Version' of Heresies Magazine," *The New York Times*, January 3, 1988.

“It was a monumental undertaking,” wrote Princenthal, “but hardly anyone knows it’s there. When Michael Heizer or Walter De Maria retreat to the country’s arid interior, the earthworks they create there, almost as remote as the underwater reef, do not suffer for a lack of publicity.”[50] Princenthal underscores a distinction between invisible and illegible. Because Beaumont was not driven by the formal, perceptual or anthropological concerns of the earthwork pioneers, nor the macho clichés that defined them, she suffered from lack of publicity. Princenthal suggests that the project’s lack of visibility is in part due to the fact that Beaumont exceeds the earth artists original concerns of defying the gallery system and eluded categorization in the art canon. Nor for that matter did *Ocean Landmark* fit neatly into narratives of feminist collaboration that were often associated with community art projects during that era. Even within the broad definition of art embraced by a feminist publication, Beaumont’s bold, ambitious, hybrid project that deployed a pocket barge to shape tons converted coal ash on the ocean floor into a large-scale living sculpture more closely resembled an earthwork than a community art project. There was no established channel for this living artwork.

It took a full decade for the project to reach the awareness its achievement deserved. In 1990, Beaumont installed documentation of the work at the Damon Brandt Gallery in New York City. Brandt may have read about the project in an article in the *Wall Street Journal* titled, “New Sculpture: A Matter of Waste” (January

[50] Nancy Princenthal, "Synthesizing Art, Nature and Technology," *Heresies Twenty-Two* 6, no. 2 (December 1987): 68.

30, 1990). The article focused on the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles crediting her as a pioneering artist in the nascent movement centered around "waste." The article discussed other artists —all women—like Nancy Rubins and Nancy Holt who, like Ukeles, were working with dumps as sites and established a framework for the movement. The article positioned *Ocean Landmark* as a progenitor project. Although Beaumont did not consider herself an artist who worked with waste *per se*, she was excited that the project was finally garnering some attention for her overall work.

In late 1991 Barbara Matilsky, then a young New York curator, motivated by a series of environmental disasters and fires that had deeply damaged Yellowstone National Park in the late 1980s, set out to discover how late-twentieth-century artists were responding to the natural world. The result of her exploration was a ground-breaking traveling exhibition and catalogue titled "Fragile Ecologies" that centered on activist, environmentally oriented art, placing it in historical and cultural context and legitimizing contemporary artists as agents of change. Matilsky, drawing on her connections in the New York art world, heard about *Ocean Landmark* and made a visit to Beaumont's studio. While Beaumont had by now generated a significant body of other work, it was *Ocean Landmark* that resonated with Matilsky She selected it for the exhibition and featured it in the catalogue.

"Fragile Ecologies" received considerable press and attention even in a New York art world driven by work that could be fully realized in an art gallery setting. Lucy Lippard wrote about *Ocean Landmark* in her 1991 essay "Garbage Girls" that was included in *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art* (1995). The

project, once ahead of its time, was now of its time. In the 1990s, when environmental art became a recognized (if marginalized) category in the art world. Lippard's essay, following on the *Wall Street Journal* article, linked Beaumont to other female artists who were working with waste, essentially creating an artistic subgenre. Beaumont did not view her practice as centered on waste, nor had she conceived of *Ocean Landmark* as a feminist work when she made it. But over time she has come to view it through those lenses, "I think *Ocean Landmark* is overtly feminist and I am not sure why the work has not been written [about] as feminist," she told Lippard. "It is certainly not phallocentric—it's invisible—you can't even see—it and it feeds people!" According to Lippard, "Feminist art raises consciousness, invites dialogue and transforms culture."[51] By that definition from the 1970s, *Ocean Landmark* can be understood as a feminist work. Moreover, it is a significant artwork that demonstrates a shift from earthworks as artworks imposed on the land to public artworks that integrate with the surrounding environs.

In September of 1976, the *Wall Street Journal* published an article by Earl C. Gotttschalk, Jr. called "Earthshaking News from the Art World: Sculpturing the Land" about the reporter's road trip in the American West. Wearing desert boots, Levis, and a T-shirt, sipping a Budweiser, he drove a four-wheel-drive Jeep across the Western landscape in search of a single artwork he had heard about. "The artwork I am looking for cost 100,000 dollars to make and is highly praised by New York art

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[51] Lucy Lippard, "Get the Message," *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 172.

critics, but it isn't for sale," he writes. "It can't be moved. It weighs 500 tons and only a handful of people have ever seen it. It's called 'Complex One' and it's an earthwork."[52] Gottschalk's interview with the creator of "Complex One," Michael Heizer, is rife with macho clichés that dominate earthwork narratives.

Fourteen years later, Amy Gamerman's piece for the *Wall Street Journal*, "New Sculpture: A Matter of Waste," which had introduced *Ocean Landmark* to the wider public, covers work made by women only. In a decade and a half, the definition of public art has completely changed. Like earthworks, none of the art Gamerman discusses has originated in galleries, but unlike earthworks, not all this new work originated in the art world itself. Artists, and more often women artists, had to seek out other realms. In many ways, the non-art in art came down to who was footing the bill, a matter of practical and conceptual collaboration. The practical matters involved led to an emphasis on the functional and the possible ways in which artists could foment social change. Although she eventually became part of the team, the science journals and press never mentioned Beaumont's contributions to the project, which included the reef as sculpture.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, female artists like Betty Beaumont were shaping what constitutes public art and who makes it. *Ocean Landmark*, a living underwater project, is an historical precedent for contemporary collaborations

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[52] Earl C. Gottschaulk, Jr., "Earthshaking News from the Art World: Sculpturing the Land," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 10, 1976.

between art and science. It is also an intervention in the spirit of feminist tradition that cooperatively crossed disciplines in order to creatively foster change.

Chapter 3

Landscape Sculpture: Patricia Johanson, Fair Park Lagoon (1981-1986)

> One of the things you have to learn as a public artist is that you can't control the future. Things change—your piece becomes a part of that change.[1]
>
> -Patricia Johanson

Figure 1. Patricia Johanson, *Fair Park Lagoon*, Dallas, Texas, 1986.

Patricia Johanson's *Fair Park Lagoon* (1981-86) is a large-scale public artwork that took nearly five years and more than a million dollars to complete. The project, which includes an "environmental sculpture" consisting of elements that bring people into contact with the water, plants and animals in the lagoon, was a redesign of a five-block long expanse of an environmentally degraded, artificial body of water surrounded by four museums in central Dallas, Texas. The original

[1] Author interview with Patricia Johanson, May 1, 2019, Buskirk, NY.

commission was for a monumental sculpture, but Johanson submitted a comprehensive, environmentally sustainable design that included native vegetation to purify the water and provide micro-habitats for fish, turtle, birds, and insects. The plan for revitalizing the ecosystem was a collaboration among local environmentalists, biologists, historians and community partners. As an interdisciplinary work, *Fair Park Lagoon* permeated the boundaries of art, architecture, and landscape architecture. As a comprehensive ecological landscape, the project helped establish a pathway for a new genre of public art in which humans and nonhumans engage with a structure that allowed for a multitude of perceptions and experiences (Figure 1).

In the mid-1960s, Johanson, a painter and sculptor, was a rising star in the New York art world and one of the few women associated with the Minimalist art movement that emerged in the United States in that decade. But less than five years after her first solo show at Tibor de Nagy, an influential gallery in uptown Manhattan, a pregnant Johanson retreated to a house in the woods in rural upstate New York. In the ensuing years, Johanson's work shifted one-hundred and eighty degrees from minimal, monochrome, inorganic large-scale line paintings to small representational drawings on notebook paper in pencil depicting the organic material such as leaves, flowers and butterflies that she discovered on long walks through the woods. After reflecting on plant forms, thinking about how its design enabled it to function, she imagined it as a buildable structure like a plaza or bridge. She enlarged the colored pencil, pastels and ink drawings of imagined landscapes into detailed studies and

master plans. These drawings became the foundations for the *Fair Park Lagoon*, a public artwork in the center of Dallas.

At the close of the 1970s, as noted in previous chapters, Krauss's influential essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" attempted to clearly separate the boundaries of practices such as sculpture, landscape architecture, and architecture that Krauss argued had become blurred in the era during the 1970s known as "post modernism." Johanson did not simply blur boundaries in her work, she ignored them in a deliberate effort to bring forth a new public art that demanded presence, engagement, and collaboration between humans and nonhumans, so providing an early example of a more expansive notion of a "social landscape." For Johanson, the social landscape was all inclusive and an open-ended. Embedded in the human aesthetic of *Fair Park Lagoon* was a comprehensive ecosystem comprised of vegetation, fish, waterfowl. Johanson asserted that "The work isn't about 'perfection' (the ideal, closed world of formal artist) but rather about what happens 'in between'…what effect those forces have on each other, and also how they mutually create each other—because each is constantly affecting what the other *becomes*."[2]

Nearly a half century later, feminist anthropologist Anna Tsing noted, "The concept of sociality does not distinguish between human and non-human. 'More-than-human' sociality includes both."[3] A progenitor artist in public environmental art,

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[2] Xin Wu, *Patricia Johanson and the Re-invention of Public Environmental Art, 1958-2010* (London: Routledge, 2017), 126.
[3] Anna Tsing, "More-than-Human Sociality: A Call for Critical Description," in *Anthropology and Nature*, ed. Kirsten Hastrup (London: Routledge, 2015), 27.

she created artworks that demanded engagement with more than human elements often to the detriment of her career as an artist.

In the twenty-first century, social scientists have begun to more urgently discuss the importance of a holistic strategy approaching one that considers the importance of nonhuman actors, plants, animals and microbes, complex multi-species relations in landscape formation.[4] Johanson, a progenitor in this way of thinking, helped to initiate that enduring conversation in the art world and beyond. Her journey from painting to sculpture to drawing, then back again to sculpture, would culminate in the momentous and controversial public work *Fair Park Lagoon*. One of the earliest recipients of a large-scale public commission awarded to an American female artist in that era, how did a young artist make the leap from abstract art to large-scale public environmental art?

The Bennington Years

Patricia Johanson was born in Manhattan in 1940. She spent her early childhood years playing in the city's parks and botanical gardens. In 1958, she left Manhattan to attend Bennington College in Vermont where her focus became painting. By 1960 she was deeply immersed in color theory and preoccupied with the impact that color had on the viewer's senses. While at Bennington, she created several temporary environments for a series titled *Color Room*, located in spaces that

[4] For more information on interdisciplinary approaches in the humanities, see Ursula Heise, "Stories for a Multispecies Future," *Dialogues in Human Geography* 8, no. 1 (March 2018).

included her painting instructor Paul Feeley's office. According to an excerpt from an unpublished autobiography, Johanson wrote for art critic Eleanor Munroe, who nominated Johanson for a Wonder Woman award in 1984, "By covering windows, walls, floor and roof with various colors, and placing colored objects within the room, a 3-dimensional positive negative space was created, so that different 'compositions' occurred as one moved through the work (the person was actually *inside* the sculpture)." The colored paper over the windows created a glowing effect, making for an immersive installation that several art historians have acknowledged prefigure the colored-light installations of Dan Flavin.

Johanson's youthful artwork engaged the viewer's senses in a complex way, moving beyond the visual and allowing for multiple and shifting perspectives, these early works were a rejection of the singular perspective of modernism. The roots of her life-long aesthetic can be traced back to these earliest experimental environments. According to art historian Xin Wu, later interpretations of Johanson's Bennington project "have rightly pointed out that the *Color Room* was an artwork that resisted a fixed viewpoint and demanded to be seen in motion."[5] If *Color Room* could be considered Johanson's first attempt at creating an environment, it would be nearly two decades before she made her next one. The seeds for *Fair Park Lagoon* were sown during her time at Bennington College and took root during the 1970s, a decade during which the women's movement, and specifically feminist art, worked to expand the audience and reconnect art to the fabric of everyday life.

[5] Wu, *Patricia Johanson*, 15.

At Bennington, Johanson studied with two teachers who would become her most influential mentors: Tony Smith, an artist and practicing architect who is often cited as an influential early figure in Minimalist sculpture, and the director of exhibitions, Eugene C. Goossen, who would later become head of the art department at Hunter College in New York City; he also became Johanson's romantic partner. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Goossen was responsible for organizing several important exhibitions and retrospectives for artists such as Helen Frankenthaler (a Bennington alumna) and an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art for Ellsworth Kelly. Several major artists, such as Frankenthaler, and critics such as Clement Greenberg came to speak at Bennington, and Johanson was able to interact with them and eventually establish friendships. She spent many weekends traveling to Manhattan to see art exhibitions. Tony Smith sought inspiration from the natural world for his artworks in a way that would inspire Johanson. In a group project with his students, he explored enlarging geometric shapes such as tetrahedrons, scaling them up into large, architectural, sculptural forms. Several years later while teaching at Hunter, Smith took a black notecard box from Goossen's desk and scaled it up to design a building that was eventually constructed as a home. Scaling up small geometric objects became a signature aspect of Smith's work. His practice helped to shape Johanson's interest in landscape sculptures.

Rising Star Under Glass Ceiling

After graduating from Bennington in 1962, Johanson followed Smith and Goossen back to New York City to attend graduate school at Hunter College. Even as she continued painting, she decided that rather than obtaining an advanced degree in studio art, she would get a master's degree in art history with a focus in nineteenth-century American landscape painting. She supported herself by doing art research for publishers during the day, attended classes in the evening, and stayed up most nights painting. Like many of the younger artists in her generation, she continued to explore color applied in pure geometric forms. One of Johanson's instructors at Hunter was Ad Reinhardt, an influential figure for Minimalists whose focus was creating visual purity. Celebrated for his monochromatic squares, Reinhardt tried to achieve "[a] pure, abstract, non-objective, timeless, spaceless, changeless, relationless, disinterested, painting."[6] The main tenent of Minimalism was to completely do away with subjectivity, and that included any subjective expressionism that could be implied by the use of color. The prevailing ideology at the time held that an illusionistic painting was, essentially, false; rather, the idea of "the real" demanded that a painting be completely devoid of any reference to the material world.

Although she was deeply influenced by Minimalism, Johanson admitted that "a lot of my early Minimalist paintings came from landscape."[7] Unlike many artists working at that time, Johanson did not view her work as being in opposition to nature,

[6] Gallery label, *Abstract Painting,* New York, Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, 2007.
[7] Author interview with Patricia Johanson, May 1, 2019, Buskirk, NY.

but rather aligned with it. Several of her paintings from 1964 were named for actual landscapes in the Southwest, a region where she traveled extensively, and all her later works were named for American explorers. Her minimal line paintings such as *Pompey's Pillar* referenced prominent rock formations and the colors were derived from the canyons that she explored. In order to achieve the kind of sensory-perception she had experimented with in *Color Rooms*, she dramatically increased the size of her paintings. She wanted viewers to participate in her paintings from different perceptual vantage points as they walked along beside them. "One of my large paintings, particularly those with symmetrical spots, you would have to measure with your body," she would say decades later. "If you stood in the middle, the spots would diminish at both ends. If you stood at one end, they would diminish in space. If you walked along it, they would have changing relationships—like you do with the landscape. I realized the paintings had become like landscapes and eventually they reached an end to what could be done."[8] Her oil paintings became longer, first as long as 15-feet, and then several of them, such as *Minor Keith* and *William Clark*, both made in 1967, 8-½ by 28 feet in size (Figure 2). The 28-foot long paintings were essentially site specific—the length of the wall of Tibor de Nagy, the gallery that presented her first solo show.

[8] Author interview with Patricia Johanson, Buskirk, NY, April 30, 2019. Many of these paintings were never exhibited and they sit in large crates in a rundown barn on the property at Buskirk where Johanson has lived since 1973.

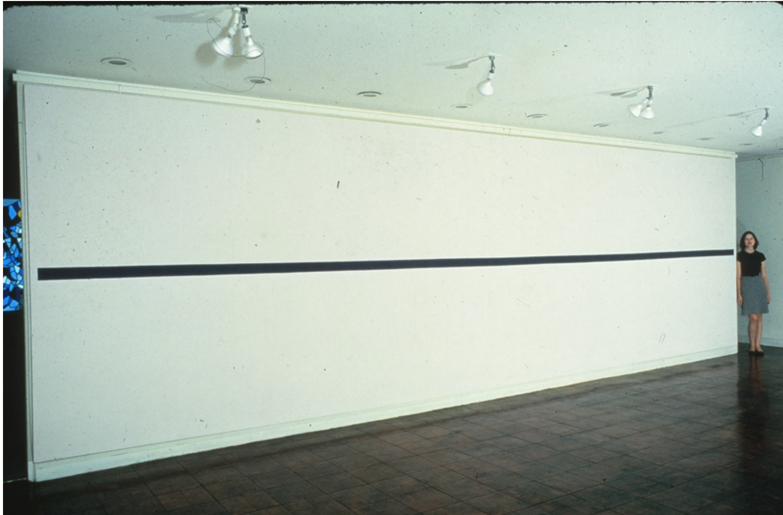

Figure 2. Patricia Johanson, *Minor Keith*, Tibor de Nagy, New York City, 1967, photograph from Johanson Archives.

In 1964, the year Johanson completed her master's degree, Goossen included one of her paintings in an exhibition he curated, "8 Young Artists" at the Hudson River Museum, New York. Works by then little-known artists such as Carle Andre were also in the exhibition. The paintings were widely included in anthologies and came to be known as "minimal." The other artists were men and quickly sought after by galleries. Johanson recalls Andre visiting her at Hahn Brothers, the warehouse where she worked on her very long paintings, a year later after the exhibition. "He said, 'I have an upcoming show called *Primary Structures* at the Jewish Museum and I had no idea what to do—you have just given me an idea!' When Gene and I went to see the show there was—I think it was called *Lever*, a line of bricks on the ground, and Gene and I just looked at each other and said,' Ah, okay…" [9] *Lever* became widely recognized as a breakthrough artwork for Andre and helped to define the

[9]Author interview with Patricia Johanson, Buskirk, NY, April 30, 2019.

movement known as Post Minimalism. Whereas Minimalism was a movement defined by the effort of artists to make work that was anonymous and impersonal, in the early 1970s Post Minimalism, a term that referred to several movements, performance, Process, Conceptual and site-specific art is associated with artists efforts to invest sculpture with emotionally expressive qualities.

Even though during the mid 1960s Johanson and Andre were working in similar ways, it would be Andre who received all the attention for his bold, horizontal, sculptural work that emphasized material presence. One logical explanation for this was simply that throughout the 1960s and well into the 1970s, women artists were not perceived as commercially viable. Johanson, with the help of Goossen, did manage to secure a solo exhibition of her paintings in 1967 (Figure 2). Moreover, in 1968 Goossen included Johanson in “The Art of the Real: USA 1948-1968” at the Museum of Modern Art, which included works by her instructors Paul Feely and Tony Smith as well as Georgia O’Keeffe and other celebrated artists. In his essay for the catalogue Goossen wrote, “In a minimal painting by Patricia Johanson for example, we are expected to grasp a single narrow strip of color extending as much as twenty-eight feet along an empty field of raw canvas. Such pictures remind us that painting had reached the minimal several times before in this century—Georgia O’Keeffe’s *Blue Lines* of 1916 for example, and in Malevich’s *White on White* of 1918— but in the Johanson we are asked to cope with the irreducible facts

physically rather than intellectually."[10] Goossen distinguishes between physicality and intellect as if they distinctly autonomous characteristics. His assertion was curious. Was he suggesting Johanson's work was intriguing because she was a slight woman who made giant paintings? Or because as woman her work was less intellectual than her male peers? In spite of this early critical attention, unlike her male peers, Johanson would not have another solo show of her work in New York for nearly a decade.

Multisensory Landscape Sculpture

By 1968, the art world was in another period of transition. Several influential texts were published that garnered the attention of artists, critics, and art historians. Lucy Lippard co-authored the essay "Dematerialization of the Art" with John Chandler, arguing that art was moving away from the traditional object (painting and sculpture) toward "pure intellectualism," as evidenced by new movements like Conceptualism and Process art, which were heralded as "post-minimal" movements.[11] The following spring, *Artforum* published Robert Morris's "Anti Form" manifesto, stressing process over object.[12] The summer issue included a photo of Johanson's *William Rush* on the back cover and featured Allan Kaprow's response to Morris, "The Shape of the Art Environment: How anti form is 'Anti Form'?" Morris and

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[10] E.C. Goossen, *The Art of the Real USA, 1948-1968* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art: Distributed by New York Graphic Society, 1968), 9.
[11] Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism* (New York: Dutton, 1971), 255-76.
[12] Robert Morris, "Anti Form," *Artforum* 6, no. 8 (April 1968): 34-35.

Kaprow considered themselves theoreticians, and both advocated for form over color. However, Morris was interested in the formal aspects of materiality and Kaprow was focused on the environment and a broader sense of engagement. Johanson was deeply intrigued by both philosophies. Although she was still engaging formally with Minimalist principles of color and purity, she was struggling with the movement's rigid boundaries.

It was another formative essay that *Artforum* published in 1968 that resonated deeply with Johanson. As noted in Chapter One, during the late 1960s many New York artists were influenced by systems thinking. Writer Jack Burnham posited a post-formalist aesthetic in his essay "Systems Esthetics," that caused another stir in the art world. Citing the work of male artists, many of whom were Johanson's teachers and colleagues, like Ad Reinhardt, Robert Morris, and Carl Andre, as well as Robert Smithson, Dan Flavin, and Hans Haacke, Burnham argued that systems— the way that artists worked— were becoming more relevant than the objects that artists created. Moreover, he stated that, "The scope of a systems esthetic presumes that problems cannot be solved by a single technical solution, but must be attacked on a multileveled, interdisciplinary basis. Consequently, some of the more aware sculptors no longer think like sculptors, but they assume a span of problems more natural to architects, urban planners, civil engineers, electronic technicians, and cultural anthropologists."[13] It seemed as though the importance of the object, for example, the painting or sculpture, was disappearing at the same time that the role of the artist was

[13] Jack Burnham, "Systems Aesthetics," *Artforum* 7, no. 1 (September 1968): 31-35.

becoming increasingly more complex. By the end of the 1970s, reacting against this shift, contemporary art's transformation from medium specificity to post-modern plurality, Krauss wrote her essay that attempted to redefine the differences between art, architecture and landscape architecture.

Based on the numerous annotations she made in her copy of Burnham's article, Johanson agreed with much of his argument and his application of the scientific concept of system's theory to make his argument. Johanson herself had been raised in a "system thinking" household. Her father, an engineer, was in charge of developing the navigational guidance systems on both the Polaris and Cruise missiles. As children, Johanson and her sister would swim in the surf off Cocoa Beach, Florida, and watch the test launches from ships off Cape Canaveral as the missiles were fired down the "Atlantic Range." In his essay, Burnham deploys Hans Haacke as his example for an artist who applied a systems approach. Citing Haacke's artist statement from a show in 1968, Burnham quotes: "A 'sculpture' that physically reacts to its environment is no longer to be regarded as an object. The range of outside factors affecting it, as well as its own radius of action, reach beyond the space it materially occupies. It thus merges with the environment in a relationship that is better understood as a 'system' of independent processes."[14] Johanson, who by 1968 was working predominately outside making large-scale sculptures, began to explore how her work connected to a larger system—in this case, the natural world. The

[14] Burnham, "Systems Aesthetics," 31-35.

processes of nature, light, weather, and decay became increasingly intrinsic to her investigations.

Stephen Long (1968), named after a military officer who became a surveyor and engineer, was a 1,600 by 2-foot sculpture, a straight line the scale of the Empire State building that ran along an abandoned railroad bed in Buskirk, New York. Johanson was fascinated by Leonardo da Vinci's experiments with atmospheric painting. The sculpture was comprised of connected two-foot-wide acrylic pieces attached to plywood panels, each painted with eight-inch wide red, yellow, and blue bands. The viewer would only be able to distinguish the separate colors for a brief time before they began to mix and interact with the environment as the eye moved back and forth between a closeup perspective and the long view. According to Johanson, as the viewer walked along the sculpture, "the colors were constantly in flux due to changes in the color of natural light in the landscape."[15] With such a multisensory engagement, Johanson felt the artwork functioned almost like a piece of the sky, flora, and terrain. "At sunset, for example when red light was falling on the sculpture the blue stripe turned violet and the yellow stripe turned to orange. Because the space-projection literally went beyond the field of vision, movement and the aerial views also became particularly important."[16] (Figures 3 & 4).

[15] Author interview with Patricia Johanson, Buskirk, New York, April 30, 2019.
[16] Stephen Long, Stephen Long, PatriciaJohanson.com, http://patriciajohanson.com/timeline/stephen_long_aerial.html.

Figures 3 & 4. Patricia Johanson, *Stephen Long,* Buskirk, New York, 1968, photographs, http://patriciajohanson.com/timeline/stephen_long.html.

Although the large-scale sculpture in rural upstate received some publicity locally, a small write up in *Vogue* magazine and appeared on the back cover of *Artforum*, it was largely ignored by the New York art world. Johanson claims the lack of attention and the temporary nature of the sculpture gave her a great sense of freedom. "I realized that I could build anything I wanted to as long as I could finance it and engineer it. Thus, it set the pattern for the next few years, do more art research, work harder, save more money, build more projects."[17] During the time she was conceiving and constructing her sculptures, Johanson learned that the purveyors of materials she used—such as the steel beam for an earlier sculpture titled *William Rush* (1966) and the lumber for *Stephen Long*—as well as the fabricators she worked with, were all skeptical about working with a woman. The skepticism in part, became the motivation Johanson would need to pursue subsequent degrees in civil engineering and architecture. She quickly learned that she needed to be literate in

[17] Eleanor Munro, "Unpublished Biography of Patricia Johanson" (unpublished manuscript, 1986).

drawing and reading plans and well versed in how to work with materials. Based on her experience with making large-scale sculptures, Johanson took to heart Burnham's assertion that sculptors now needed to "assume a span of problems more natural to architects, urban planners, civil engineers." In the ensuing years, Johanson came to understand that the kind of art she wanted to make would require technical expertise.

House & Garden Drawings: Butterfly Wing as Landscape

In 1969, Johanson received a letter from the editor of the magazine *House & Garden*. "After seeing your 1,600-foot-long railroad track sculpture in *Vogue*," the editor wrote, "it occurred to me that your fresh approach is one that would make considerable impact on the field of landscape design. A knowledge of, or even an interest in, gardening is not required at all. The kind of design I am thinking of would approach the problem as one of form, color and texture, with materials used to execute the design being selected as required. These could include—to name a few possibilities—water, gravel, grass, cement blocks, would and metal strips or panels."[18] Although Johanson did not particularly like gardens and knew little about them, she deemed the commission a promising opportunity that she accepted. One can only speculate whether gender played a role in inspiring this commission, but it is unlikely that the editors would have approached men such as Morris or Smithson to make a garden.

[18] James Fanning to Patricia Johanson, "Letter from James Fanning," 1969, Archives of Patricia Johanson.

Perhaps it was more a question of cost, as the magazine would not have been able to afford those artists. Nevertheless, it was a commission offered to an artist working with large-scale outdoor sculpture. Johanson could experiment with color and perception and generate something new. There were very few women sculptors who worked in contemporary styles in the late 1960s and early 1970s and even more than their male counterparts, they had to look beyond the parameters of the artworld in order to finance their work.

While her experimentation with garden art may seem like an aberration in her career as a young minimal artist, the commission came at a moment when both the art world and landscape architecture were in transition. The burgeoning environmental movement of the 1960s in North America affected both realms. In 1969, Ian McHarg's influential book *Design with Nature* focused on the emerging awareness of ecology and demonstrated a shift in landscape architecture as it was distancing itself from gardens and parks toward data-driven environmental planning rooted in systems thinking. In contrast, within the artworld, earthworks made in remote locations that romanticized open landscape were becoming a widely popular movement. Johanson's work, as blend of art and landscape architecture, was something different altogether.

In contrast to her large-scale sculptural work, the garden drawings were small pencil sketches that Johanson drew on notebook paper and later made into more fully realized works on paper (Figure 8). They contained fragments of text, which incorporated her ideas more directly into the drawings. Working on the contemporary art of garden design generated the opportunities for Johanson to research, think

through ideas, and draw in conceptual ways that she hadn't been able to explore with painting. While her paintings were in the tradition of minimal art and emphasized the real, the garden drawings allowed for her imagination to ramble freely.

The original idea for the *House & Garden* commission was for Johanson to provide a garden design with a fresh approach that the magazine would then build, photograph, and publish. But after making nearly 150 sketches and writing a series of seven essays exploring her ideas, the *House & Garden* commission remained unrealized. Although Fanning encouraged her from the outset, in the end he decided that the work was too visionary to publish in the magazine. The unrealized garden remained dematerialized in artistic terms. In drawings, the work resonated more strongly with Conceptualism and Process art than with the Minimalist movement. Much to Johanson's displeasure the works on paper were not understood as buildable but rather were viewed as utopian.

With the distance of nearly four decades, Johanson articulated her struggle with the limitations of Minimalism:

> I have recently been looking at the paintings I made nearly sixty years ago when I got to New York and I think they are not half bad, but I wonder—why did I make them and what are they about? They were of the moment. You take art history to the next logical step. There were the abstract expressionists, the 'hard edge' painters of the late fifties, the people that were doing hard-edged shapes and you are left with Minimalism which is virtually nothing. People are recreating the shape of a stretcher and people are writing twenty-page articles about it.[19]

[19] Author interview with the Patricia Johanson, Burkisk, New York, April 30, 2019.

Unmistakably, Johanson was caught up in the movement of her time and she was as ambitious as any artist seeking recognition. Although she was deeply engaged with the formal elements of Minimalism, light, color and space, painting as a medium precluded the immersive experience of her youthful artwork such as her *Color Rooms* experiments that immersed the viewer's senses in a complex way. Ultimately, painting became a dead end for Johanson who wanted to make art that not broached the boundaries of the art world but actually played a functional role in the real world.

The garden drawings, as an intense and prolific exercise, served as a catalyst for transcending Minimalist principles in a way Johanson hadn't been able to enact in her prior work. In all, she made one-hundred and fifty drawings in seven themes. The final two themes of the garden drawings series were titled respectively "Gardens for Highways" and "Garden-Cities" and not only did they demonstrate Johanson's interest in systems and buildable structures but they revealed her holistic view of nature (Figure 5). In 1963, American historian and writer, Lewis Mumford published a collection of essays entitled *The Highway and the City*. Mumford and men like Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright were influential thinkers focused on urban planning during late 1950s and into the 1960s. Johanson was more aligned with and influenced by author and activist Jane Jacobs. A critic of urban planning and development, Jacobs argued that urban planners driven by aesthetic concerns, geometry and clean lines, overlooked the importance of diversity, no matter how chaotic, as the foundation healthy community.

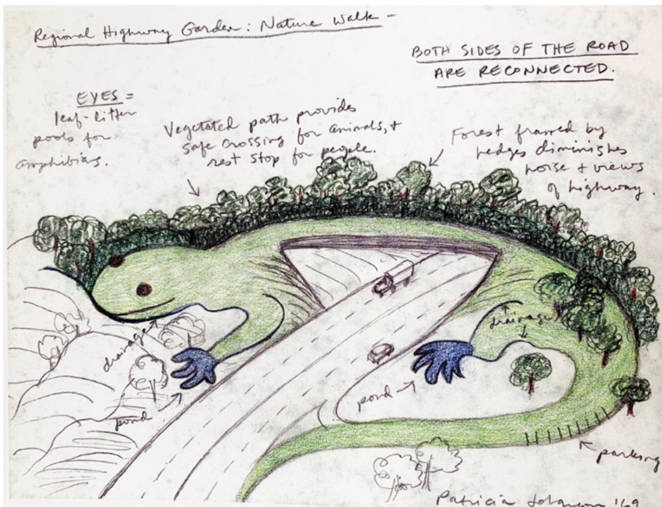

Figure 5. Patricia Johanson, *Regional Highway Garden: Nature Walk,* 1969, Pencil and colored pencil on paper, 8 ½" by 11".

In her drawings, Johanson portrayed highways as nature, not separate from it and, rather than simply arguing that they blurred boundaries. Johnson argued for civil engineering as an artform. The drawings helped foster her interest in functionalism and the notion that art could and should be more than an autonomous object. Johanson wanted the art she made to value social processes and consequently explored how this could be manifest. One of the unspoken rules that distinguished twentieth-century Western art from other human products was its status as an endeavor with no inherent practical purpose. By the 1970s, unlike the early 1920s with movements like Russian Constructivism, functionality rendered art into architecture, landscape architecture, or design. Johanson sought to disrupt the long-standing premise that if art had a purpose beyond pure aesthetics then it became non-art. Moreover, the drawings, many featuring animals, pushed the work well beyond the bounds of a modernist sensibility. *Regional Highway Garden: Nature Walk* serves

as an early example of a garden that is also migratory bridge that allowed for animals to avoid the hangers of the highway (Figure 5).

When Johanson received a Guggenheim fellowship, she used the funds to embark on a sculpture titled *Cyrus Field* (1970). It was the first sculpture she made after the garden drawings. Completed in three phases between 1970-1975, like *William Rush,* the large-scale work was located on Eugene Goossen's woodland property in Buskirk (Figure 6). With her garden drawings, Johanson made an aesthetic break from the formalist course of art, but with *Cyrus Field*, she returned again to what was familiar—but this time in a different way.

Figure 6. Patricia Johanson, *Cyrus Field*, Buskirk, New York, 1971, photograph from Johanson Archives.

Cyrus Field —Marble & Redwood & Cement Blocks was comprised of three linked sections made respectively of marble, redwood, and cement blocks. For *Cyrus Field —Marble*, white slabs of marble, sixteen inches wide and four inches thick, were laid end to end on the forest floor to create a 1,200-foot line. *Cyrus Field—*

Redwood, by contrast, is a triangular maze of planks twelve inches wide and two inches thick on low stilts, its total length 2,600 feet. The last section, according to Wu, *Cyrus Field—Cement Blocks*, has a more complex composition of multiple curved lines derived from its combination of the initials "PJ-TS-ECG" of the three close friends: Patricia Johanson, Tony Smith, and E.C. Goossen. The cement block line extends over 3,200 feet.[20]

Although Goossen and Smith were forces in establishing the American modern art aesthetic, both men supported Johanson's experimentation with new sculptural forms in a way that other contemporaries did not. *Cyrus Field*, a low-lying sculpture that creates a rambling pathway along the forest floor, was not like other large-scale sculptures of its time. Unobtrusive, the site-specific sculpture was not "plunk art," a term some used as a pejorative that defined non-site-specific sculpture that could be plunked down in any location. Nor did it disrupt or scar the landscape like many of the site-specific earthwork projects. In spite of the media attention that earthworks received in the early 1970s, the movement was taken lightly by the New York art world. According to critic Douglas Crimp, during this era "[a]rtist was synonymous with painter."[21] Uptown galleries like Tibor de Nagy were still the center of the art world, and modernist critics who felt antagonistic toward conceptual art were, for the most part, dismissive of earthworks.

[20] Wu, *Patricia Johanson*, 69.
[21] Douglas Crimp, *Before Pictures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 98.

Although Johanson's aesthetic was aligned with the formal tradition of modernism, *Cyrus Field* allowed Johanson to break more fully with the idea of art as an autonomous object. The sculpture was so completely integrated that it disappeared into its surroundings.[22] This shift from sculpture as object to a more relational approach within the context of environment recalls Johanson's early experiment *Color Room* where she sought to integrate her work into a total environment. It also represents the strategy for *Fair Park Lagoon*, an immersive sculpture that over time has also disappeared into its surroundings.

Cyrus Field didn't appear from nowhere; its roots were firmly established in the local landscape. Johanson claimed that she spent a great deal of walking down country lanes at Bennington, where she apparently developed her mature aesthetic, even if she didn't realize it at the time. Excerpts from a passage in one of her college journals reads, "[a]s you drive along a winding road, you never know what lies around the bend. Possibly art should be like this…with the road it takes a long time to know the configuration—and possibly you never know it…I am fascinated with the idea of vast configuration. Art should never be seen all at once… dealing with art would be like dealing with life. Both would be the same things and this might give art the meaning it has lacked for a long time."[23] Bennington was less than an hour away

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[22] Although Smithson had completed the Spiral Jetty in Utah a year earlier, one of its most defining features is how well it stands out in the landscape. Johanson maintains that Smithson had no idea it would disappear for years at a time. Projects like Michael Heizer's *Double Negative,* a pair of 1500 foot long trenches, displaced 244,000 tons of rhyolite and sandstone in the Nevada desert.
[23] Patricia Johanson to Eleanor Munro, "Letter to Eleanor Munro," 1977, Archives of Patricia Johanson.

from the woodlands in Buskirk where *Cyrus Field* still lies, now buried under mounds of pine needles.

Figure 7. Patricia Johanson, *Cyrus Field—Redwood (detail),* Buskirk, New York, 2019, photograph by Kris Timken.

At the time this approach to sculpture, work that integrates in the land had almost no resonance in the artworld; Goossen, when writing about the piece, felt compelled to create a new term for it, "landscape sculpture" (Figure 7).[24] The site-specific landscape sculpture *Cyrus Field* stands as clear evidence of the inadequacy of categories— humble compositions that introduced new materials into existing ecosystems—they seemed to disappear into the surroundings. Conceptually, without historical precedent, *Cyrus Field* was difficult to interpret. Like Betty Beaumont with her *Ocean Landmark* project, Johanson's aesthetic emphasized co-existence between humans and nonhumans and the opportunity for both engaged spectatorship and

[24] Wu, *Patricia Johanson*, 72.

microhabitats— the bugs, snakes, chipmunks, moss and duff that accumulated on and around the work.

Architecture and Civil Engineering

Through her art world connections Johanson was introduced to Romaldo Giurgola, an academic at Columbia who headed the well-known design firm Mitchell/Giurgola. His wife had seen the publicity surrounding *Stephen Long* and suggested the idea of hiring Johanson as a site planner. Although she had no experience and had just begun her new graduate program, within a few months she became the head site planner for the company. She began working on a site plan for Con Edison project, a nuclear power plant along the Hudson River. Like Betty Beaumont, Johanson spent time in helicopters with the Con Edison team flying up and down the Hudson River. Growing up with her father's work helped her to better understand how everything is connected. "Because he designed missile guidance systems, and discussed his work with me," Johanson says, "I grew up thinking about the parts and the whole."[25] The experience of the ariel views left lasting impression on the artist, deepening her awareness of how smaller systems fit into larger ones.

Her first project was to design a site for public access at Con Edison. She created several large-scale sculptures for the 80-acre park. In work similar to *Cyrus Field,* she designed two "landscape-sculptures," mile-long trails called "Serpent" and "Dinosaur." The projects gave Johanson a unique opportunity to explore technically

[25] Author interview with Patricia Johanson, Buskirk, New York, May 1, 2019.

how to scale up her drawings and make them buildable. She drew upon and referenced several of the drawings she made for the *House & Garden* commission. In this way she was able to complete two large-scale sculptural projects.

In 1973, Johanson found out she was pregnant. She submitted her thesis for her BA in civil engineering on the properties of concrete, quit her job with Mitchell/Giurgola and at the age of 33, left Manhattan and the art world behind, she thought—for good. It was the same summer Betty Beaumont first arrived in New York and Mary Miss made *Untitled* in the Battery Park Landfill.

Motherhood in Buskirk

In 1974 Johanson found herself alone in rural upstate New York with a new baby. As most women artists know, nothing disrupts or even ends a career faster than having children. After years spent working nonstop on her art and getting professional training, as well a successful and demanding stint as a site planner, Johanson knew she would have to make a concerted effort to continue to create. Given time constraints, her rural surroundings, and few other options, she returned to her drawing practice (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Patricia Johanson, *Drawing in Journal,* 1974, Pen and Ink, photograph from Johanson Archives.

Every day Johanson would strap her son on her back and carrying a small notebook went on long walks through the woods around Buskirk. Like a botanist, she looked for plants to study and draw. Western art and science have overlapped since the early eighteenth century through the practice of botanical illustration. Many artists including many women like Maria Sibylla Merian and Marianne North made contributions to scientific publications with their drawings of plants and their life-cycles. Over the course of many hours of close observation, Johanson made numerous small drawings or two-inch studies in the field, later in the evening while her son slept, she would reflect on the plant, "I found that nature doesn't do much that's frivolous," she would write later. "No matter how bizarre a form looks, it's there for a very specific reason."[26] Using a grid, she would transfer the small drawings to large

[26] Patricia Johanson, *Art and Survival: Creative Solutions to Environmental Problems* (North Vancouver, BC: Gallerie Publications, 1992), 11.

sheets of paper and create large-scale organic designs that fell somewhere between recognizable and abstract—art and architecture.

In this way of working, she merged drawing, sculpture, and her architectural training. Escaping the bounds of art history and the art world, she let her imagination take over. The scaled drawings from this period have a surrealistic quality that Museum Director Harry Parker noted, more resemble the work of the surrealist artist Salvador Dali than that of any conceptual work being made during that time in the 1970s. Perhaps given Johanson's extensive art historical training, this was no coincidence. Johanson knew enough about art to find surrealism in many different eras and styles. Many Modernist art historians would agree with critic Hal Ashbery, who Douglas Crimp quoted during the late 1960s: "[s]urrealism is… the connecting link among any number of current styles thought to be mutually exclusive, such as Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism and 'color-field' painting."[27] Johanson was schooled in the modernist tradition.

When Parker first viewed the work, it was the surrealistic quality of spidery ferns and elongated pine needles that engaged him (Figure 9). "I was quite taken by these very original drawings in black ink," he said. "They were elegant graphic works and very different from the more sculptural drawings made by artists like Tony Smith."[28] While her mentor's influence can be observed the drawings, Johanson noted, "I had been looking at more stylized approaches to nature, especially oriental

[27] Crimp, *Before Pictures*, 101.
[28] Harry Parker, former director of the Dallas Museum of Fine Art, in conversation with the author, August 8, 2019.

and art nouveau works," she envisioned "A park, that was also an earth-sculpture, that would also give a poetic experience of the forms of a flower."[29]

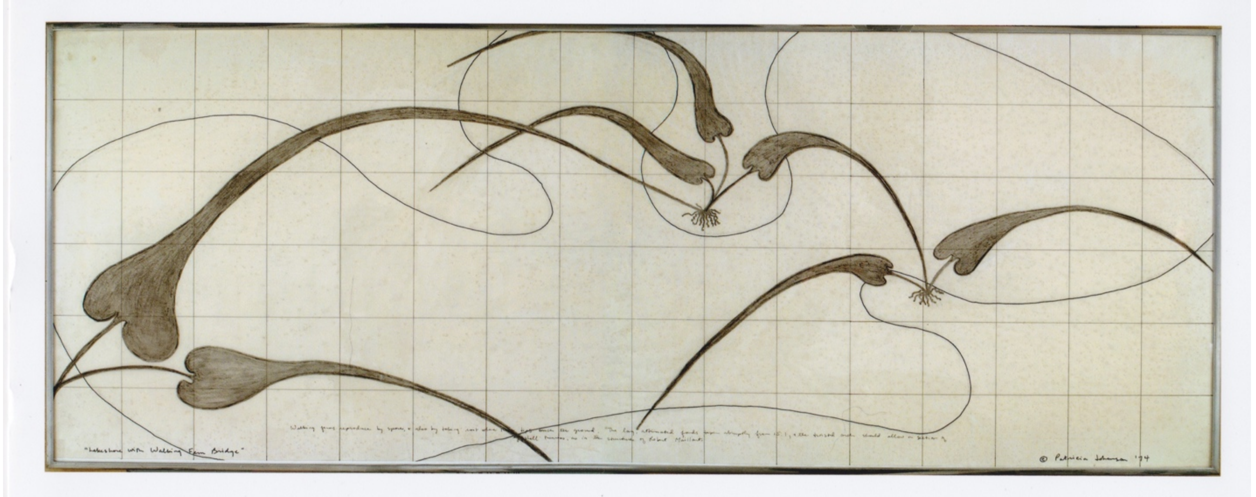

Figure 9. Patricia Johanson, *Lakeshore with Walking Fern Bridge*, 1974, Ink and Charcoal 18"x 48," Image from Johanson Archives.

Johanson worked on the drawings throughout 1974 and then put them away. By that time, she felt comfortable leaving her baby in the care of her mother and resumed the challenging commute to Manhattan to complete a graduate degree in architecture at City College. Her architecture notebooks from 1975 to 1977 reveal that she continued to draw from nature. By 1977, environmental art, particularly in the form of public sculpture, was now a movement that had gained recognition beyond the art world. An essay by landscape architect Catherine Howett for *Landscape Architecture* magazine, "New Directions in Environmental Art," demonstrates that artists making landscape art were pushing up against the boundaries of landscape architecture and building architecture. In her review of an exhibition, Howell wrote, "A design concept from a landscape architect's notebook? If it appears

[29] Wu, *Patricia Johanson*, 120.

so, then this proposal may usefully illustrate the extent to which narrowly defined professional parameters no longer obtain. Its author is Lloyd Hamrol, an artist whose work was included in two exhibitions of 'site-sculpture' at the Zabriskie Gallery in New York, in the summers of 1975 and 1976. These exhibitions documented a number of projects, proposed or realized, having in common, a commitment to the radical specificity of site as primary criterion for public sculpture."[30]

Although Howett's article featured Smithson as the progenitor of the movement, she also cited the work of several female sculptors including Alice Aycock, Beverly Pepper, and Athena Tacha, whose show in 1977, also at the Zabriskie Gallery, was in part the inspiration for the essay. Lippard discussed the work of these women artists in an essay, "Centers and Fragments: Women's Spaces," which she wrote for *Women in American Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective*, published by the Whitney Library of Design in 1977. By the late 1970s Lippard and others like art historian April Kingsley argued that women artists were making the more innovative moves in land art. Although Johanson's sculpture work had been largely ignored, and then forgotten, she would eventually benefit from the transformative work of her peers.

Johanson often felt that her life was a series of fortuitous accidents, many of them precipitated by her eldest son, Alvar. When she was newly pregnant with her second child in 1977, Goossen came up from Manhattan to Buskirk for the weekend

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[30] Catherine Howett, "New Directions in Environmental Art," *Landscape Architecture* 67 (January 1977): 38-46.

and cajoled Johanson into bringing three-year-old Alvar along to a cocktail party at a friend's house. Shortly after their arrival, Alvar had a tantrum and attached himself firmly onto the ankle of a woman and wouldn't let go. The woman, a fashionably dressed Manhattanite, looked angrily down as Johanson was attempting to pry her son loose and demanded "Who *are* you?" When Johanson replied simply, "Pat Johanson," the woman, gallerist, Rosa Esman, exclaimed, "Well, I have been looking all over New York for you…do you have anything to show?"[31] For several years Esman had been exhibiting the work of women artists like Mary Miss. She had seen art by Johanson in the late 1960s and early 70s and wondered where she had disappeared to. In 1978, four years after Johanson made the plant drawings, and more than a decade after her first one person show in Manhattan, "Plant Drawings for Projects" opened at the Rosa Esman gallery. Two weeks later, Johanson gave birth to her second son.

The show was reviewed in the *New York Times* by John Russell. Russell contextualized Johanson's work by citing sculptors like Anthony Caro and Robert Morris who, during her absence from the art scene, had become largely recognized as the pioneers of the "horizontal sculpture" movement. Johanson was introduced by Russell as an artist "[w]ho with this body of work was part of a generation of artists who thought in terms of the earth surface."[32] He made no mention of her past sculptural work. The review—with the illustration published upside down--was brief,

[31] Author interview with Patricia Johanson, Buskirk, New York, May 1, 2019.
[32] John Russell, "Art: Projects From Plant Forms," *The New York Times*, March 24, 1978.

but postive. Russell wrote “The projects are very elegantly drawn. As educated fancies these projects have much to recommend them.”[33]

The Commission

Johanson now had a gallery as well as a gallerist who was actively promoting her work. One of the people Esman contacted about Johanson’s exhibition was a former colleague of Esman’s, Harry Parker, the newly appointed director of the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts. Parker was so intrigued with the drawings that he insisted on calling Johanson from the gallery while he was viewing her work. When she answered his call, she was lying in a hospital bed holding her newborn in her arms. After complimenting her on the show, Parker asked, “Are these drawings buildable?” Johanson, thrilled that someone in the art world understood her work as more than utopian, answered enthusiastically, “Yes!” To which Parker responded, “We have to have one of these in Dallas. I will be in touch.”[34] Johanson was quite sure in that moment that she would never hear from him again (Figure 10).

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[33] Russell, "Art: Projects."
[34] Written correspondence between Patricia Johanson and the author, February 18, 2019.

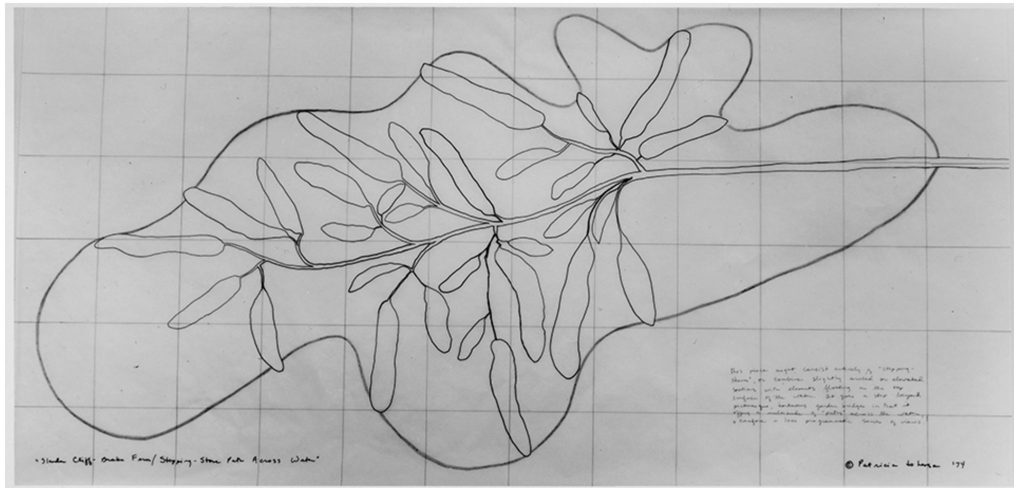

Figure 10. Patricia Johanson, *Slender Cliff Brake Fern/Stepping Stone Path Across Water*, 1974, photo of drawing from Johanson Archive.

It would be nearly three years before Parker raised funds to fly Johanson out to Texas for a site visit. In the interim, Johanson continued drawing and exhibiting with Rosa Esman. In 1979, her show “Drawings for the Camouflage House and Orchid Projects” was comprised of drawings made after she completed her architecture degree. The work was simultaneously more abstract and rooted in architecture than “Plant Drawings for Projects” had been. Rather than rendering identifiable plant forms, these newer drawings were abstracted site plans for actual dwellings. These drawings were less delicate and surreal, more closely resembling blueprints, with blocks of color opening up onto one another.

Johanson views the “Plant Drawings” show of 1978 as a transition from making drawings perceived as visionary fantasies to constructing civic projects linked to infrastructure. However, it was the “dwellings” in 1979 that would inspire an essay, “Architecture as Landscape,” that she published in *The Princeton Journal*. In the essay, Johanson wrote, “Recent work has tended to focus more and more on

smaller problems. Total design should not mean doorknobs and bathrooms. Art and architecture can continue to succeed in the tiny world of museums and textbooks, or they can expend outward into structures with values and meaning for the 'real world'—both natural and human."[35] Johanson's goal continued to be to embed art into the lived environment, even if that meant it sacrificed some of art's "aura." Contrary to many in the art world at that time, she felt monumentalism diminished art. Plant drawings like *Pine Suspension Bridge* are the direct precursors for the *Fair Park Lagoon*, which would be Johanson's first attempt at creating a public sculpture that would "literally *become* its physical context" (Figure 11).[36]

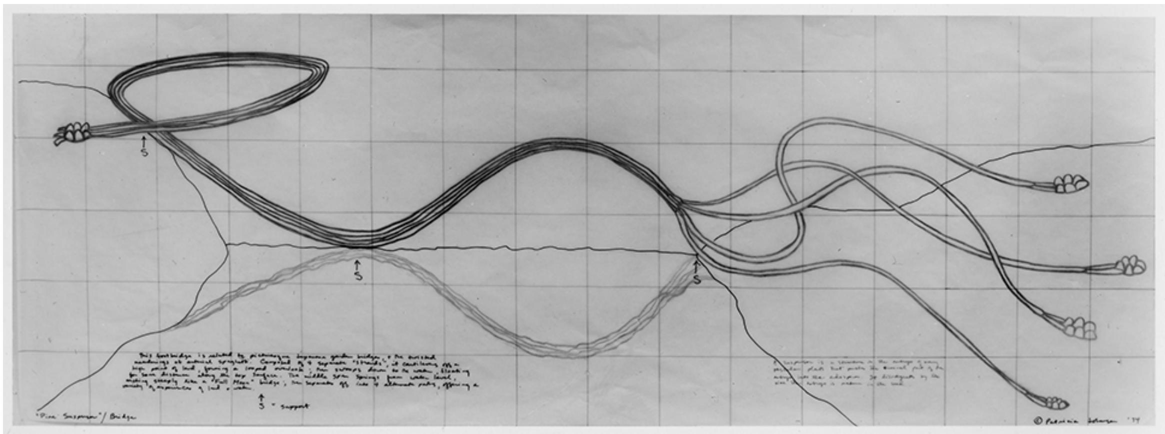

Figure 11. Patricia Johanson, *Pine Suspension/Bridge,* 1974, photograph of drawing from Johanson Archive.

By November 1981, Parker had raised nearly $5,000 for an environmental sculpture for the lagoon. He flew Johanson to Dallas for her first site visit. Parker gave her a tour of "his old mudhole," and asked if she thought she could do anything

[35] Patricia Johanson, "Architecture as Landscape," Raymond L. Beeler, comp., *The Princeton Journal: Thematic Studies in Architecture, Volume II, Landscape* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Architectural Press, 1985).
[36] Johanson, "Architecture as Landscape."

with it.[37] The photographs Johanson took of the lagoon capture a manmade body of water covered with algae bloom caused by years of fertilizer washing from the lawns. The banks of the lagoon were eroding almost 8 inches a year. A child trying to get close to the water had gotten stuck in the mud and drowned. It was not only an eyesore, but also a liability. As soon as she saw the lagoon, Johanson knew that it needed more than a work of art to complement it. From the beginning, she envisioned the entire ecosystem as the work of art.

Johanson imagined the lagoon area with sculptural elements that were designed to bring people in contact with the water, plants, and animals. The first of her multiple immersive proposals stressed the ecological aspects of the renovation. Eugene Odum, the pioneering ecologist who authored the *Fundamentals of Ecology* textbook in 1953, helped establish the pond as one of the basic units of ecology, formed of the cohabitation of plants and animals during this era was known as the Pond ecosystem. Ponds, defined as shallow bodies of water generally 12-15 feet, were viewed as self-sustaining biological communities. In its current state the lagoon had no diversity. Johanson's first task was to revitalize the body of water—through a process of biological restoration. Johanson "thought it would be wonderful to have a complex, ecological landscape in the middle of a big dynamic city like Dallas, so a major part of the 'environmental art' became to create a functioning aquatic community."[38]

[37] Author interview with Patricia Johanson, May 1, 2019, Buskirk, NY.
[38] Patricia Johanson, "Revisioning the Fair Park Lagoon" (speech, Symposium, Dallas, Tx, 1984).

Located within Fair Park, a city park that was home to the Museum of Arts, the Museum of Natural History, the aquarium, science museum, Cotton Bowl Stadium, and the Hall of State, any new construction on the lagoon would have to be approved by the Park's board. In 1982, Johanson began collaborating with naturalists Dr. Richard Fullington and Walter Davis, curators for the Dallas Natural History Museum, to develop a program for the lagoon. She eventually selected two native plants as the sculptural elements, the delta duck-potato, *Saggitaria Platyphylla* for the north end, and the Texas fern *Pteris Multifidia* for a span arch at the south end (Figure 12). The plant forms would provide bridges and pathways that crisscrossed over the water. In addition to an aesthetic transformation, Johanson proposed an ecological plan that included the addition of fifteen embankment plants, four floating plants, three submerged plants, eleven fish species, five types of turtles, and several species of ducks.

Figure 12. Patricia Johanson, *Johanson site photos*, Dallas, Texas, 1981, photograph from Johanson Archive.

The leaves and fronds of the two sculptures would serve as erosion control devices, providing microhabitats for plants and animals (Figure 13). All the plants were collected from surrounding local lakes. Cypress trees were added around the sculptures so they would eventually provide shade once fully grown. Specific microhabitats were designed as "living habitats" for the Dallas Museum of Natural History (Figure 14). From the start, Parker told her not to worry about a budget, "This is Dallas--if they like it, they will build it!" (Figure 15).[39] He planned to time the project to coincide with the state's Sesquicentennial celebration—the celebration of 150 years of Texas's independence from Mexico— that would take place in 1986.

Figure 13. Patricia Johanson, *Johanson's son Alvar with an early ceramic model*, 1982, photograph from Johanson Archive.

[39] Author interview with Patricia Johanson, May 1, 2019, Buskirk, NY.

Figure 14, Patricia Johanson, *Site Drawing*, 1982, photograph of drawing from Johanson Archive.

Figure 15. Patricia Johanson, "Scale model of *Fair Park Lagoon*," 1983, photograph of model from Johanson Archive.

In 1973, Betty Marcus of the Neiman-Marcus family had become the president of the board of trustees of the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts. She lured Harry Parker, then just thirty-five years old, from the Metropolitan Museum of New York to Dallas to become the new director of the museum. Although it was the 1970s, it was unusual to have a female president of a museum board. Marcus had cutting edge connections with the New York art world and was also very environmentally aware. She selected Parker for his background in public outreach. He was immediately tasked with humanizing the museum and making it more accessible to the general public. Unlike his predecessor who detested local art, Parker was known for his ability to strike a balance between elitism and populism.

The art museum had a strong contemporary collection and had recently merged with another museum, an old art association of amateurs in Fair Park that

made “cowboy art.” Fair Park was adjacent to a largely African-American neighborhood and was also the location of the state fair. “We were pretty liberated folk in Dallas—where you find one extreme—you will find the other.”[40] The museum’s progressive board sought work by women and people of color to diversify its collection. The presence of a female president and a director with a background in public outreach worked in Johanson’s favor.

When Parker first contacted Esman about Johanson’s drawings, he was searching for artists to commission new work for the museum. Johanson had the pedigree and experience he sought. Parker admitted that he might have preferred a Tony Smith or a David Smith, but Johanson was affordable. Although Johanson didn’t know it at the time Parker offered her the commission in 1981, he was just beginning to fundraise for a new art museum, one that would be located in the arts district in downtown Dallas. By 1983 the Henry Moore and Richard Serra sculptures that sat less than ten feet from the lagoon would be gone, with Parker himself, but Johanson’s sculpture, now budgeted at three-quarters of a million dollars, would, according to a Dallas Newspaper, be left behind as “a lasting legacy.”[41] Although Parker had pointed out that Johanson’s commission was motivated by the board’s interest in inclusivity, ultimately once the museum moved the work was no longer considered a part of the collection.

[40] Author interview with Harry Parker, August 17, 2019.
[41] "Unpublished Newspaper Clipping" (unpublished manuscript, Johanson Archive).

Returning to Fair Park in 2010 for the first time since his departure in 1987, Parker admitted he felt pangs of regret about how he handled Johanson's commission. He admitted the project never got the launch it deserved. "Johanson got me at my best as a visionary who saw the potential in her work and also at my worst because I was distracted by the new museum and I didn't provide support she needed for the project. I took the Henry Moore and the Richard Serra but I left her work behind." To this day Parker wonders if he should have taken Johanson's two sculptures *Saggitaria platyphylla* and *Pteris multifidia*.[42] Yet this regret demonstrates a continued lack of understanding of the nature of Johanson's project. As distinct from the Serra or the Moore, Johanson's work was site specific. Her sculptures were integral elements of the lagoon ecosystem— an open system in which animals, birds, and people could freely participate (Figure 16).

Figure 16. Patricia Johanson. *Fair Park Lagoon*, 2009, photograph from Johanson Archive.

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[42] Author interview with Harry Parker, August 17, 2019.

Johanson, for her part, was thrilled to receive the commission. Although she was grateful to Harry Parker for his visionary thinking, the *Fair Park Lagoon* was built primarily due to the effort of women. According to Johanson, several strong women in the community championed the project from the outset. Betty Marcus was an early supporter, as was a young curator named Sue Graze who followed through on the project once Parker became distracted. A Texas socialite named Sally Lancaster, who worked with the Meadows Foundation, helped to generate a significant portion of the budget that project ultimately required. For The People Inc., an environmental non-profit private corporation with an emphasis on biological restoration, expressed early interest in the project. Led by the dynamic founder Bobette Higgins, For The People Inc., working in partnership with the Dallas Parks and Recreation Department eventually took over the project completely from the museum by the end of 1982. Higgins's husband was an artist and Higgins herself was intrigued by the public art and reclamation movement of the late 1970s. Aware of efforts like "King County Earthworks: Land Reclamation as Sculpture" in the Seattle area, which had received attention in *Artforum* several years earlier, Higgins curated her own exhibition in the fall of 1982 entitled "Inherit the Earth" in which all four of the museums in Fair Park participated by coordinating their exhibits for the first time.

Figure 17. Patricia Johanson, "Site Drawings of *Fair Park Lagoon*", 1982, photograph from Johanson Archive.

Figure 18, ceramic model for *Fair Park Lagoon,* Johanson Archive, 2020, photograph by Kris Timken.

Johanson's sculpture, promoted as a restoration project, was the inspiration for the exhibition. There was a tremendous amount of local press devoted to the exhibition, which helped to raise funds and generate awareness for Johanson's project. The art museum exhibited eight of Johanson's project drawings and several of the ceramic models she made as studies for the project (Figures 17 & 18). Johanson had been making sculptural models in conjunction with her plant drawings since 1979. Spectacular as sculptures in their own right, Johanson fabricated several of them with edges creating shallow basins that could be filled with water. The models likely enabled her to test some of her ideas about scale in three dimensions. Moreover, aesthetically Johanson could gain a better understanding of how light and reflection affected the piece.

For the *Fair Park Lagoon* commission, Johanson shipped several ceramic models she made to the museum to be included in the exhibition in conjunction with the drawings. The curator however, refused to exhibit the ceramic pieces without

plexiglass for protection. Unfortunately, once covered with plexiglass the sculptures that were filled with water became obscured by condensation. Removed from the exhibition within a day or two they were returned to Johanson.[43] The proposed large-scale sculptures for the commission inspired by local ferns, had long tapering tips that Joahnson envisioned as causeways that extended out over the shallow water in their basins. According to Johanson, “At closer range it becomes a bridge that created its own landscape, with individual leaflets slightly arched or floating on the surface of the water, and moving through the different environments, so the colors and textures and the sense of the water are continuously changing.”[44] The poetic effect of tangled mass of paths and stems plunging into the water was significantly more difficult to illustrate two dimensionally.

A two-day symposium called “Present. Tense. Future, Perfect?” was held in conjunction with the art museum exhibition. Notables from the art world, such as critic John Beardsley, were speakers, along with an environmental scientist from MIT and several local developers. Beardsley gave a talk, “A Reconsideration of Environmental Art Forms,” that framed issues inherent within the art and restoration movement. He voiced his concern over the role of functionality in art. Although in his talk he said Johanson’s project “looks like fun,” Johanson felt that Beardsley “hated the project,” and he refused the museum curator’s offer to have dinner with Johanson

[43] The removal of the ceramic models was a huge disappointment for Johanson. When the museum moved them, most broke during shipping. Figure 18 is the remains of one of two still intact that sit in an abandoned barn on Johanson’s property.
[44] Patricia Johanson, "Revisioning the Fair Park Lagoon" (speech, Symposium, Dallas, Tx, 1984).

after the symposium.[45] Beardsley, who wrote extensively about earthworks, felt Johanson's project had little in common with the work of Smithson, Heizer and de Maria.

Several months after the symposium, during the spring of 1983, the Dallas drawings along with other drawings and ceramic models of ferns were exhibited in Johanson's fourth show at the Rosa Esman gallery. Johanson noted how "Under her eyes, the withering leaf of a fern metamorphized into a garden: 'As ferns dry out, they become twisted; contorted. The ordered network of channels becomes a maze of line fragments —'decorative' and disjointed rather than a coherent whole of nature."[46] The exhibition catalogue contained essays written by the Dallas Museum curator Sue Graze and by Lucy Lippard, whose ground-breaking book *Overlay* (1983) included *Fair Park Lagoon*. A review in *Art in America* in December 1983*,* rather than an analysis of the project was simply a description. It refers to Johanson as an "unclassifiable artist." There was no one making work like this, and the New York art world remained at best confused, and at worst, uninterested.

Beardsley did make a salient and prophetic point about the project. "I think that it can be expected to do its part to revitalize Fair Park," he said. "But again, I caution that it shouldn't be expected to do this alone. If it's built and these other things aren't done, Patricia's piece should not be made the scapegoat if Fair Park fails

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[45] John Beardsley, "A Reconsideration of Environmental Art Forms," Pete Gunter and Bobette Higgins, eds., *Present Tense. Future Perfect? A Symposium on Widening Choices For the Visual Resource* (Dallas: Landmark Program, 1985).
[46] Wu, *Patricia Johanson*, 119.

to flourish."[47] Ultimately, Johanson learned that compromise and disappointment are hallmarks of public art. In fact, *Fair Park Lagoon* did revitalize the location for a time and it was a success by certain measures, but in the end, just as Beardsley warned, because the maintenance work for the rest of the park was not performed, it failed to fully revitalize the site.

Throughout 1982 and into 1983, Higgins worked furiously to try to raise money to complete the project. Johanson continued to revise her drawings and proposals based on the funding, or lack thereof. The large complex forms got smaller and more flattened out with each revision. There were six revisions in all, and by the final proposal the project was more than one-third smaller than the original. With each budget revision, another leaf or frond was removed and over time the sculptures lost their three-dimensional form and were no longer accurate depictions of the local plants Johanson had originally chosen. Although she was disappointed, she was willing to sacrifice aesthetic aspects of her vision in order to keep other elements that she felt were more crucial. The most important of those were the pathways where people could walk on that extended out over the water. To mitigate the risk to children, Johanson devised a "continental shelf," a ledge that extended beyond the forms eighteen inches below the surface of the water. If anyone fell into the water, they would land on the shelf. After months of negotiations, the design was approved.

Johanson planned to emphasize the curving uneven pathways over the water. She felt they fostered body awareness. "If the pathway is too narrow, then you notice

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[47] Beardsley, Gunter and Higgins, eds., *Present Tense.*

the water and you begin to pay more attention to the surface that you are walking on—especially if it isn't flat. You become more aware of how your mind begins to relate to everything around you."[48] There was no one way to enter the sculptures, and once you were on them, the maze of pathways provided no easy exit. She viewed elements that were potentially dangerous as strategic ways of connecting the human and nonhuman. The animals would nest in niches where people couldn't actually reach them but could see them. In the middle of Dallas, Johanson wanted to create an alluring swamp, a place where nature prevailed, and that is exactly what she did.

Nearly fifteen years earlier Johanson drew *Urban Landscape: Swamp for a Center of a City* as one of the one-hundred and fifty drawings she made for the House & Garden commission. The drawing was part of the final series "Garden-Cities." The text on the drawing read, "A forest of cypress trees, rising out of the black mirrored reflections creates a magic landscape in the city."[49] In her proposal Johanson suggests that Garden-Cities should both urban and rural to foster interactions between humans and nonhumans. The idea of a swamp in the middle of high rises offers a way to keep humans humble and provide a space for refection. Johanson wrote, "Seeing the marsh as food and housing help us see *ourselves* as food and housing. It gives us insight into our own body as a universe filled with life—weather systems, landforms, plants and animals."[50] Johanson's project would bring the swamp back to the city. Swamps are what we built are cities on—swamps are where life regenerates. The swamp as an

[48] Author interview with Patricia Johanson, Buskirk, New York, May 1, 2019.
[49] Xin Wu, *Patricia Johanson's House and Garden Commission: Re-construction of Modernity* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2008), 140.
[50] Wu, *Patricia Johanson's*, 141.

ecosystem unlike the pond, evoked entanglement, unpredictability— a hint of mystery—but most significantly, it reflected a loss of control, a sensation that Johanson became increasingly more comfortable with over time.

Thanks to Johanson's background in fabrication, once the final proposal was approved in 1983, the building process went quickly. The lagoon was drained and the foundation set. The armature, heavy-duty steel wrapped in mesh and a layer of fabric, was sprayed with gunite, dry gun concrete, on site. Many people were horrified by the terra cotta color. Johanson viewed it as utilitarian, a connection to pots and bricks. Function was the basis of her work. Johanson made clay models by hand and filled the bowls with water so she could see the reflections. The gunite process allowed her to scale up the organic forms. "The Leonhardt Lagoon Sculpture Park" (renamed for a donor) opened in the spring of 1986. It was panned by art critics, but the public loved it. One local observer jokingly referred to the million-dollar sculpture as the "spaghetti explosion sculpture" (Figure 19). [51] Johanson determined to see the project through, remained amused. She knew that the overtime, the plantings and trees would grow in and cause the sculptures to remain in a state of change and eventually integrate into the emerging ecosystem.

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[51] Floyd, "Leonhardt Lagoon, Dallas," *Dallas/Fort Worth and Me* (blog), entry posted June 4, 2008, https://www.dfwandme.com/540/leonhardt-lagoon-dallas/.

Figure 19. Patricia Johanson, *Fair Park Lagoon*, Dallas, Texas, 1986, photograph from Johanson Archive.

The Sesquicentennial opening celebration was a huge success. Vice President George H. W. Bush was the first member of the public to walk out onto the sculpture. The margaritas flowed freely, and Johanson's shelving design proved useful when several donors splashed into the lagoon late in the evening. Higgins curated a second symposium in conjunction with the opening called "New Public Art: Towards Understanding."[52] Because Johanson's project was no longer associated with the museum, the symposium was held at the Dallas Garden Center in Fair Park and was attended by approximately 100 people primarily from the art world. Artists Nancy Holt, Helen Harrison, and Newton Harrison were speakers at the event. In the five years since the project was first commissioned, earthworks were opening up into new genres of public art.

[52] "Catalogue," table, Archives of Patricia Johanson.

In her talk, “Toward a New Art,” at the second symposium held upon completion of the project, she declared, “[t]he use of aesthetic as an organizing living force—especially in non-art areas—has had few applications in this country because we tend to separate art from life. I believe the most important new art will be able to provide a dialogue between art, man, and nature—a living vital art, with spectator input. The problem is establishing connectedness while setting the mind free to dream.”[53] However in the early 1980s aesthetics and connectedness remained separate in the North American art world. It would be years before the climate crisis made finally this work desirable.

The response to the project by the traditional art world comprised of institutions, galleries, critics and funders was for the most part disappointing. Some such as Richard Andrews, the Director of the National Endowment for the Arts, chose to place the blame on public art and government partnerships. Within the earthworks movement there was growing skepticism about the government’s lack of funds and an inability to understand how to build things that didn’t fit into boilerplate contracts. Andrews wrote a note to Johanson: “On a recent visit, I went over to see the piece and was disappointed to see the low quality of construction. I am certain you must have been upset to be removed from the ‘quality control.’”[54] Johanson endured the criticism, but the implication that her work was shoddy nevertheless stung. Her choice to use gunite sprayed with the color of ochre was antithetical to the long-

[53] Patricia Johanson, "Toward a New Art" (unpublished manuscript, 1986).
[54] Richard Andrews to Patricia Johanson, "Letter from Richard Andrews, Director of the National Endowment for the Arts," August 25, 1987, Archives of Patricia Johanson.

standing aesthetic in public sculpture. Although playful, her functional approach was critiqued harshly as opposed to the work of sculptors like Claes Olderburg, Johanson broke too many conventions in public art and she did so all at once.

By the time the commission was completed, the 1970s were long over, and the experimental nature that had taken hold of the art world during that decade shifted yet again. *Artforum* was sold in 1980, signaling a shift in focus and emphasis. According to a former editor Nancy Foote, “the outdoor ephemeral period was very strong in the late nineteen-sixties and through the seventies but it petered out in the eighties. The indoor conceptual work continued, but the outdoor ended. The galleries and the collectors wanted a thing, they want to sell something—that is the function art has had in people’s lives, for better or worse.”[55] Having proved she could complete a large-scale public work, Johanson was hired by the city of San Francisco to design a pump station and holding tank to be used for water and sewage during heavy rains. She immediately went at work on her next ecological sculpture in the Bay Area and never looked back. She had given up on trying to fit into the art world. Rather than return to the gallery world, she helped establish a new genre that focused on functional, ecologically based art projects that fostered partnerships with local governments.

[55] Author interview with Nancy Foote, February 22, 2019, NYC.

Figure 20. Patricia Johanson, *Fair Park Lagoon*, 2019, photograph by Kris Timken.

Although dismissed or ignored by the art world, Johanson's projects, particularly her first, *Fair Park Lagoon*, began to receive attention in other realms such as landscape architecture. A review of the *Fair Park Lagoon* in 1985 *Arts and Architecture* stated, "Johanson's aesthetic is one in which all the separate and distinct elements come together in a mutually-defining process. Her work indicates a fusion of entities: architecture merges with landscape, and landscape becomes the synthesis of nature and the human response. It is clear that for what is seen in Johanson's work, a larger context exists."[56] Like Beaumont's invisible *Ocean Landmark*, Johanson's work portended something new, an immersive kind of artwork in which the artwork itself, unlike anything before it, was not front and center. In *Fair Park Lagoon*, the art recedes into the larger whole and the spectator becomes, almost unknowingly, fully

[56] Laurie Garris, "The Changing Landscape: Patricia Johanson," *Arts and Architecture* 3, no. 4 (1985): 59.

integrated in that whole as with her *Color Rooms* project more than twenty years earlier (Figure 20). Johanson's innovative functional "landscape sculpture," both creative and utilitarian, helped to transform the traditional category of public sculpture and has implications for present day ethical imperatives and environmental art.

Chapter 4

Land Art and the Racialization of Matter: Beverly Buchanan's Georgia Projects (1979-81)

> According to my mother, I have always been interested in rocks. Always 'seen things' in them that other people didn't see.
>
> -Beverly Buchanan

In 1977, just as she was gaining some prestige in the New York art world, sculptor Beverly Buchanan left East Orange, New Jersey, where she had been living for nearly a decade and moved to Macon, Georgia. During the seven years she lived in Macon, Buchanan created several large-scale public artworks. This chapter focuses on two of those projects—*Ruins and Rituals* at the Museum of Arts and Sciences (Macon, Georgia, 1979) and *Marsh Ruins* located in the Marshes of Glynn State Park (Brunswick, Georgia, 1981).

Buchanan's art was set in terrain fraught with racial history and tragedy. The earliest earthworks made by artists like Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson a decade earlier had been intentionally situated in the vast, remote deserts of Nevada and Utah. According to art historian Emily Eliza Scott, "The desert is arguably the most heavily coded of American landscapes—in its apparent blankness, it is particularly prone to abstraction and projection, and it plays an enormous role in the lore of land art."[1] The heroic earthworks of white male artists effaced a history of Native Americans in the land. Buchanan, a queer black woman, chose to strike out into a very different yet

[1] Emily Eliza Scott, as quoted in Spyros Papapetros et al., *Retracing the Expanded Field: Encounters between Art and Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 68.

equally racialized landscape—the American South—a landscape that is as dense and dark as the desert is vast and open. It was in these violent natural arenas that Buchanan would make the work she was most proud of.

Figure 1. Beverly Buchanan, *Roadside Attraction*, Archives of American Art, 1981, pen and ink on paper, 8x10.

Although Buchanan made environmental sculptures in racialized landscapes, a drawing titled *Roadside Attraction* (1981), that Buchanan made while she was completing the work *Marsh Ruins*, reveals a tongue-in-cheek attitude about her centrally located large-scale public artworks (Figure 1). With colored markers on sketchbook paper, the artist portrays herself in the American landscape signified by golden arches and Sears as a tour guide standing next to a sign that reads "This way to Beverly Buchanan's *Marsh Ruins.*" With her left arm outstretched, Buchanan points toward three large boulders located in the nearby marsh grass, as if to attract motorists on the highway. In a passing car, a figure leans out the window to wave at

Buchanan. The passenger's arm is noticeably white, in stark contrast to Buchanan's own black arms. In a letter to her friend Lucy Lippard, Buchanan—known for her wry humor—wrote, "Yes sir folks, step right up--real close now, and don't push, there is room for all. See this magnificent work of art that the LORD helped one of our ladies put here for all to see!"[2] Although she abhorred the role of the artist promoting their art, she did want people to see the work. Unlike earthworks located in open landscapes, Buchanan's environmental sculptures were so well integrated into the surrounding environs they were often difficult to locate. Ruins hidden in plain sight, at its most powerful and provocative in quotidian spaces, unmarked borders lying between visible and invisible, Buchanan's public art evokes historical knowledge particular to the Georgian landscape.

The first generation of earthwork artists had been long known for making work in landscapes that were for the most part difficult to access but with the recognition that the artwork would mainly be experienced as a photograph or film. This was an aspect of the cachet of the artwork—the challenging journey one must make into remote landscapes in order to view it. But Buchanan's roadside attraction is located right next to a well-traveled highway near the border between Georgia and Florida. In the drawing, a marsh occupies nearly three-quarters of the space. A highway separates the sculpture from a distant narrow sliver of landscape Buchanan filled with symbols synonymous with American popular culture: a sign for Sears, an American flag, and a pair of golden arches, the only color on the highway strip. These

[2] Letter from Beverly Buchanan to Lucy Lippard, 1979, Lippard's personal archives, Galisteo, NM.

popular cultural symbols contrast with the racial violence inscribed in the land marked by Buchanan's sculpture.

In a journal entry she wrote years before she made *Marsh Ruins*, Buchanan had a vision of the sculpture which she describes as a "Slouching Ruin" and again later as a "Buried Ruin," envisioning three rocks placed in tall grass near a body of water. *Marsh Ruins* is situated at the edge of Clubb's Creek in Brunswick, Georgia. In the mid-nineteenth century, at high tide slave ships were able to enter the flooded marsh to deposit the human beings who had been sold into slavery in Africa. Although it is not apparent in Buchanan's drawing, an island lies directly in front of *Marsh Ruins* where less than two hundred years earlier more than seventy-five Africans chose to drown themselves in a mass suicide rather than live as slaves. Twice a day, Buchanan's sculpture disappears completely—covered by the tide (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Beverly Buchanan, *Marsh Ruins*, Brunswick, GA, 2019, photograph by Kris Timken.

Based on her historical research, Buchanan sited her public works in landscapes in which past histories of extreme violence have largely been forgotten or ignored. She often referred to these artworks as "ruins," causing them to be misidentified and read within the broader context of artwork that referenced prehistoric and Neolithic work such as Stonehenge.[3] The deliberate placement of Buchanan's artworks speaks to more immediate sociopolitical histories. Yet her large-scale site-based sculptures appear less as monuments to the violence and more like markers [of what…]. The geology professor Katheryn Yusoff says that such "originary moments, told as the event of geology, can be thought about as 'interstitial—those punctualities (in a linked series of events) that go unmarked so that the mythic view remains undisturbed.'"[4] Who and what gets marked, and how, and by whom? In Buchanan's public projects, geomaterials are critically recast.

Buchanan re-purposed matter stone, red clay and tabby to question dominant narratives and connect a series of historic and tragic events locked into a picturesque landscape. As ruins hidden in plain sight, Buchanan's environmental sculptures evoke the geophysical referencing historical knowledge particular to the Georgian landscape. To put this in Buchanan's words, "If I see some rubble, my thought is, 'Let's see, now where in Georgia could that go? I immediately claim it.

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[3] Lowery Stokes Sims, curator for the Metropolitan Museum of Art linked Buchanan's sculptural aesthetic to a primitive tradition of stonework. Buchannan's sculptures were viewed by the public in the formal space of the gallery. See Lowery Stokes Sims, "Beverly Buchanan's Constructed Ruins," in *Beverly Buchanan: 1978-1981*, by Beverly Buchanan, et al. (Mexico City: Athénée Press, 2015).
[4] Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 58.

Psychologically, it's mine."[5] By claiming it for herself and repurposing it site - specifically, Buchanan unleashes the memory bound up in the rubble. Professor of Architecture and Urban History, David Gissen notes a distinction between the definitions of debris and rubble, a subtle yet significant difference that foreshadows the way Buchannan would come to about her sculpture:

> In French architectural writing, authors often used the word *debris* to describe the scattered atomatized remains of structures that had been leveled by cataclysmic events such as war or natural disasters. In contrast, other terms describing rubble suggested something larger, potentially salvageable, and local in terms of its distance from the building that it was once a part of.[6]

Buchannan's environmental artworks, as she came to call them, were tied to specific geographic locations both at macro and micro registers. Anthropologist Paulla A. Ebron notes that even in the present, "While recovering communal memories has been central to African American cultural projects, few analysts have asked what communal memory *is*, that is, how it is made." [7] The abstract yet architectural sculptures resembling rubble served as silent testimonials to social histories in ways that many scholars and curators, not to mention those who collaborated with Buchanan on these projects, are only now beginning to understand.

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[5] Jennifer Burris Stanton and Park McArthur, eds., *Beverly Buchanan: 1978-1981* (Mexico City: Athénée Press, 2015), 11.
[6] David Gissen, *Subnature: Architecture's Other Environments* (New York: Princenton Architectural, 2009), 132.
[7] Paulla A. Ebron,*"Enchanted Memories of Regional Difference in African American Culture," American Anthropologist,*(March 1998), 94.

Claiming the Identity of Artist

Beverly Buchanan was born Carrie Beverly Brown in Fuquay-Varina, North Carolina, in 1940. Her parents divorced when she was an infant and she was sent to live with her great-aunt and great-uncle, Marian and Walter Buchanan, on the campus of South Carolina State University in Orangeburg, South Carolina, where she was known as Beverly Buchanan. Marian Buchanan was a school principal; Walter Buchanan, who died when she was in the sixth grade, was the dean of the School of Agriculture. In addition to being a professor, Walter Buchanan was a state agriculture agent and young Beverly accompanied him on his many trips across South Carolina to visit the workplaces and homes of tenant farmers. Buchanan's childhood travels in South Carolina not only informed the representational sculptures of single-story structures known as her "shack" series, a body of work for which she would become widely known in the late 1980s.

The trips also alleviated some of the pressure of being a child on a university campus. Surrounded by successful people, she grew up thinking she would make something of herself. Although she was raised in a comfortable middle-class environment, Buchanan would later write in her journal, "the children of faculty were almost always 'on.' You learned the appropriate responses, the appropriate smile and frowns."[8] "[G] rowing up on a college campus in the late 1940s and 50s, I learned to devise ways of protecting myself," Buchanan would recall. "Other girls were older

[8] Beverly Buchanan, "Journals of Beverly Buchanan." Beverly Buchanan papers, 1912-2017, bulk 1970s-1990s. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

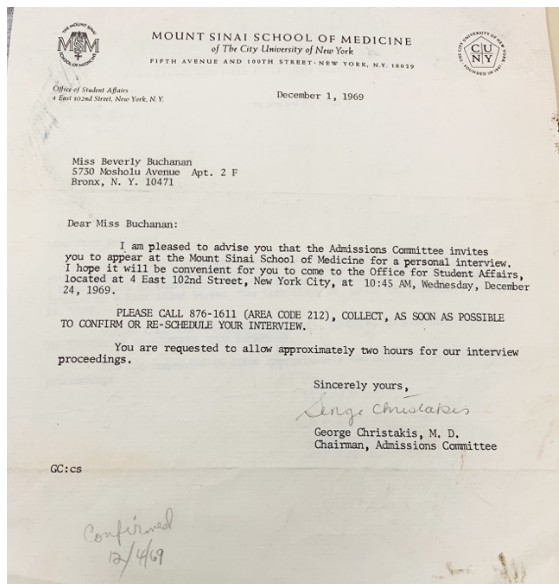
and so I played with boys and it was they who taught me how to fight. Rocks became my first weapons."[9] Rocks would later become central to her large-scale public works—weapons that she deployed to deliver metaphorical/symbolic blows.

Buchanan spent much of her youth scavenging in the biology laboratories and the woodshop gathering materials for what she called "structures"—early sculptures. She had to hide this work after Walter accidently ran one over with his car. Buchanan also recalled a professor of architecture who took an interest in her drawings encouraging her to consider a career in designing buildings. Although she continued to draw in sketchbooks, Buchanan did not pursue art in college. Instead in a deliberate effort to fulfill her adoptive mother's wishes, she earned a bachelor's degree in medical technology from Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina. While at Bennett in the early 1960s, Buchanan was active in the burgeoning civil rights movement and participated in several demonstrations, including one lunch counter sit-in where she sustained a beating that left her with a shoulder injury that would cause her pain for the rest of her life.

[9] Beverly Buchanan, "Journals of Beverly Buchanan." Beverly Buchanan papers, 1912-2017, bulk 1970s-1990s. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Figure 3. *Graduate Students in Parasitology at Columbia with Dr. Harold Brown, M.D.*, New York, 1969, photograph from Buchanan Archive.

After college, Buchanan moved to New York to pursue a master's degree in parasitology and public health at Columbia University (Figure 3). Following her graduation in 1969, she worked as a medical technologist for the Veterans Administration in the Bronx and then as a public health educator for the East Orange Health Department. While she was in graduate school during the mid-1960s, Buchanan began taking painting classes at the Art Students League of New York on West 57th Street in Manhattan. The League, founded in 1875, was historically known for its broad appeal to both amateur and professional artists and had a roster of notable instructors that included Jacob Lawrence and Hans Hoffman and celebrated alumni such as Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse. Buchanan took classes with Norman Lewis, a well-established figure in the New York Abstract Expressionist movement. Known for his formal color-field (a style of abstract painting) paintings and as well as his political activism, Lewis became an important mentor for Buchanan. Both he and his wife became her close friends and supporters.



MOUNT SINAI SCHOOL OF MEDICINE
of The City University of New York
FIFTH AVENUE AND 100TH STREET · NEW YORK, N.Y. 10029

Office of Student Affairs
4 East 102nd Street, New York, N.Y.

December 1, 1969

Miss Beverly Buchanan
5730 Mosholu Avenue Apt. 2 F
Bronx, N. Y. 10471

Dear Miss Buchanan:

I am pleased to advise you that the Admissions Committee invites you to appear at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine for a personal interview. I hope it will be convenient for you to come to the Office for Student Affairs, located at 4 East 102nd Street, New York City, at 10:45 AM, Wednesday, December 24, 1969.

PLEASE CALL 876-1611 (AREA CODE 212), COLLECT, AS SOON AS POSSIBLE TO CONFIRM OR RE-SCHEDULE YOUR INTERVIEW.

You are requested to allow approximately two hours for our interview proceedings.

Sincerely yours,

George Christakis

George Christakis, M. D.
Chairman, Admissions Committee

GC:cs

Confirmed
12/4/69

Figure 4. *Admission Interview Request from Mount Sinai School of Medicine*, New York, 1969, photograph of letter from Buchanan Archive at Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art.

In 1969, Buchanan applied to medical schools and was invited to interview with the admissions committee of Mount Sinai School of Medicine (Figure 4). Driven by the feeling that she had to succeed as a scientist, but frustrated by the certainty that she wanted to be an artist, Buchanan did not keep the appointment. She felt that her family never forgave her for the choice she made not to pursue medicine. In an interview years later with art critic Marsha Yerman, Buchanan spoke of her dilemma, "I had an opportunity to go to medical school. I was devastated because I said no. At the time I thought I had really ruined it for other black women."[10] Although she wanted to be an artist, she felt the pressure of being a black woman raised in a family of educators weighing heavily on her shoulders. Her interest in art was not taken

[10] *Women in Art*, "Interview with Beverly Buchanan," hosted by Marcia Yerman, aired 1993, on New York City Time Warner Cable System.

seriously by her family, who thought that it wasn't an acceptable way to make a living.

In a 1969 letter to her mother she wrote, "As of August 1st, I am a resident of East Orange. The commuting is a bit much but guess what. The Girl Scouts, U.S.A want me to work for them, so if the price is right, I may become a commuter to NYC." In the same letter Buchanan refers to the difficulties of her job as a public health educator and the effect on her psyche. "Things have become so hectic and political that my physician had to put me on tranquilizers. I have stopped taking the tranquilizers because I don't trust them." Although she makes no references to the art classes she is taking, in the same letter Buchanan addresses grappling with another personal issue. "I am having lawyer draw up papers which make my name legal. This takes all of my vacation money to pay for this transaction, but I can't get a passport without a birth certificate and my birth certificate and my present signature don't correlate. This means I must have my name changed from Carrie Beverly Brown to Beverly A. Buchanan, which is how I sign my name at the present."[11] It would be several years before she would tell her mother about her artwork and even longer before her mother would accept her career as an artist.

Buchanan's years at Columbia and afterward in the New York area were turbulent times in the Civil Rights Movement. Malcom X was assassinated in 1965 and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. Political upheaval sparked culture and

[11] Letter from Beverly Buchanan to Mother, "Correspondence Between Buchanan and Her Mother," (1969). Beverly Buchanan, "Journals of Beverly Buchanan." Beverly Buchanan papers, 1912-2017, bulk 1970s-1990s. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

artistic development as well. Between 1965 and 1975, the Black Arts Movement emerged in the region of New Jersey where Buchanan would move in 1969 as an outgrowth of the Black Power Movement. Black Power, a slogan made famous by Stokely Carmichael in 1966, was a political and social effort with a separatist bent that grew out of discontent with more mainstream civil rights efforts by King and others. The Black Arts Movement had great theater and poetry. Buchanan's archives contain several issues of the publication *Black World*, which was the movement's public voice from 1972 to 1975. She also owned several books by writers featured in *Black World* such as poet and playwright Amiri Baraka.

The Black Arts Movement inspired a great deal of profound and innovative work; it also alienated black as well as white mainstream sensibilities with its shock value and frequent embrace of violence. The movement also was not hospitable to the emerging African-American feminism. According to journalist Hannah Foster, "Many works put forth a black hyper-masculinity in response to historical humiliation and degradation of African American men but usually at the expense of some black female voices."[12] Although Buchanan was living at the center of the movement and was well versed in the work of the most contemporary black radical artists of her time, she was paradoxically drawn to abstraction.

[12] Hannah Foster, "The Black Arts Movement (1965-1975)," *Black Past*, last modified March 21, 2014, https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/black-arts-movement-1965-1975/.

Abstraction, Race, and Gender

Buchanan's mentor Norman Lewis was known early in his artistic career as a social realist who believed that if white people saw what was happening to his fellow black people things would change (Figure 5). Eventually he felt that his depictions of violence against black people were not having an impact on racism, and he turned to his first love, abstraction. Although Lewis never gave up his social activism, he came to believe that protest belonged on the picket line, not on the artist's canvas. Although he was an important figure in the New York Abstract Expressionist movement during the late 1950s, like many other black artists who were at the forefront of abstract art throughout the post-war era, Lewis was excluded from the canon until quite recently. It was not until as recently as the 2019 that curators began to trace a lineage of abstraction among black artists. Buchanan's abstract paintings that she made during the 1970s belong to the genealogy.

Figure 5. Norman Lewis, *Confrontation*, Collection of Patricia Blanchet and Ed Bradley in New York, New York, 1971, oil on canvas, 88 x 72 inches,

In an interview in 1985, Buchanan recalled that in the early 1970s she was "taking work around to galleries to see if they might be interested in showing my work—and that was during my exclusively abstract period—I walked into one gallery in SoHo, and I asked 'Are you looking for work?' They said, 'Yes, but we don't show black art.' I said, 'Oh good! Let me show you my slides."[13] As a female artist of color who work abstractly, Buchanan was an anomaly. In the mid 1960s, a Black Arts Movement emerged. Through the 1970s, although it was primarily associated with theater and literature in the New York art world, artworks associated with the Black Arts Movement predominantly foregrounded black pride and activism. Artists like Faith Ringgold, who self-identified as a black radical feminist, Betye Sarr and Howardena Pindell made artwork that addressed issues of racism, slavery and oppression. Conceptual artist Adriene Piper who came out of Minimalism by the 1970s also pivoted toward foregrounding race in her performance and video work.

In the 1970s and beyond, black artists working in non-figurative and non-narrative modes not only risked being ignored by the dominant white art world, but also had trouble engaging African American viewers. According to critic Edward W. Waddell, a black woman who made abstract paintings experienced reactions to her work such as "'You're the only black artist here, and you're doing abstract work when everyone knows black people don't understand abstract art.' And 'What great

[13] Edward W.1. Waddell, "Life…Ain't Been No Crystal Stair.," *Art Papers* 9, no. 6 (November 1985): 14.

work-and for a woman.'"[14] These same sentiments would plague Buchanan when she began working as a sculptor. More often than not, viewers were always surprised to find out the abstract sculpture they were drawn to was made by a black woman. Black women artists in particular were most commonly associated with figurative work or folk art.

Figure 6. Beverly Buchanan, *Untitled*, 1971, photograph from Buchanan Archives.

Like her mentor Lewis, Buchanan's earliest paintings emerged from the tradition of color field painting, the style of abstract painting that arose in the late 1940s and is often associated with Abstract Expressionism. The key characteristics of the color field movement are bright colors in geometric shapes without hard edges and work that emphasized the flatness of the canvas. Buchanan drew her inspiration from city walls; she made several bodies of work titled *Wall Series* (Figure 6). In her journal she wrote, "I am exploring color as a sensation. I intend to paint large wall size canvases that magnify the smallest cracks and enlarge the splatter of crumbled

[14] Diane Wilson, "Beverly Buchanan, Black Artist, Speaks on Campus," *Upsala Gazette* (NJ), 1973, only accessible through Beverly Buchanan Archives.

paint maintained by generations of tenants with triple coats of paint."[15] She viewed layered surfaces as depicting complex histories. Her interest in the smallest cracks connects back to her educational background and work as a scientist. Buchanan linked social histories to microbial matter—for Buchanan, matter was imbued with history—the peeling wall of a church or rocks in the landscape was inextricably linked with social history.

Buchanan's preoccupation with sensation was not unusual but another journal entry indicates that the intention in her work extended beyond aesthetic pleasure, "it is smothered in intensity— the inner life [Buchanan's underscoring] of the *Wall Series* is the driving force behind the subtle violence of some of the work. The 'beauty' is deceptive."[16] Unlike Lewis, a well-established artist who came to believe that art and politics should remain separate, Buchanan would infuse her anger into her art.[17] She embedded her sentiments in the multi-layered, brightly colored, flaring surfaces of her paintings—but few experienced her or understood the abstract work as expressive of her anger. As a formalist, Buchanan struggled with how to address violence against black people in her artistic practice. She searched for methods to articulate inner life that included violence through artistic technique.

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[15] Beverly Buchanan, "Journals of Beverly Buchanan." Beverly Buchanan papers, 1912-2017, bulk 1970s-1990s. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
[16] Beverly Buchanan, "Journals of Beverly Buchanan." Beverly Buchanan papers, 1912-2017, bulk 1970s-1990s. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
[17] In a 1976 review of a show "City Walls" at the Montclair Art Museum, Donna Lee Goldberg wrote "Buchanan claims there is a lot of anger inside her, but the viewer would never know it. Even in the murky grays of *Afterglow,* which some have called her most serious and solemn work, there's light shining through."

Even as she acknowledged she was full of anger through her abstract aesthetic, Buchanan worked in a lower frequency, in a register that was not generally identified with black art during the Black Power era. The decaying walls of old buildings such as churches, with their quotidian surfaces yet complex histories, were her main sources of inspiration. Walls for Buchanan came to stand for black lives. In a journal entry from 1976 about her *Wall Series*, Buchanan wrote “it’s personal, VERY PERSONAL.”[18] In search of a more haptic vocabulary, Buchanan would eventually turn to sculpture and move from New Jersey to the rural southern landscape of her childhood. Buchanan’s interest in ruins can be traced back to childhood and the time she spent in the South in the fields and homes of sharecroppers while she accompanied her father on his regular visits. In a sketch she made just after finishing college, Buchanan drew an ambiguous architectural ruin barely distinguishable from the mountain range in the background (Figure 7). The stacks of slabs resonate both as architectural and organic features that integrate into the landscape. With its simple outlines of abstract geometric forms, the drawing of the ruin foreshadows the large-scale outdoor sculptures Buchanan made in the Georgia landscape nearly two decades later.

[18] Beverly Buchanan, "Journals of Beverly Buchanan,” (1976). Beverly Buchanan papers, 1912-2017, bulk 1970s-1990s. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Figure 7. Beverly Buchanan, *Ruins,* 1964, drawing from Buchanan Archive.

Writer Robert Pogue Harrison suggests that “Ruins in an advanced state of ruination represent, or better they literally embody, the dissolution of meaning into matter.”[19] By the early 1970s during extremely turbulent times, the urban ruins of New Jersey—in the form of walls—were the focus of Buchanan’s work. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, urban decay was a source of inspiration for many artists in the New York region. A genealogy of decay began with a 1967 *Artforum* essay by the celebrated earthwork artist Robert Smithson, “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey,” that re-imagined the state’s smokestacks and drainage pipes as urban monuments, and continued to a review by Nancy Foote for *Artforum* in 1976, “The Apotheosis of Crummy Space” that notes the tendency for 1970s art in New York to be made about or shown in wrecked or rundown places. Ruins, decay and entropy

[19] Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3.

were themes that preoccupied certain well-known artists.[20] Living in New Jersey in 1969, Buchanan was not only at the epicenter of the Black Arts Movement; she was also traversing the same urban landscape at the same time as Smithson.

In 1969, Norman Lewis and Romare Bearden—both former members of Spiral, a collective of African American artists that emerged during the civil rights movement—joined with artist Ernest Crichlow to found the Cinqué gallery, named for Joseph Cinqué, the leader of an 1839 mutiny on the slave ship *Amistad*.[21] The gallery, like the alternative spaces that began opening up for female artists in New York City in the era of the women's movement, intended to establish a space where emerging African American artists could view and exhibit art without paying rent. The artists were able to keep 100% of their sales. Buchanan first exhibited her paintings in a group show at the Cinqué gallery in 1972, which was followed by a two person show with another female artist in 1973.

Buchanan was nurtured early in her career by black male artists like Lewis and Bearden, and although she was not an activist like Miss during this period, the women's movement helped open doors for her in the New York art world. Buchanan's archive contains copies of magazines such as *Womanart* with articles about protest groups in New York like the Art Workers Coalition, Women Artists in Revolution, and the Ad Hoc Women's Committee that formed during the early 1970s, along with reviews for shows of Buchanan's paintings. Buchanan also saved

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[20] Robert Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," *Artforum*, December 1967, 52-57. Nancy Foote, "The Apotheosis of Crummy Space," *Artforum* 15 (October 1976): 37.
[21] Ruth Jett, "Cinque Gallery Records," Expanding the Legacy: New Collections on African American Art, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC.

newspaper clippings from her interviews with various feminist publications such as *The Feminist Art Journal*.

As a black female artist, one who was also a lesbian and who chose never to openly discussed her sexuality, Buchanan was often confronted with issues of identity during the 1970s. According to a 1973 *Feminist Art Journal* article, “Beverly Buchanan firmly refused to speak for black women, blacks, or women. She made a point of speaking for herself only, determined to make it as herself, for her painting, and to show wherever, whenever and however she could.”[22] In interview for another publication from the same period, Buchanan acknowledged the “Women’s Movement helped encourage women to try to exhibit their work” and yet she “emphasized that to be accepted as a woman artist one had to be seen as not a normal woman (either you’re homosexual or you’re mad).”[23] This reference to sexuality is one of the very few times Buchanan publicly broaches the subject. Race, class, and gender norms created barriers as well as opportunities and Buchanan learned from an early age that she could never be comfortable revealing her whole self. Just making the decision to become an artist was challenging enough.

Just as with many black women during that era, Buchanan openly expressed ambivalence about the women’s movement and its limitations for women of color but noted, “As women—black and white—we must be exposed to each other. We have more in common as women than as races.”[24] Through her experiences moving in New

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[22] "Women Artists Speak Out," *The Feminist Art Journal*, Spring 1973, 14.
[23] Wilson, "Beverly Buchanan."
[24] Wilson, "Beverly Buchanan."

York art circles, Buchanan felt there was more opportunity to connect across gender than race. The women's movement in the New York area was more inclusive than most, and Buchanan benefitted from the connections she formed during the mid 1970s. In 1976 alone, the year Buchanan's paintings received the most significant attention, her work appeared in three noteworthy exhibitions of art by exclusively female artists. One show at Douglass College was titled "New Jersey Women Artists." A two person show at the Montclair Art Museum with a female sculptor was called "City Walls: Symbol of Human Effort and Design." According to her curriculum vitae, the third exhibition was titled "Women in the Arts,"; no place or date is listed however.

In 1977, just as she was gaining some notoriety in the New York art world and had secured several upcoming shows and gallery representation, Buchanan quit her job as a public health educator in East Orange and abruptly moved to Macon to pursue art-making full time. While Buchanan never expressly stated why she decided to move, in several journal entries she writes about the challenges of urban life. She also expressed a desire to become a full-time artist, and she could not afford to do this while living in New Jersey. Friends in Macon also speculate that a romantic relationship precipitated the move. While the exact reasons remain unclear as to why she made the decision to move—it is clear when. In a sketchbook from 1977, there are two abstract paintings made on sequential pages. Both resemble working drawings from her *Wall Series*, one from her *Black Wall* series and the other from *Torn Wall* series. Buchanan signed both works, signaling their significance to her. In

each painting the orientation appears to shift from the surface of a wall to the surface of a map.

The first one is comprised of a layer of thick black ink. The gaps are filled in with blue scribbles suggesting water. A handwritten title to the left of work reads *I Don't Love You Anymore* (*For New Jersey*), 4/8/77 a.m. (Figure 8). The second piece on the following page is rendered in bright white and yellow transparent washes layered atop a clay colored base. Buchanan went back into the painting with black pen to delineate shapes that resemble landforms. The title on the left facing page reads, *Hail, Georgia!*. Both drawings were made on the same day but the second one specifies a time of 10:30 am (Figure 9). The paintings mark the day Buchanan decided to move from the urban landscape of New Jersey to the rural South.

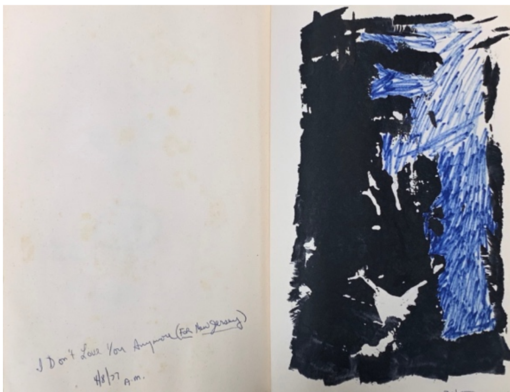

Figure 8. Beverly Buchanan, *I Don't Love You Anymore*, (*For New Jersey*), April 8, 1977, sketchbook from Buchanan Archives of Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art.

Figure 9. Beverly Buchanan, *Hail, Georgia!*, April 8, 1977, 10:30 am, sketchbook from Buchanan Archives of Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art.

The System of Demolition: The Personal Politics of Rubble

Even before Buchanan moved to Macon, her art practice was already in transition from painting to sculpture. Around 1976, she began a new series of sculptural work she called *Wall Fragments.* Buchanan taught herself how to cast concrete in wooden molds and mix it with pigment, creating the mottled eroded surfaces that she had been painting on large canvases. Alluding to her scientific background, she first called the sculpture work "frustulae," a word she made up that closely resembles "frustule," a scientific term. A frustule is the silicified cell wall of a diatom, a molecule that is composed of only two atoms. She was creating for her art a word derived from cell biology that means wall. In her journal Buchanan described her neologism as defining single fragments that are "meant to stand solitary and to support itself aesthetical and structurally."[25] The *Wall Fragments* series was titled "Frustulum." Buchanan wrote, "My interest in walls involves the concept of urban walls when they are in various stages of decay. Often, when buildings are in a state of demolition—one or two pieces (Frustula) standout that otherwise never would have been 'created.' This state of demolition presents a new type of 'artificial' structural system a piece that by itself (its undemolished state) would not exist. This 'state of demolition' has created new structures —discards and it is these that compel me."[26]

The concept of demolition as generating an artificial system— and something new—aligns her with other artists who were preoccupied with systems thinking in the

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[25] Beverly Buchanan, "Journals of Beverly Buchanan." Beverly Buchanan papers, 1912-2017, bulk 1970s-1990s. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
[26] Beverly Buchanan, "Journals of Beverly Buchanan." Beverly Buchanan papers, 1912-2017, bulk 1970s-1990s. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

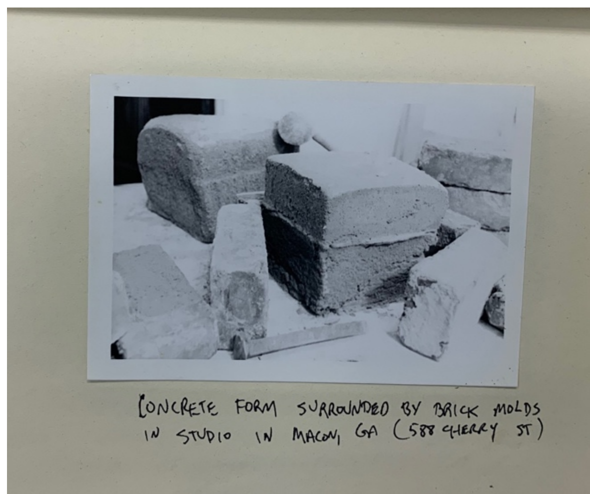
New York art world in the late 1960s. Systems art was influenced by cybernetics, an approach for exploring regulatory systems and systems theory that is the interdisciplinary study of theory for exploring how a system is more than the sum of its parts.

Figure 10. Beverly Buchanan, *Wall Fragment Series*, New York, 1976, sketchbook from Archives of Beverly Buchanan, Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art.

As noted in Chapter Three, several female artists such as Agnes Denes deployed the theory of "open systems" as strategy for intervening upon entrenched hierarchical systems and universal notions of sculpture. Buchanan also appears to be influenced by systems theory in her own artwork. Her interest in the generative power of rubble and the possibility for it to re-organize itself aligns her with "open systems" and the idea that human systems are living systems that are always in flux with the possibility of re-organizing into something new in response to their environment. In the early 1970s Buchanan wrote, "'Discards' or piles of rubble can be pulled together

to form new systems. These new systems are very personal statements. They are inspired by urban ruins but are created 'in my own image' by me, in concrete and painted with dark paint."[27]

Buchanan's "Frustulum" suggests a cellular quality to the rubble that according to Buchanan, she pulled together to form something new (Figure 10). Through her education and training as a scientist, Buchanan's spent time studying micro views. As an artist she was preoccupied with discovering methods for unleashing memory bound up in the molecular. Her large-scale environmental artworks, as she came to call them, were tied to specific geographic locations and sites both at macro and micro registers.



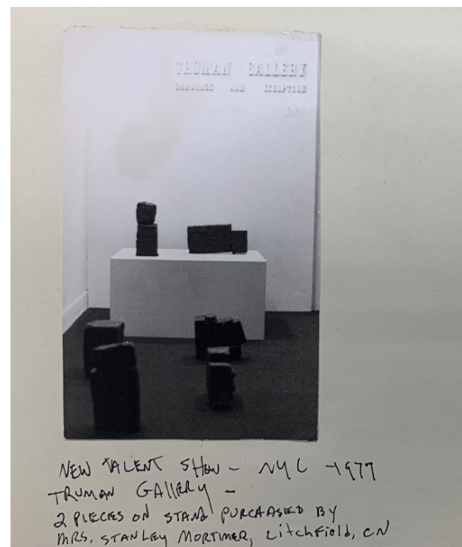


Figure 11 & 12. Beverly Buchanan, *Wall Fragments,* Manhattan, New York, 1979, photographs of sculpture compositions at the Truman from Archives of Beverly Buchanan, Smithsonian Institution, American Archives of Art.

[27] Beverly Buchanan, "Journals of Beverly Buchanan." Beverly Buchanan papers, 1912-2017, bulk 1970s-1990s. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

During her first six months in Georgia, Buchanan budgeted her savings and was able to concentrate exclusively on making sculpture. She divided her time between learning how to incorporate Georgia red clay into cement and trying out new methods of construction. Her first *Wall Fragments* series, exhibited in 1978 at the Truman in Manhattan, was comprised of cast pieces of concrete mixed with clay and pigment. Buchanan painstakingly worked the surfaces of the sculptures with various chemicals and tools like wire brushes to achieve a look of cast-off rubble. Grouped in formally constructed compositions of three to five pieces, each sculpture was placed directly on the ground in the gallery or in sculpture gardens (Figures 11 & 12). The fragments looked like they belonged in the Etruscan collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, not a contemporary art gallery on West 57th Street. The Metropolitan Museum did in fact purchase a four-part sculpture titled *Wall Column* (1980) for their permanent collection (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Beverly Buchanan, *Wall Column,* New York, 1980, sculpture from the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art.

The piece was originally shown in a in a 1980 group exhibition at the A.I R. Gallery called *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Artists in the*

United States, organized by the Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta. Curators Lucy Lippard and Lowry Stokes-Sims, both advocates of Buchanan's work, were also involved in organizing the exhibition. Although Buchanan was excited to be exhibited by a reputable uptown New York gallery, she was preoccupied with a new project, a series she called "Abandoned Pieces" that were fragments that she hid deep within the Georgian landscape.

Figures 14 & 15. *Prehistoric Mounds and Civil War Trenches*, Macon, Georgia, Ocmulgee Mounds National Historic Park, 2019, photographs by Kris Timken.

The geography and ruins of middle Georgia inspired Buchanan. The landscape offered a striking visual historical record of social infrastructure that spanned from the prehistoric Ocmulgee burial mounds to the trenched battlefields of the Civil War (Figures 14 & 15). Not to mention the center of the state was strewn with the remains of the architecture of slavery—the plantations and tabby ruins of slave quarters and auction houses. In dense woods and along the banks of rivers, Buchanan marked out sites that she had researched or that simply called to her. In these places she would install what she called "abandoned pieces," fragments that she left behind. The Ocmulgee River that flowed past Macon was especially provocative

for Buchanan (Figure 16). Rivers made the soil fertile, were the sites of baptisms, were places to lose the trail of a scent of a hunted animal or black person escaping slavery, and were somewhere to get rid of a body. Placing pieces along the banks of the river and its tributaries, Buchanan was performing a private ritual. Eventually she would even toss fragments into the river.

Figure 16. Beverly Buchanan, *Ritual on Ocmulgee*, Georgia, 1982, photograph from Buchanan Archives.

She spent days traveling through Georgian landscapes accompanied by a young assistant named Virginia Pickard in an old yellow Volkswagen Beetle filled with fragments. Pickard or whoever else was in attendance would photograph Buchanan performing the ritual of placing the work in a site-specific location (Figure 17). Buchanan would later paste these images in journal entries along with details such as, "date: Friday August 27, 1980. Location of Pear Ridge Rd (Monroe Co GA) Participants: Gina Templeton and artist—left three pieces of sculpture (one piece with signature inscribed by using a nail while sculpture was wet. Sculpture was left on grounds of JOBE A.M.E church on Pea Ridge rd. Found old primitive graves on

site—some marked with simple field stones."[28] The documentation was sparse and perfunctory. According to art historian Andy Campbell, who spoke with Pickard, "Conceptually related to her large-scale public projects, these mini-monuments are some of the clearest examples involving Buchanan's engagement with black death in the South."[29] Whereas in New Jersey, city walls stood for black lives—in the Georgian landscape the fragments left by Buchanan in public space continued the work in a contemplative and personal way.

Figure 17. *Buchanan with Frustulae*, Middle-Georgia, 1979, photograph by Gina Templeton from Archives of Beverly Buchanan

The act of ceremoniously placing sculptures or even just stones she had collected back into the landscape was both reminiscent of and yet distinct from Smithson's "site-nonsite" artworks (Figure 18).[30] Smithson developed a concept of a relationship between the site, a work made in a specific outdoor location, and the non-

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[28] Beverly Buchanan, "Journals of Beverly Buchanan," (1980). Beverly Buchanan papers, 1912-2017, bulk 1970s-1990s. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[29] Andy Campbell, "'We're Going to See Blood On Them Next': Beverly Buchanan's Georgia Ruins and Black Negativity," *Rhizomes*, no. 29 (2016). https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/029.e05.

[30] "Biography of Robert Smithson," Holt/Smithson Foundation, last modified 2020, https://holtsmithsonfoundation.org/biography-robert-smithson. According to Smithson, "his 'nonsites' were made from treks into non-urban environments. Incorporating maps, bins or mirrors with organic materials, such as rocks and earth, the nonsites create a dialectic between outdoors and indoors, ruminating on time, site, sight, nature and culture. Smithson defined the area from which organic materials were collected as the 'site', while the indoor placement of the materials is the 'nonsite'."

site where aspects of it or documentation of could be displayed such as in a gallery space. Buchanan worked in reverse by bringing pieces fabricated in the "nonsite" of the studio to the "site" where the work, through decay, offered the possibility of forming into something new. It was of singular importance to Buchanan that the piece must be related to the environment— integrated seamlessly into the local biota (Figure 19). Unlike Smithson, Buchanan offered no maps, descriptions of the locations, or embellishments. Even as some of her sculptures were being purchased by collectors and museums, they were now also hidden in the charged southern landscape.

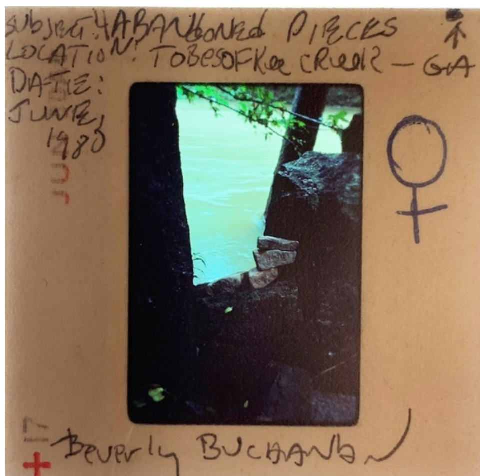

Figure 18. Beverly Buchanan, *Ritual Documentation*, Georgia, 1980, photograph from Buchanan Archives.

Figure 19. Beverly Buchanan, *Abandoned Piece,* Georgia, 1979, photograph from Buchanan Archives.

Whereas Smithson, the renowned entropologist of his generation, sought to achieve formlessness through his actions upon a landscape such as pouring a load of hot tar in *Asphalt Rundown* (1969) or dumping twenty loads of dirt on top of an old structure in *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970), a decade later, Buchanan's fragments—humble rubble—fomented a particular past while at the same time, in hiding, portended a

possible future. As they marked the unknown or the unknowable, the fragments served as counter-memorials to the act of claiming public spaces after anti-black individuals which pervaded the American South.

Rituals and Ruins in Three Parts

In an essay by Charlotte Moore Perkins for a contemporary art journal in 1979, Perkins inquired, "What kind of reception can a black female abstract artist expect to find in Macon?"[31] Turns out it was surprisingly supportive one. According to Nancy Anderson, who worked for Macon's Museum of Arts and Sciences in the early 1980s, "Beverly arrived at a time when Macon was trying to get past its overt racism—white people were looking for ways to reach out and do better than we had been doing."[32] Buchanan quickly plugged into a small but vibrant art community. Perceived as a New York artist with credentials, she was soon asked to join the board of the Macon museum. According to one version of the story, the museum commissioned an artwork from Buchanan. In reality, it was the struggling museum that asked Buchanan to donate a work. Thrilled just to be able to make her five-dollars a month studio rent, Buchanan found the museum's request rather ironic, but nevertheless she was quick to recognize an opportunity to realize her first large-scale public sculpture.

Buchanan proposed placing a massive sculpture in the museum's Harry Stillwell Edwards Arboretum. The arboretum, a small wooded area next to the

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[31] Charlotte Moore Perkins, "Risks of Choice," *Contemporary Arts/Southeast* 2, no. 3 (1979): 17, 41.
[32] Author interview with Nancy Anderson, Macon, GA, November 11, 2019.

museum, later renamed the "The Georgia Power Sweet Gum Trail," had a pathway that led through a woodland down to a creek. At the top of the trail, closest to the museum, sat a cabin called the Kingfisher Cabin, built by the celebrated Macon-born novelist and poet Harry Stillwell Edwards (1855-1938). Edwards, most famous for a pro-slavery work titled *Eneas Africus* (1919) that was serialized in the *Macon Evening News,* used the cabin to write in. In 1964 it was relocated to the museum grounds. Buchanan, well aware of Edward's racism, sought to site her "ruins" directly across the trail and within full view of the cabin. Buchanan, according to some local friends, was excited that the committee approved the location she requested—it almost made up for the lack of funding. In a letter to Buchanan's New York gallerist Jock Truman, the Macon museum director Douglas Noble notes, "The site selection, for the project was particularly important; and we are pleased that an open, moderately-wooded area, which is part of our Harry Stillwell Edwards Arboretum, fits Beverly's needs for this particular project."[33]

Her intervention in a southern landscape that directly celebrated racism was an open secret among close friends in the arts community, but the sculpture's connection to local racial politics and the legacy of violence it addressed was never acknowledged by art critics. Buchanan's work was for the most part associated and equated with the work of a group of land artists who found inspiration in prehistoric sites. In an 1976 essay that laid the foundation for her book 1983 book *Overlay:*

[33] Douglas Noble to Jock Truman, n.d., Beverly Buchanan papers, 1912-2017, bulk 1970s-1990s. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory that included Buchanan's *Ruins and Rituals* sculpture, Lippard described the movement as a "the tangled path leading from Neolithic sacred grove to contemporary site sculpture."[34] Prehistory did not account for the racial violence that took place in the land—a violent past that Buchanan felt in a deeply personal way.

Only recently have scholars begun to interpret the work through the lens of race. Even African American critics and curators, who were supporters of Buchanan's work like Lowry Stokes Sims, the associate curator of Twentieth Century Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art who purchased *Wall Columns* for the museum, described Buchanan in the context of prehistoric art, "[c]onjuring the magical quality of the art-making process which first captivated humans thousands of years ago."[35] Buchanan herself addressed only the formal elements of the work publicly, but in her conversations with friends and the random journal entry she acknowledged how historical site-specificity and violence against black bodies was embedded in the materiality of her large-scale public sculptures.

Buchanan, a black lesbian from an academic family, who chose to give up a career in public health to become an artist in the American South during the 1970s embodied the political. *Ruins and Rituals* and *Marsh Ruins* were not commissioned works—they were gifts to the state of Georgia from Buchanan. Resistance can be figured in different ways. Against all odds, Buchanan managed to intervene on

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[34] Lucy R. Lipaprd, "Gardens: Some Metaphors for a Public Art," *Art in America*, November 1981, 135-148.

[35] Lowery Stokes Sims, "Beverly Buchanan's Constructed Ruins," reprinted in *Beverly Buchanan: 1978-1981*, by Beverly Buchanan, et al. (Mexico City: Athénée Press, 2015).

institutionalized white supremacy in a groundbreaking fashion that stands out to this day. As a woman who believed in the possibility of demolition—rubble—to create something new—perhaps Buchanan was comfortable with the idea that people would eventually catch up to her in the end—or in her case — at the beginning.

Artist Michael Pierce, Buchanan's close friend while she lived in Macon, recalls, "One afternoon Beverly was driving down Ingleside to Riverside and straight ahead of her was this Kmart that was being remodeled. They were taking all the light poles out of the parking lot, and all those light poles were attached to big square chunks of concrete."[36] Buchanan pulled over and asked the work crew if they would be willing to deliver a few of the concrete footers to the museum. Amused, the men agreed to drop off four in the museum parking lot. Pierce, recalling Buchanan's sense of humor, said, "It was if she saw the footers and thought, 'Well shit— that's what I will give to the museum!' If you turn one of those sculptures over, you will probably find a partially sawed-off light pole sticking out the bottom."[37] No one affiliated with the museum ever questioned Buchanan about the footers. The Kmart discards were cast off fragments of demolition, rubble as racialized matter that Buchanan re-placed together with the hopes of forming a new artificial system (Figures 20 & 21).

[36] Interview with Michael Pierce, Macon, GA., November 30, 2019.
[37] Interview with Michael Pierce, Macon, GA., November 30, 2019.

Figure 20. *Installation of Ruins and Rituals*, Georgia, 1979, photograph from Museum of Arts and Science.

Figure 21. *Installations View*, Georgia, 1979, photograph from Buchanan Archives.

Unique circumstances, including the museum's financial problems and an institutional mandate for greater inclusivity, helped to create the conditions for Buchanan to propose, complete, and donate a large-scale, groundbreaking, site-specific sculpture. Formally, the piece was unlike any other in the museum collection. According to Noble the museum director, "There is little doubt in my mind that some degree of controversy will surround Beverly's work because it is abstract and requires more than a passing glance to appreciate and understand it. However, the time for people in the middle-Georgia area to be exposed to this kind of work is long overdue."[38] This kind of work was abstract sculpture but even those in Macon art world didn't fully understand the political heft of the site-based artwork.

[38] Douglas Noble to Jock Truman, n.d., Beverly Buchanan papers, 1912-2017, bulk 1970s-1990s. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

In an effort to engage and educate the viewing public, Buchanan made a point of addressing the formal properties of the sculpture. In her artist's statement she wrote, "There is not just one, but there are many sections of this sculpture that encourages viewers to 'read' several sections as symbolic of the sculpture. In order to try to visualize what I mean, you as the viewer must walk around the entire sculpture and walk through it to see it has many different angles and positions."[39] She was especially pleased by how the light activated and changed the piece throughout the course of a day or season and in where one stood to observe it. Buchanan never discussed the importance of the ways in which the sculpture's various angles and positions brought into view the cabin of a celebrated local white supremacist (Figure 21). Although one could view the sculpture without seeing the cabin, looking out from the cabin there was only one view—and that view always encompassed Buchanan's ruin. Depending on the light and shadows, that view closely resembled a graveyard (Figures 22 & 23).

[39] Beverly Buchanan, "Artist's Statement Accompanying *Ruins and Rituals*," 1980, Ruins and Rituals, Museum of Arts and Sciences, Macon, GA.

Figures 22 & 23. Beverly Buchanan, *Ruins and Rituals*, Macon, GA, 2019, photographs by Kris Timken.

In a letter to Lucy Lippard, Buchanan wrote, "At last. It's done. Here are the slides. One shot in particular is so like a graveyard that I thought of calling it 'southern comfort' instead of *Ruins and Rituals*, its real name. I can't seem to persuade ANYONE from outside of Georgia to come here to actually see the real thing. People from Atlanta don't want to venture south to Macon. There is supposedly, an old Indian curse on Macon. I believe it!"[40] In spite of Buchanan's obvious reference, Lippard, a well-known activist in the art world and beyond, never considered the work to be racially charged. *Ruins and Rituals*, as part of a second wave of earthworks, pressed against the boundaries of land art. Although through its geometric shapes the constructed ruins align with the formal approach of Minimalism, the sculpture is charged in a way that other minimalist works and land

[40] Beverly Buchanan to Lucy Lippard, n.d., Beverly Buchanan papers, 1912-2017, bulk 1970s-1990s. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

art sculptures are not. Unlike so many earthworks, this site-based work feels integrated into the landscape rather than amplified by it. Nevertheless, the re-organized discards through sheer size alone command a presence in the small woodland setting. The structures are simultaneously familiar and yet mysterious. Recalling ruins still scattered about the Georgian landscape, the foundation of the eighteenth-century British Fort King George, stacked walls of a slave auction house—structures that evoke a now distant past, Buchanan's earthwork, toggles between past and present while portending a future that has yet to come.

Ruins and Rituals is actually a three-part composition spread across the museum's property and beyond. The first section was comprised of the four footers dug up from the Kmart parking lot. Buchanan added layers of concrete to them and then spent weeks laboriously grinding, wire-brushing and staining them with pigment. She transformed the surfaces to loosely resemble the tabby ruins she had encountered on her many travels through the Georgian landscape. Tabby is a mixture of burnt oyster shells, sand, and water in equal parts. The materials were readily available in the tidal rivers and creeks of southern Georgia particularly among the islands where mounds and middens left by the Timucua people. To make tabby, oyster shells has to be cleaned, crushed, and burned to be turned into lime that is then combined with sand and water. The material was poured and set into wooden braces to make stackable bricks that were used for building plantation structures. Thomas Spalding, one of the most influential agrarians of antebellum Georgia, described the construction of his home: "An immense large house built of tabby was made by my

people. It is 90 feet by 65 feet in depth …the house is Ionic order and was built by six men, two boys and two mules with one white man supervising for two years."[41] Spaulding's "people" were his slaves overseen by the plantation manager. The slaves covered over the rough tabby foundations walls of the mansion with expensive plaster, but that was not the case for other structures on the plantation such as the quarters for enslaved people and sugar houses where the spiky oyster shells remained exposed—a material distinction that occurred in the architecture of slavery throughout the south.

Tabby created a direct line between the indigenous people, the colonizers, and their enslaved workers on plantations. Originally brought to Georgia by the British during the era of European colonialist expansion, tabby, with its sharp and jagged surface of broken oyster shells poking from the formed bricks, best illustrates "an alchemy of slavery and geology."[42] Once slavery was abolished, such labor-intensive material fell out of use. But the shells, sand, and soil are imbued with a violent history. For Buchanan the abstractionist, tabby offered the haptic approach to her work that she had long sought. On the razor-edged surface of tabby, Buchanan could locate her anger.

With *Ruins and Rituals*, in addition to altering the surfaces of the footers with layers of concrete and rocks then staining them with various pigments that reacted to the changing light, Buchan sliced into and around each piece about six inches from

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[41] Buddy Sullivan, *Old Tabby: The Ashantilly Legacy of Thomas Spaulding and William Douglas Haynes, Jr* (Darien, GA: Ashantilly Center, 2018), 17.
[42] Yusoff, *A Billion*, 9.

the top to create to the look of covers, not unlike those of ancient sarcophagi. Additionally, between several of the footers she placed stacks of fragments that resembled steps to climb upon for a better view, small gravestones that had fallen over, or a cover removed and left on the ground.

There was second piece to *Rituals and Ruins*, a single small frustula that Buchanan hid off the trail deeper in the wooded area. Lippard, writing about the project in her book *Overlay*, described the overall sculpture as "a three-part work, the forms of which recall unburied tombs or giant reliquaries. The second part or the composition was private, hidden in the wood nearby and intended only for the searching audience. The third is smaller and totally personal; it was buried in a river by the artist."[43] The third piece Lippard described was inspired by the *Abandoned Pieces* series. In an earlier letter, Buchanan told Lippard that, "I recently abandoned one of my pieces in a carefully chosen spot in a wooded area. Two other people know where it is and how to 'find' it. It is a dark payne's grey so it blends in at times with the large trees at the site."[44] It was important to Buchanan that Lippard understand that *Ruins and Rituals* was simultaneously public and deeply personal. The sculpture operated at multiple registers, all of them beginning and ending with Buchanan. Unlike other works made during this era, Buchanan did not distance herself from her sculpture. For Buchanan her work was not universal; it was cellular.

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[43] Lucy R. Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory* (New York, N.Y.: New Press, 1983), 17.
[44] Buchanan to Lippard, Beverly Buchanan papers, 1912-2017, bulk 1970s-1990s. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Forty years later with the pigment long gone, the artwork is covered with green moss and orange lichen. In 1988, Kingfisher Cabin was renovated, which only served to amplify the worn surfaces of Buchanan's ruins. For those wandering between the four-foot tall pieces with their tops covered in pine needles, there is an encompassing archeological aspect to the sculpture. If viewers look closely, they will find a small plaque on one of the pieces with the title, artist name, and date of the work (1979) which may feel surprisingly incongruous. The sculpture feels much older than the cabin that sits just beyond it. There is a sensation that the cabin was placed after the artwork, overlooking it from a slight rise in the woods. One of the footers of *Ruins and Rituals* sits slightly apart from the rest—closer to the cabin. Angled toward the cabin, the fragment ensures the two "ruins" will remain entangled in the Georgian landscape (Figure 24).

Figure 24. Beverly Buchanan, *Ruins and Rituals,* Macon, GA, 2019, Museum of Arts and Sciences, photograph by Kris Timken.

Ruins and Rituals combines aspects of public and personal, formal and conceptual, monument and anti-monumental, past and future, the visible and the invisible, and perhaps most significantly, absence and presence. It is a groundbreaking earthwork. Moreover, similar to the projects discussed in previous chapters, it was functional in its own way. Serving as a method for marking in the landscape through its material presence—or, in the case of the hidden or sunken pieces, the lack thereof—*Ruins and Rituals* articulates the economies of slavery and the lost social histories of indigenous peoples. Buchanan's ruins, hidden in plain sight, are particular to the Georgian landscape. The sculpture expands on the land art movement that was often characterized by isolationism and Minimalism and reveals it to be one that can be more social, connected, and activist.

Marsh Ruins

As Buchanan began working on *Ruins and Rituals*, she received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts for three thousand dollars. The funding enabled her to complete the project and also begin research for a companion sculpture. Over the years, she had drawn multiple sketches of large-scale sculptures meant to be placed near water. On July 11, 1979, she sent Lippard a rough sketch of three piles "proposed for an ocean-site in Georgia." After completing *Ruins and Rituals*, Buchanan began to scout for sites in the Georgia Lowcountry. By September 1980 she could tell Lippard, "I am now beginning to talk to officials about making a

sculpture on the coast of Georgia."[45] In a reference to the environmental artist then doing full-scale public projects, she continued, "I never did envy Christo's supposed enjoyment of official red-tape. I can't stand it and may try to find private rather than public land near water."[46] Much of the coastal region Buchanan explored was owned by the state. There were several historical sites that were now parks with ruins such as that one that held Fort King George, the oldest English fort remaining on Georgia's coast, and another a seventeenth-century century Spanish Mission located on land once occupied by a large Native American village. The tract of land is now identified by the historical marker as "an ideal site for the mission and school activities of the Spanish priests." All that remained of the mission was its tabby foundation. In nearby Darien, the city was trying to save certain ruins such as the foundation walls of a slave auction house. The tabby ruins were hauntingly reminiscent of the ones created in *Ruins and Rituals* (Figure 25 & 26). Buchanan finally found a tiny little piece of private land on which she could locate a large-scale companion piece to *Ruins and Rituals.* The site was the Marshes of Glynn.

[45] Buchanan to Lippard, Beverly Buchanan papers, 1912-2017, bulk 1970s-1990s. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
[46] Buchanan to Lippard, Beverly Buchanan papers, 1912-2017, bulk 1970s-1990s. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Figure 25. *Fort King George State Historic Site*, McIntosh County, GA, 2019, photographs by Kris Timken
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Figure 26. *Slave Auction House*, Darien, GA

The southern coastal marshes known as the Golden Isles had inspired the Macon-born American poet Sidney Lanier (1842-1881) to write his unfinished set of lyrical nature poems entitled "Hymn to the Marshes" in the 1870s. The most well-known of the series was "The Marshes of Glynn," a poem recited for years by schoolchildren across Georgia. By the time Buchanan came to Brunswick a century later, the Lanier Oak, the tree beneath which the former confederate soldier was known to stand while observing the marsh, had become part of a narrow median on Georgia Highway 17. Across the highway next to the marsh was a small non-descript shoulder of land known as Overlook Park.

From the oak tree, Lanier would have been able to see across the marsh to St. Simons Island, where in May of 1803 a group of West Africans committed mass suicide while disembarking from a slave ship. According to Gullah folklore, a captured African warrior, in a final act of resistance, led fellow captives shackled together at the ankles off the ship and into the water as they chanted, "The water

brought us and the water will take us away."[47] The event was a source of pride among the Gullah and one that allegedly inspired fear among slave owners.

According to several people in Buchanan's life, including James Webb, a close friend while she lived in Macon, the sculptor was very aware of the history of slavery in the Golden Isles. Webb confirmed that he had discussed the history of the mass suicide with Buchanan and said that the chant "the water brought us and the water will take us away" was a source of inspiration for the sculpture.[48] The contractor Max Emery, who fabricated *Marsh Ruins* for Buchanan, also remembers her grasp of the history of coastal Georgia and her commitment to this specific site for the artwork.[49] Buchanan told him that she was basing the large-scale sculpture on three ships that landed within sight of Lanier's Oak more than a century earlier when the marsh at hightide served as a port for the slave trade. Buchanan's artwork would disturb the mythic view perpetuated by the celebrated cultural figure Lanier and serve as a second counter memorial.

Buchanan applied for a Guggenheim Fellowship in the late spring of 1980, proposing a large-scale environmental sculpture in coastal Georgia to be called *Partially Buried Ruins.* Her application was timely. In 1977, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. had helped to establish the earthworks and environmental sculpture movement in the artworld with "Probing the Earth: Contemporary Land Projects," the first exhibition to include artwork made by a

[47] Samuel Momodu, "Igbo Landing Mass Suicide (1803)," *Black Past*, October 25, 2016, https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/igbo-landing-mass-suicide-1803/.
[48] Author interview with James Webb, Macon, GA, November 16, 2019.
[49] Author interview with James Webb, Macon, GA, November 16, 2019.

woman—*Sun Tunnels* by Nancy Holt, the wife of pioneering land artist Robert Smithson. “Probing the Earth: Contemporary Land Projects” traveled to other museums including the Seattle Art Museum, which curated its own exhibition the next year, “Earthworks: Land Reclamation as Sculpture.” This groundbreaking but largely forgotten exhibition was composed of artists proposals made for a collaboration between Seattle’s arts commission and the King County Department of Public Works. Together the agencies sponsored “the most ambitious earthworks project this country has ever seen.”[50]A year later, the Guggenheim gave Buchanan a $17,000 fellowship.

After deciding she wanted to erect an artwork in the Marshes of Glynn on a lot adjacent to U.S. 17 next to Overlook State Park outside of Brunswick, Buchanan had to acquire the permission of the owner the property. The small strip of land sat adjacent to a bait and tackle shop. After acquiring permission, she began the lengthy and difficult process of trying to get a government permit to gather usable fragment pieces from buildings or demolished sites in and around Brunswick.[51] Her hope was to get both the materials and machinery, such as a crane, to move the large pieces donated by the city just as she had done with *Ruins and Rituals.* Buchanan’s formal aesthetic driving the project was, as in the past, demolition: the process of gathering discards and rubble from demolished sites with the hope of finding the one or two pieces to create a new type of structure.

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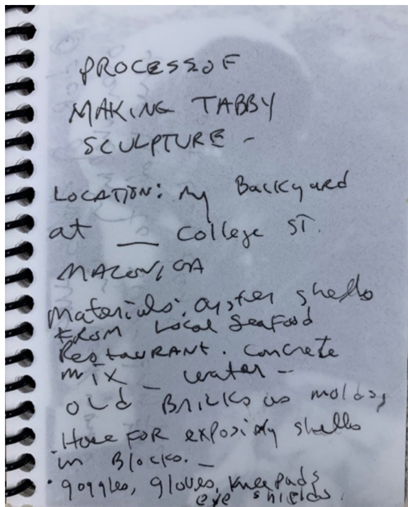
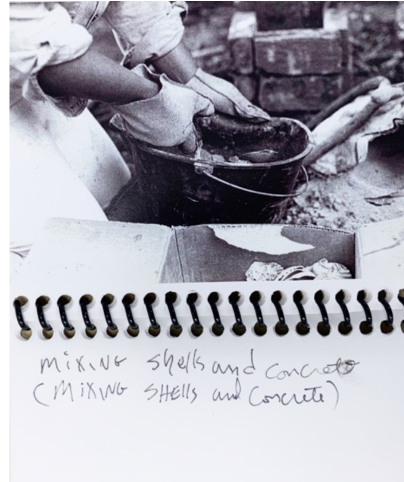
[50] Foote, "Monument—Sculpture—Earthwork," 34.
[51] Beverly Buchanan to Frederick C. Marland, Ph. D, "Letter to the Director of Coastal Protection, Dept. of Natural Resources," April 16, 1981, Buchanan Archives, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institutions.

Because the proposed site was within the highway right-of-way, Buchanan needed approval from the Georgia Department of Transportation as well as zoning permits from Brunswick. Moreover, the permitting process would entail both federal and state approval to sink footers in the marsh that would support a large-scale concrete sculpture in an intra-coastal waterway. After several months of back and forth, Buchan received permission from the Coastal Resources Division of the Department of Natural Resources, who denied the use of a crane. Buchanan realized that she would have to fabricate the concrete forms on location so she began the search for a contractor.

During the 1970s there was a revival of interest in tabby construction that grew out of nostalgia for the material in spite of, or perhaps because of, its association with plantation architecture. In the Golden Isles region, it reemerged as a sought-after material for the exterior of new construction both residential and commercial. Once Buchanan realized she would not be able to make a sculpture just from the rubble of Brunswick, she turned to the idea of tabby. The material was already the literal foundation for ruins she encountered throughout the landscape. In her Macon studio she taught herself how to make tabby and even chronicled the process in a small booklet as part of her documentation for her Guggenheim Fellowship (Figures 27 & 28). Making tabby was difficult. Buchanan came to realize she would need to use the remainder of her fellowship money to hire someone to help her fabricate the work.





Figures 27 & 28. Beverly Buchanan, *Tabby Booklet*, Georgia, 1981, photographs of booklet from the Buchanan Archives, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institutions.

By 1981, Max Emery, a contractor in his mid-thirties, had developed a reputation among architects throughout the coastal region for his skill with tabby. Buchanan contacted him about helping her to make her environmental sculpture in the Marshes of Glynn. Charmed by the artist and intrigued by the project, he agreed to work with her. Throughout the summer months of 1981, Max and his crew worked with Buchanan under the scorching sun in the marsh. "She had a budget and she couldn't afford to build the whole thing out of tabby," Emery recalled, "so we made the pieces out of concrete with a coat of cement and then covered them with tabby. I told her solid tabby would have lasted more than a hundred years, but she was okay with it cracking off."[52] Emery wanted her to situate the sculpture on the bank of the marsh so it wouldn't be damaged by the tides, but Buchanan insisted it be placed in marsh itself so the tide would completely cover the sculpture twice a day. Buchanan told Emery about the abandoned pieces, including the work she threw in the

[52] Author Interview with Max Emery, Brunswick, GA, November 16, 2019.

Ocmulgee. He recalls she was very specific about wanting the artwork to be both visible and invisible.

Used to working with architects, Emery made a point of explaining that the piece would last longer if it was not in the water. But Buchanan knew what she wanted and stuck to her vision with the understanding that the public artwork she was gifting to the state of Georgia would eventually disappear. The crew poured three different concrete fragments made to Buchanan’s specifications. According to Emery, one of the few people who has knowledge of the entire content of the artwork, the pieces were abstract representations of three different sized slave ships Buchanan discovered had brought enslaved Africans to the channel (Figure 29).

Figure 29. Beverly Buchanan, *Marsh Ruins*, Brunswick, GA, July, 1981, photograph from the Buchanan Archives.

Once the forms were coated with a layer of cement, the tabby was added and Buchanan stained the light surface with a brown acrylic wash. This site-based work was meant to evoke the numerous brown bodies lost in the landscape. During the six weeks it took to fabricate the work, Buchanan stayed at a nearby hotel in Brunswick.

She came to adore Max and his crew and vice versa. Buchanan chronicled the process for the Guggenheim Fellowship Committee and she could not resist adding her humorous observations that revealed their playful camaraderie (Figure 30). On the final day of work, Buchanan wrote a note to herself on a piece of Holiday Inn stationary, "It's done! Marshy Ruins (they) exist!"[53] That day, as a light rain began to fall, the crew was able to tease Buchanan one last time by pointing to some fins in the distance that were moving toward the disappeared sculpture. Convinced they were going to be attacked by sharks, Buchanan ran for her car followed by loud laughter as a school of porpoises made their way past the workman standing along the shore. When the work was complete nobody wanted to leave it. "Emery and his crew were wonderful," Buchanan told the Macon newspaper, "from the start, they seemed to understand exactly what I was trying to accomplish."[54]

[53] Author Interview with Max Emery, Brunswick, GA, November 16, 2019.
[54] Kristina Simms, "Macon Artist creates Sculpture for Georgia's Coast," *The Macon Telegraph* (Macon, GA), August 4, 1981.

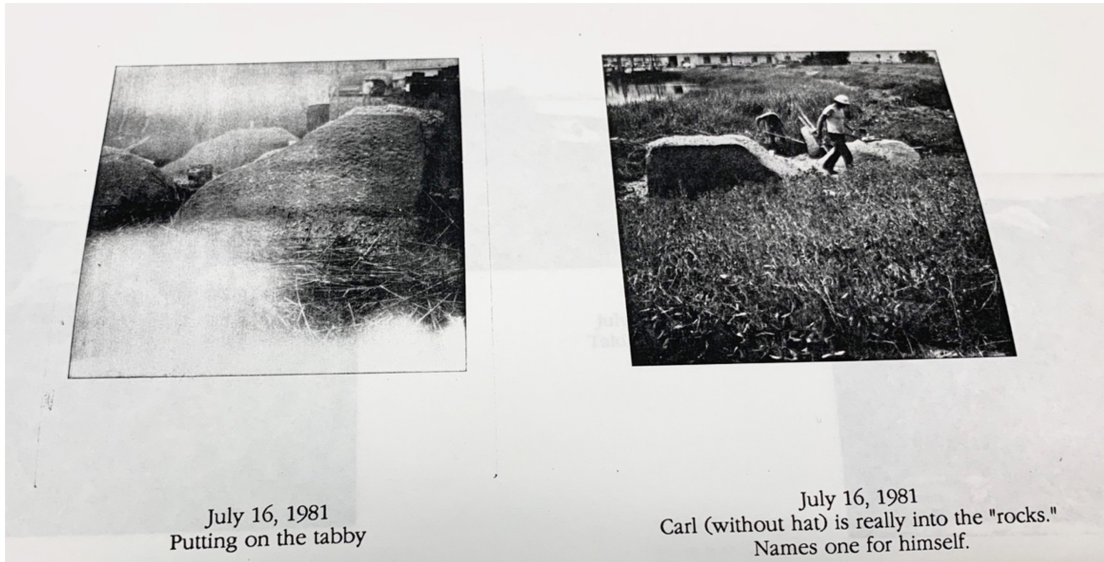


Figure 30. Beverly Buchanan, *Documentation for Guggenheim Fellowship Committee*, Georgia, 1981, photograph of documentation from the Buchanan Archives.

Although she would go on to do several more large-scale site-based projects in Georgia and Florida over a long career, according to art historian Andy Campbell, “Buchanan, who was living with dementia and recently died, kept a photograph of *Marsh Ruins* above her bed, marking the installation as especially significant.”[55] It was a project she had seen in her mind’s eye repeatedly long before she ever made it.

Figure 31. Beverly Buchanan, *Marsh Ruins*, Brunswick, GA, 1981, photograph from the Buchanan Archives.

[55] Campbell, "'We're Going.”

Forty years later, Emery, now retired and in his mid-seventies, still checks on the sculpture at least several times a year. Just as he predicted, one of the three tabby caps popped off and sits wedged among debris that gathers at the edge of the marsh at low tide. Emery remains the sole witness to the reclamation earthwork project now that the earth has largely reclaimed the art, as was intended. Most people think the site-based work that became known as *Marsh Ruins* is gone— totally submerged. In the present day, surrounded by tall marsh grass, even at low tide it is difficult to locate the "rocks." In addition to the three fragments, there was once a fourth one, a small piece on which Buchanan carved her name, the words *Marsh Ruins,* and the date. But the water appears to have taken the marker away (Figure 32).

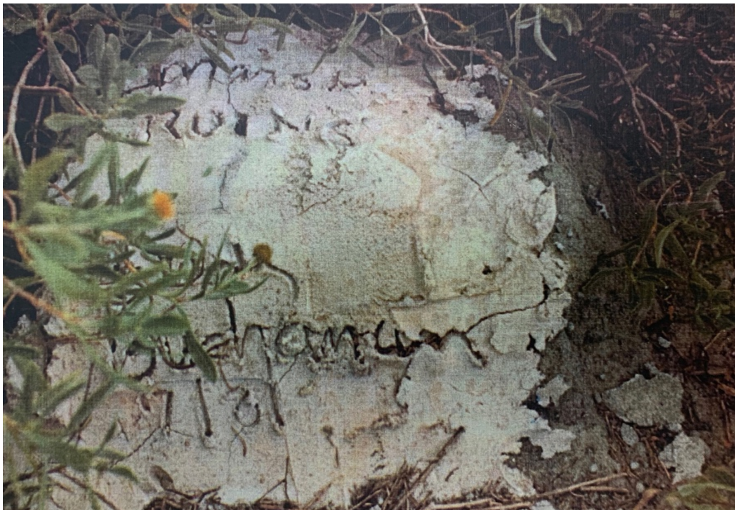


Figure 32. Beverly Buchanan, *Marsh Ruins*, Brunswick, GA, 2019, photograph by Kris Timken.

Conclusion

Shortly after completing *Marsh Ruins*, Buchanan received an artist-in-residence grant from the Georgia Council of Arts to make a large-scale environmental sculpture. *Unity Stones* (1983) was comprised of a large piece of black Georgia granite surrounded by eight fragments formed of concrete that were stained black. At Buchanan's insistence, the piece was placed in front of the Booker T. Washington Community Center in the black neighborhood of Macon. Although the community center closed its doors in 2009, unlike *Marsh Ruins* which is presently disappearing into the marsh, *Unity Stones* is a ruin that has been meticulously maintained by the neighborhood. When I visited the artwork in 2019, the grass that surrounded the sculpture was mown with precision and the artwork was nestled in the local mulch know as Georgia pine straw (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Beverly Buchanan, *Unity Stones* (1983), Macon, Georgia, 2019, photograph by Kris Timken.

Unlike *Unity Stones*, many artists' large-scale public artworks made in landscapes during the late 1970s and early 1980s have suffered from neglect and fallen into disrepair. Perhaps this was because the sculpture engaged more with Miss's notion of social reclamation than the aesthetics of first-generation earthworks. Even works by the some of the most celebrated male artists of their time, like Robert Morris's *Johnson Pit #30* (1979), a 3.7-acre abandoned gravel pit excavated and terraced into an earthwork and the centerpiece of the exhibition "Earthworks: Land Reclamation as Sculpture," have struggled to remain true to their original form and intentions, and even to survive. While public and private support for *Johnson Pit #30* demonstrated the strength of the environmental movement during the 1970s, the city council of SeaTac, Washington, where the site-based earthwork is located, began debating its significance and enduring value as early as 1992. At the time of its completion, Morris' reclamation project was surrounded by farmland. According to art critic Deloris Tarzan in 1978, "The willingness of [local governments] to provide maintenance will depend on the popularity of the piece created."[1] In the present day, the once bucolic views have disappeared and the contemplative artwork is crowded by housing and industrial development (Figures 2 & 3).

[1] "King County Earthworks: Land Reclamation as Sculpture," King County, last modified 2013, https://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/records-licensing/archives/exhibits/earthworks.aspx.

Figures 2 & 3. Robert Morris, *Johnson Pit #30* (1979), SeaTac, WA, 2019, photographs by Kris Timken.

Residents who live in the nearby apartment complexes have no idea who Robert Morris was or what an earthwork is. Many people think the earthwork is a giant dog park created and maintained by the city. How to value an artwork that occupies 3.7 acres of developable land remains a constant quandary for the city with a population of 29,000 who would like to reclaim this land once again for development. If maintenance in perpetuity is an issue that artworks by celebrated male artists of the 1960s and 1970s must grapple with, the situation is even more troublesome for projects made by female artists during the same era.

Throughout the 1970s, women artists benefitted from the gains and connections made in both via the women's movement and through environmental activism. The motivations that fostered a willingness on the part of local and state governments and private industry to enter into collaborations and partnerships with women artists ranged from wanting positive public relations to seeking inexpensive approaches for addressing disturbed landscapes. Once the collaboration came to an

end, there was little incentive on the part of the partnering agency to fund continuing maintenance. Artists soon came to understand that the government agencies had limited resources and little patience to keep their work alive and aligned with its original intentions.

Nor would the art establishment embrace such work. Large-scale land art projects made by women artists that blurred the lines among art, architecture and landscape architecture, whether sponsored by government agencies or private industry, were routinely ignored by the art world. By the mid 1980s as the U.S. economy began to improve, commercial galleries multiplied and all were looking for traditional art objects they could sell. At the same time, there was a cultural backlash against both feminism and environmentalism. In the ensuing political climate, private industry came to focus more on profit margins than green-washing. The experimental pluralism of the 1970s provided the fertile ground for new forms of activism in the 1980s New York artworld when activist art shifted its attention towards the AIDS crisis, and punk culture became the definition of alienation from mainstream culture.

The historical conditions that allowed for experimental large-scale land art projects to take place all but disappeared. Moreover, the experimental alliances that once seemed to have so much potential floundered. Government agencies realized that artist's idealistic projects were challenging to enact and equally difficult to maintain. Self-trained artists playing the role of architect or landscape architect produced unforeseen issues and expenses. Many of the unique partnerships between artists and agencies that fostered outside of art institutions evaporated. Only Patricia

Johanson, with her educational background in civil engineering, a degree in architecture and the willingness to abandon the art world completely, continued to build large-scale, functional pieces. However, her unique role as an ecological artist building functional public artworks was littered with challenges and disappointments along the way.

In 2016, Fair Park was purchased by a private company and the lagoon was no longer maintained by the park service. In a violation of the original intention of the work, the sculpture was bisected by cyclone fencing and plastered with caution signs (Figure 4). There is no longer any mention of Johanson's sculpture in the public discourse about the fate of the park and the lagoon—it is merely a feature of the lagoon, like the swan boats that were introduced several years ago. Nevertheless, with the growth of concern about the effects of climate change, the once maligned sculpture has gained recognition in some art circles as a foundational piece in the movement known as ecological art. Eco art, once a marginalized movement that emerged during the early 1980s, is now more widely recognized by an art world capricious in its intentions.

Figure 4. Patricia Johanson, *Fair Park Lagoon*, Dallas, Texas, 2019, photograph by Kris Timken.

Betty Beaumont has never been able to comprehensively view or evaluate the condition of *Ocean Landmark*. Another earthwork largely ignored at the time it was made, *Ocean Landmark* now is re-considered as groundbreaking in eco art. On the twentieth anniversary of the project, Beaumont began a campaign to raise the funds to explore technologies that would make the artwork more visible to the viewing public. This effort was disrupted by the September 11th attacks. When compared to the fate of *South Cove*, the invisibility of *Ocean Landmark* works in its favor. In 2019, New York City revealed a proposal to redesign the vulnerable shoreline of lower Manhattan in order to make it more resilient to rising sea levels caused by climate change. Miss's *South Cove* is not a part of the proposed redesign and will likely be destroyed.

Whereas the first generation of earth artists were primarily interested in making gestures on the land, the second wave of projects while rooted in a tradition

aesthetics, expand the traditional category of sculpture. Throughout history, generally during politically or socially turbulent times art movements have emerged that call for art to be useful. For example, in the early twentieth century during the Russian Revolution, a movement known as Constructivism was characterized by art and architecture that reflected socialist principles, more pragmatic than rarefied, so art that was made often served a purpose. The late 1960s and 1970s was a period of significant cultural unrest in North American history. The influence of Vietnam war, civil rights, the women's movement and environmental activism helped shape the direction of a second wave of earthworks. The case studies examined are grounded in aesthetics, but they are of a more functional nature, a shift that began in the 1970s to dislodge art from "high" culture and fuse it with the everyday.

This small yet expansive genealogy of large-scale sculptural projects made by Miss, Beaumont, Johanson, and Buchanan demonstrate how land art made by women who lived and worked in New York during the 1970s carried on in the early 1980s operating almost completely outside the art world. Each sculpture possessed equal parts aesthetic worth and functionality whether as social reclamation, a source of food, a strategy for drawing people closer to the natural world, or a marker for lost social histories and economies. Scholars have suggested that the 1960s didn't truly end until the early 1970s. The same can conceivably be said of the early 1980s—a period in art history that remains largely unexamined. One in which the sociopolitical and experimental forces of the 1970s were highly influential in transforming the nature of site-based public art.

The first wave of earthworks emerged in a historical moment when ideas about atomic warfare, entropy, systems, ecology, and Marxism, as well as an anti-war movement fostered a rebellion in the New York art world. By the late 1970s, pluralism began to coalesce with activism. Morris's *Johnson Pit #30* (1979) was recognized formally as an earthwork connected to the first generation of large-scale land art. Yet the earthwork offered something more than an aesthetic experience. The sublime site-based work contained an environmental critique. Morris left four blackened stumps on the site to represent the forest that had been cleared away to make the gravel pit. Up to that point, earthworks were celebrated as formal, phenomenological engagements with landscape. With the King County Department of Public Works as a co-sponsor on the project and the Bureau of Mines also contributing funds the aestheticized artwork was shifting to the realm of useful but the issue was who were they useful for? In his address at the dedication of the artwork, Morris with a background in activism, highlighted his critique by questioning the role artists played in partnerships where they are commissioned to beautify destroyed landscapes.

Johnson Pit #30 demonstrates that by the end of the decade, landscape was no longer a tabula rasa for the second wave of site-based land art. As they wove their artworks into existing ecologies, women artists were at the forefront of a movement that began to question the politics of land use. At the beginning of a new decade, networks, sociability and the blurring of the boundaries between art and life took on increasing significance. Ultimately however, in direct contrast to the work of their

predecessors, it was the lack of visibility that was the germane feature that unites these projects—the success of the work rested on disappearance. Buchanan's *Marsh Ruin*, which she anticipated would eventually disappear into the surrounding environment, Johanson's ecological swamp sculpture, and *Beaumont's* reef ecosystem all resemble each other in the way they differ from earthworks made a decade earlier. The hubris of bulldozing up a landscape, the notion of the artist as genius, the desire for monumentality or a creative savior complex is lacking in the work. Rather the projects are defined by the desire to integrate art and biota.

Sitting alone in her hotel in Brunswick, Georgia, on one of the final days of the *Marsh Ruins* construction, Beverly Buchanan wrote a note to herself on a sheet of Holiday Inn stationary. Under the heading *ending*, she documented "Three is enough. They don't overwhelm the marsh. They are snuggly fitted into the grasses."[2]

[2] Beverly Buchanan, "Holiday Inn Buchanan Note to Self," n.d., Beverly Buchanan papers, 1912-2017, bulk 1970s-1990s. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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