

Presence and Absence: Reflective Art Practice on the Site

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Abstract: Michael Heizer's land arts and outdoor sculptures are not concerned with the context of the site in terms of site selection; the site is for him simply a suitable place to put his art. What role does the site play in his artistic practice and how does he interfere with it? This article aims to use case studies and the author's reflective art practice to explore the elements that are present and missing in Heizer's art scene. The emphasis of this article lies in the body's engagement with the conflicts on the site of art creation. The findings of this article reveal the unique experience of the artist and the viewer on the site, which is triggered by the contradictions between presence and absence. And, the author's art practice, confirms the reshaping effect of absence on the site.

Keywords: Site-specific Art, Physical Engagement, Art Practice, Reconstruction, Land Art, Installation

1. Introduction

The massive land art sculpture City finally opened in September 2022 after 50 years of construction. Its creator Michael Heizer related his preference for creating earthworks with his revolt against the gallery system and the commodification of art. He says, "One of the implications of earth art might be to remove completely the commodity-status of a work of art and to allow a return to the idea of art as.... more of a religion" [1]. This is also reflected in the siting of his works, although he creates site-specific art, the landscape or cultural meaning of the site is not his consideration. In City, he constructed much of the work inside the pit or below the horizon line, and those towering forms make the surroundings invisible when people walk through it. About the site of City, he says that "the author didn't come here for the context. The author came here for materials, for gravel and for sand and water, which you need to make concrete, and the land was a cheap desert, a flat and theatrical space. There is no landscape" [2]. The context of the site is never Heizer's aim the site, it is also true of his other works. Not like other land artists, He is little influenced by environmentalism and does not warn mankind of the necessity to protect the environment in his works, his construction of artworks could even destroy the original environment. He was indifferent to ecological questions. Paramount for him was the creation of "place" [3]. So, since neither the context nor the environment is important for Heizer in his artistic creation, then what does he draw from the site and how does he use the site? This article argues that Heizer's destruction of place is a form of exposure, exposing the invisible and then naturally creating conflict on the site. Contemporary technology allows him to create large-scale works, allowing him to move large objects, which makes his reshaping of space less restrictive.

Heizer's earliest works are paintings that obsessively examine the play of positive and negative which make an absence feel present. He exhibited these so-called "Negative Paintings" during his short enrollment at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1964, but left the school after one term and moved to New York [3]. His later land art and outdoor sculptures continue this play of positive and negative, with the use of negative space being common in his work. Double Negative and North, East, South, and West excavate downwards into the hollow, which is filled in again little by little as people visit and interpret it in various ways. It can be said that absence and presence together constitute his works, creating conflicts and contradictions on the site. And, the author practices a similar presence and absence in his artistic creations, where the controlled and uncontrolled, the planned and the accidental, the present and the missing things come together to form my work on the site. This essay is therefore not concerned with Heizer's large-scale land arts, but attempts to explore what is and is not present in his works and analyzes them in practice.

2. Sites in Heizer's Art Creation

2.1. From the Place

When land art emerged as a movement and land artists move away from art galleries to create works outdoors last century, Michael Heizer is no exception. His large outdoor sculptures and earthworks appear in natural spaces, making those sites still a common place to visit and research today. Heizer said, "part of my art is based on an awareness that we live in a nuclear era. We're probably living at the end of civilization" [3, 4]. This sense of the crisis of the end comes from the environment and circumstance in which he finds himself. The Cold War in those days made Heizer feel the threat of nuclear crisis and wants to house his works in "structures capable of surviving a possible nuclear apocalypse" [5]. As a result, his works are often large in scale and are not temporary installations or sculptures, but rather art that seeks to be preserved in that site for a long time. Also, from his father's archaeological practice, Heizer borrows methodologies and integrates them with artistic practice to create his narratives in the land. His earthworks use scientific and technological interventions and seek to recreate ancient relations to site and space. Ancient monumental constructions often carry the meaning and aim of rituals, but Heizer's works are his attempt to resonate with "contemporary attempts at totality and timelessness" [5]. Despite his knowledge of archaeological methodologies and the improvements in technology, Heizer has never been in a hurry to finish his works. His earthwork City, which has been under construction for half a century, will only be ready for visitors in the autumn of this year.

This monument-building approach to composition and production is quite common in Heizer's work. Land art understands the earth as a material object, controlling and transforming it, as does Heizer. However, his work does not come from a specific site, and his choice of location is not deliberate. Many writers write about the isolation and monumentality in Heizer's desert works and his adventurous' posturing in situating them in the wild, but Heizer claimed that he would have created Double Negative and City in New Jersey if suitable sites were available. His works, according to himself, allude only to art and not to their natural sites [6]. Therefore, the place of artworks for Heizer is not a meaningful site that may carry spirits or cultural understandings, but just a place that is suitable for his art.

From the place, Heizer doesn't ask for meaning; everything about his siting is only for his art, the place is purposeless or purely purposeful. His artworks are site-specific arts, arts of resistance to the placeless-ness, and commodification of art in the late 1960s. Site-specific art was initially a phenomenological or experiential understanding of the site, defined primarily as an agglomeration of the actual physical attributes of a particular location [7]. Heizer's Double Negative uses the place itself and the natural physical properties of the land to seek resistance in the ground. The site of his

work is an arrangement of elements that are already unique beings, and Heizer simply shows the order between them. Site-specific art usually works to trouble the opposition between the site and the artwork [8]. Heizer's works make people gaze at the site, and under the gaze, the site forms the landscape. This process, which both the artist and the viewer must engage with, weakens the opposition between place and artwork. At this time, the place is the work. So Heizer does not intentionally choose specific locations that make sense; as he says, his work can be placed elsewhere if the conditions are suitable. His work, augmented by his experience and technique, is itself creating a place.

2.2. The Scale and Landscape

Those outdoor sculptures and land arts created by Heizer are always large in scale, viewers walk through these works, and the size of the works is foremost visually striking to viewers. In the presence of Heizer's works, people can seem very small, however, he negates his discounting of the traditional measure of scale's relationship to the human form, and what he is interested in, is simply size itself [7]. However, William L. Fox, the Director of the Center for Art + Environment at the Nevada Museum of Art, has pointed out, this relationship is axiomatic because when experiencing a new landscape, viewers will immediately relate themselves to its scale, and change the land into a "landscape". No matter how Heizer considers the audience, the scale of his artworks can automatically be associated with the sense of "sublime". In Kant's aesthetics, "sublime" refers to the concept of the sublime and to the sense of sublime beauty. A history of esthetics states that the sense of the sublime begins with the impression of the grandeur of nature, but then turns to the recognition of the moral dignity of humans, which exceeds any quantity or force in nature [9]. As a source of the sublime, the grandeur of an artwork can give aesthetic pleasure to audiences and can also give rise to an a priori aesthetic rationality in the human mind, which can then lead to the recognition of human morality. When the audiences stand beneath the monolithic work *Levitated Mass* in the gallery or walk through Heizer's monumental sculptures in the wilderness, the large scale of natural materials evokes this feeling while giving people visual impact.

The scale changed the landscape, or even create a landscape on the site. All these changes were unintentionally caused by Heizer. All he is concerned with is the size itself, but it is the size itself that carries the impact. The large scale of his works disrupts the primitive environment of the site and redefines the site with newly created landscapes, and that is outside of Heizer's conscious consideration, all brought by size itself. As he says, "It is interesting to build a sculpture that attempts to create an atmosphere of awe...The immense, architecturally-sized sculpture creates both the object and the atmosphere. Awe is a state of mind equivalent to a religious experience" [3].

3. Disruption and Reconstruction

3.1. The Exposure in Double Negative

Although Double Negative has a reputation as a tourist destination, it doesn't like the famous works of Christo and Jeanne-Claud which are always temporary and invoke a celebratory atmosphere. Heizer's work is a longer intervention in the place, and the reflexivity in it is not meant to arise a momentary celebration; he does not seek a conspicuous, explosive impact. Unlike the momentary artworks with their explosive impact, Heizer's Double Negative is a slow exposure, but no less impactful than the former. The excavations in Double Negative have given a naturally beautiful site another aesthetic feature, although it's disruptive, it seems to have triumphed over what Barnett Newman called "the moral struggle between notions of beauty and the desire for sublimity" [10]. This disruption is also exposure, exposing more elements beneath the surface, and the viewers in the scene

are thus in the middle of this exposure. The experience here is itself reflexive, with the compulsion to force the viewer to confront what is being exposed.

The author made an artwork named Tail in 2022, which was a performance art combined with installations. These installations are made up of the old clothes of residents, and although they are not as large as Heizer's works, they are all above human beings, no matter whether viewing them indoors or outdoors, and both performers and viewers need to look up at them. Before making installations, those hundreds of used clothes collected from the residents were piled up like a mountain in a warehouse. At the site, they are dirt on the ground and earth of the land, because all of them come from local people at the site, and those local people are the most important element with consists of the site. Therefore, those used old clothes are not a bunch of fibers that look like hills, the process of making installations is to expose them as what they are. Christian Boltanski also consciously uses old clothes to tell stories of the past and his work is always related to memory and death. The mountains of old clothes represent in him people from the past, they are objects full of monumentality, as he says "You can hold onto the clothes, and even the heartbeats of many, many people, but you can't keep anybody" [11]. However, the author does not use these old clothes as intentionally as Boltanski does, and although they have many narratives from a variety of people as well, the author does not care about the stories behind the clothes. In her practice, the author simply shapes them as a whole object, borrowing images of towering columns, connected curtains, and ladders to deconstruction the old clothes.

Layers of clothes can be seen in my work as what is exposed beneath the surface after excavation. The yellowing clothes from the depths of the people's wardrobes are thus displayed to the public. And the author considers the work to be relentless, just as the author does not care what emotional significance those clothes have, the author does not care whether such exposure is ugly or beautiful, nor does the author care what emotions the piled-up clothes evoke in the viewer. Although the author is not excavate anything material, if clothes are the second skin of a person, the author is showing the skin that humans shed. And this skin, no longer shiny and smelling bad, is pressed underneath the box like a rock formation squeezed together and unattended.

When audiences look at those old clothes from the past, the past conflict with the present, yet the site is constant, this conflict is caused by time. Exposure is an act with a destructive quality, but Heizer's exposure is not a momentary art, what he inspires is a slow conflict that takes time.

3.2. Reconstruction in Disruption by Technology

Negative spaces are common in Heizer's works, whether it is Double Negative or North, East, South, or West, the downward excavation creates the missing space that makes up his work and disruption the site. The behavior of excavation also reconstructs the site which exposure elements in front of people, this process always comes along with reconstruction, which, in Heizer's case, is approached through technology. He admits that technology "multiplies the potential" of art by affording increased size and accelerated production, he recommends "use technology and its devices in ways dissimilar to the industrial techniques for which they were intended" [3]. Heizer's use of technology is reflected in the conflict between technology and primitive nature. Rather than trying to transform nature to benefit humans, as industrial design generally does, he disrupts and interferes with nature for the sake of art itself; his reconstructions are not in the service of humans.

Levitated Mass, which was created by Heizer in 2012, presents monumentality and displacement of site and space. The giant rock, which is placed above a viewing pathway that allows viewing from any aspect, lets nature come into the context of the gallery. About this work, Heizer said: "We live in a world that's technological and primordial simultaneously. The idea is to make art that reflects this premise". Here, Heizer is equating the geological forces that created the boulders with the contemporary industrial processes that lifted and moved them for artistic purposes [9]. And it is a

technology that allows him to have such force as powerful as a natural force to lift that giant rock. The artist Robert Florczyk criticizes this work, he compares Levitated Mass to Michelangelo's statue of David, claiming that by transforming the raw material of a rock into the beautiful figure of a masculine man, David is the more artistically brilliant art piece and therefore contains more transcendental truth [12]. David is an imitation of nature while Heizer never tried to mimic nature. Florczyk thinks that artwork is only valuable when it can convey truth, he thus denies the value of Levitated Mass in expressing truth. However, although Heizer's work does not imitate nature, he places nature in the site of the gallery, which makes his work able to explore truths that are invisible to mere imitation of nature. Such a reconstruction of a site without deliberate shaping with shapes, but simply by replacement, is more natural than the reshaping made by David.

The author also used artificial materials in the work Pary, and then place them in nature to make this man-made object disrupt the environment. The acrylic material the author used is transparent and it does not completely block the continuity of nature, but rather makes that small space jump out from nature. In the process of making this work, the author didn't try to imitate nature, nor replace it in the gallery of the exhibition, but rather recreate that small space. What is framed by the transparent acrylic is a space that does not belong with the site, a replacement of the object hanging in the gallery and the natural object. Also, the author does not aim to replace it, but the space is thus naturally exchanged in the work. Therefore, when looking back at Heizer's work, the reconstruction of space that comes from this exchange is not something that Heizer intended to achieve. By using contemporary technologies, he introduces nature into the gallery and places artificial objects into nature. This is not an imitation of nature, but the resulting conflict is presented in the viewer's reflection, then makes the reconstruction continually happen.

4. What is on the Site? What is Not?

The pioneer of land art Robert Smithson suggested that artists must come out of the isolation of galleries and museums and provide a concrete consciousness of the present as it exists, and not simply present abstractions or utopias [13]. In the creation of art, the materiality and reality contained in present cannot be ignored. When an artwork comes out from the gallery outdoors, the site where it is situated has become a part of this art. The present face in the art creating process is the site, the site which contains conflicts and contradictions. In Heizer's works, what can be read is not only what exists, but also those missing objects and spaces.

4.1. The Conflict in the Physical Engagement on the Site

Large-scale land artworks often need photography to show the full extent of the work, but for Heizer, photographic documentation of his works is only for documentation, it could never supplant the importance of direct physical engagement and this is why he tries to prevent any further aerial views of Double Negative [5]. It is a sculpture comprised of negative space which can only be experienced physically, it displaced the earth through removal and is gradually filling it back. The place that is taken and created can only be discovered by viewers' physical engagement, which the author suggests, can be seen as a connection between the site and the body. As Deleuze argues, rather than mind on one side and body on the other, the matter is already sense-making [14]. Heizer places such an emphasis on physical experience, perhaps it is because he believes that the meaning created by exposed matter and missing space is perceived by the body.

In the process of performing in the installation of Tail, the author sees herself as an experiencer, connecting with the installation through her body. The body, or physical connection, is always an indispensable thing in art practice no matter whether the artwork is large-scale or small-scale, temporary or permanent. During the performance, the conflict between the body and the installation

is occasional, and even if the author has a general plan in advance, the naturally occurring conflicts that come with randomness are inevitable. In this process, the installations are not a simple collection of old clothes, they stand abruptly as a whole in that site, and at the same time disrupt the site itself, creating obstacles to the movement of the human body and placing restrictions on the performance, which the author tries to deliberately control. But whether these conflicts and disruptions bring meaning, what meaning they bring to the site, and what connection they make with the audience, is beyond my control. The author thinks Heizer is also looking for something that arises randomly in this control and non-control, perhaps not intentionally, but when something is missing, something fills in, and when something is controlled, something loses control. When we look at artworks in time, the negative space formed by the excavated earth is gradually filled in, and what is controlled gradually loses its control, none of the artists can interfere with this process, they happen naturally. Matter, exists or missing, is sense-making, just like bodies.

Body engagement creates conflicts on the site, this is not limited to performance art that requires the direct involvement of the human body, the entire process of creating an artwork requires the body's engagement. The human body takes some space away from the site, which is consciously controlled in the process of creation, but that missing space is then filled by uncontrollable contingency. Both the negative space created by excavating earth and the installation that creates a relationship with the human body are, for those sites where the creation takes place, contradictions between the controllable and the uncontrollable.

4.2. Presence and Absence

The site can be deconstructed in the process of artistic creation into things that are present and absent things, those that are seemingly missing are also able to constitute the site. This could be seen in Heizer's North, East, South, and West, the massive sculpture of four deep depressions. The work is not defined by constructed form, but by the lack of matter; the steel plates are outlines of extracted mass, like the holes left behind after an archeological excavation [15]. The deep voids disconcert people and give the viewer a sense of crisis, which is caused by something that is missing. Likewise, the Double negative also creates the absence of ground space, the missing objects are filled in by the viewer's visit. Rosalind Krauss thinks that Double Negative is a phenomenological experience because the viewer physically enters the work [16]. And The long journey to visit this work is part of the experience. This work in the wilderness is not easy to find, so the viewer needs to explore it with a little care. This exploration is a unique experience and when the viewer finally finds it and enters into it, as Giles Tiberghien suggests, the massive size of the work obliterates an understanding of the scale and location of the landscape by restricting the viewer's view of the horizon [17]. The viewer's physical experience of visiting is enhanced by the visual limitations and the temporary lack of a sense of size. It is the absence that makes those unique experiences happen. Thus, there is a contradiction between presence and absence in Heizer's works. He attempts to make his artworks exist for a long time, but what is not existing in his works is creating an experience and reconstructing the site.

The author has explored this contradiction of presence and absence in the site with light and shadow. Installation "3" is a projection of an image onto a triangular clay entity in a completely dark space, which is then expanded by the use of mirrors. The only visible triangle in the dark space is the only presence, but it looks like a hole that has been hollowed out of the darkness, and the contrast between light and dark makes the triangle more like a missing space. The dark space temporarily deprives the viewer of his or her vision, but the lighting triangle with the image makes up for it. At the same time, the space presented in the mirror is a virtual space that does not exist, it appears to be an extension, but is a reminder of the absence. Heizer creates contradictions by reshaping space with tangible matter, but the author thinks that without major construction, light and shadow can still reconstruct the space and give viewers a different experience. However, the author does not dig a

triangular hole in a dark space for the viewer's unique experience. The light of the image illuminates the darkness while at the same time being eroded by it, they are mutually contradictory. Wherever the site of the artwork is, it is the conflict in the artwork that reconstructs that place, a conflict that brings reflection on the pull of presence and absence.

5. Conclusion

About land art, Antonia Rigaud suggests that "These works challenge each viewer individually by making him go through a ritualistic experience of the land. Viewers are made to experience physical or cognitive disorientation, which transforms them into explorers of the land, navigating between orientation and disorientation. Our experience of the works is no longer based on knowledge but on finding". Heizer's artworks are works that waiting to be discovered by viewers, not just the journey to visit them, but the experience of visiting them is also discovery, and this discovery is based on time. Rather than being bound by the cultural meaning of the site, he chooses the suitable site to create his work, using contemporary technology to expose that which is unseen. This exposure takes time, and like the viewer's process of discovery, the work itself is always in the process of discovery, and it is in this process that the reconstruction of sites takes place. In Heizer's works, those things that are missing are slowly discovered, and absence and presence form a conflict in that site. They appear natural, not as a product of the artist's planning, and their accidental and uncontrollable nature of them can create a contradiction. And here the conflicts and contradictions require physical engagement the feeling of physical experience cannot be replaced by photography. Although the monumentality of Heizer's work is often referred to, he stresses that his works are contemporary, they cannot be embedded with ceremonial or spiritual qualities. The missing space and matter, the contradictions, and the conflicts in his works are perhaps a reflection of the current human disquiet. The emptiness that floats in the site of the work does not impose any will on the viewer, but in such absence, people cannot help but look for something to fill, and the author thinks this is where the reflection in the creation of the work lies. Here the creation of the work does not end when the construction is done, but takes a long time and is ongoing in the process of discovery. The reflection on the current times is implicit in the conflict between presence and absence so that the absence is also part of the artwork when the artistic practice is carried out on a site. The unique experience and impact given are not directly related to the size of the work; size is only one element of the artwork; they are related to the conflict perceived by the body.

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