

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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### The Long Fight for Michael Heizer's "City"

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*Michael Govan (left) and Michael Heizer on opening day of "Levitated Mass" at LACMA.  
(Photo by Stefanie Keenan)*

"To remove the work," the artist Richard Serra famously quipped in a 1984 letter to the bureaucrats who commissioned his then-embattled "Tilted Arc" in New York's Federal Plaza, "is to destroy the work." For Serra and others whose art responds to site, the integrity of the work's environment is vital. But as site expands beyond the narrow confines of the city, as in much of the land art that emerged in the 1960s and '70s, blocks dissolve into landscape, pedestrians to pipelines, and property lines alone become insufficient boundaries for preserving an overall artistic vision. With the passage of time, this sets up an inevitable collision between the expansive claims of certain works of land art, no matter how remote, and the human laws and conditions that govern their existence in the world. This has meant, for example, the decades of patient viewshed acquisitions carried out by the Dia Art Foundation in stockpiling parcels of ranchland surrounding Walter de Maria's "Lightning Field" in Western New Mexico, or the intricate leasehold negotiations that ensured the unmolested survival of Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty" on the shore of Utah's Great Salt Lake.

Today, Michael Heizer's "City" in Nevada is the most daunting of these pale elephants, the complexity of the challenges it faces matched by the unprecedented monumentality of its concrete, bunker-like sculptures. Two pending pieces of legislation — a bill introduced in January by the Democratic Senator Harry Reid and its double, introduced in February in the House of Representatives — and a petition drive undertaken by a conservation nonprofit are

working to protect Garden Valley's 800,000 acres of federal land surrounding the complex by "withdrawing" them from possible mining, mineral, or geothermal exploitation with an urgency that belies the many challenges "City" has weathered in the decades since Heizer broke ground. Begun in 1972 on a plot of land purchased with support from dealer and land art patron Virginia Dwan, Heizer, who lives on a private plot nearby, has continued to develop the site — with a break for medical issues in the mid-1990s — supported by the Lannan, Brown, and Dia Art Foundations, among others.

Lobbying and conservation efforts surrounding "City" have been ongoing since the late 1990s, says Michael Govan, a leading advocate for the earthwork and the director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). Previously the head of the Dia Art Foundation, Govan is no stranger to the intricate wrangling that comes with preserving land art, and his long-term dedication to Heizer's project was apparent in a wide-ranging telephone conversation with ARTINFO last month. "I've been going to the West for decades, and [Garden and neighboring Coal Valley] are absolutely extraordinary landscapes in the American West, they are among the most pristine examples of basin and range you can find," he said.

Beginning with regular visits to Washington in 1997 and 1998, when Govan held information sessions for legislators and other officials who may be in a position to advocate for Heizer's project — which is surrounded by federally-controlled land held by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) — the process of protecting "City" has included visits to the work-in-progress from various state and national legislators and officials, including a trip by Nevada Senator Harry Reid himself in the mid-aughts. (Reid's office did not respond to multiple requests from ARTINFO to confirm the date of his visit and clarify the impetus for introducing the Senate bill to withdraw mining rights to Garden Valley.)

"The nicest thing about this project is you bring people into it at whatever level, as soon as they get to know it they fall in love with it, and people have supported it. The first visits were out of obligation — representatives' staff, BLM, and Reid's staff — and once they see it they fall in love and become very protective of it," Govan said. Between 2011 and 2012, lobbying records reviewed by ARTINFO indicate, the Triple Aught Foundation formed by Heizer and his supporters to own and manage "City" retained Cassidy & Associates, a Washington firm with ties to Reid's office, paying \$50,000 for work related to protecting Garden Valley against the impending possibility of solar energy development in the area. Govan, who sits on the board of Triple Aught, described the expenditure as a response to an "urgent" threat that came up as the Obama administration pushed solar development nationwide; a 2012 disclosure filing by Cassidy & Associates broadly states that the lobbying relationship pertained to "mining, solar grazing and land tenure issues — no specific legislation."

A lobbyist with close knowledge of the efforts to protect "City," who would speak to ARTINFO only on background, confirmed that further lobbying efforts were undertaken *pro bono* on behalf of Triple Aught. The same source also displayed a deep interest in the project, one borne out of visits to the site and a personal fascination with Heizer's work, and enumerated the series of threats that confronted the Garden Valley area, from the MX missile railroad and silo network planned by President Jimmy Carter and nixed by Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s, to a proposed water pipeline scrapped in 2005 and yet another railroad project that emerged that same

year, also abandoned. (The 2005 railroad issue drew a resolution of support for Heizer from the College Art Association.)

After weathering these successive threats, however, the mining question remains unresolved for “City,” and its lingering uncertainty creates a problem for the institutional management of the nearly-completed artwork. “The idea was at the time that the sculpture was finished, Triple Aught — which was organized to manage, own land, protect the sculpture, create the sculpture — that it would work with institutions, not outside of institutions, because Dia and LACMA were very involved, that once it was finished we would develop a new ownership structure,” Govan said. “Today I cannot tell you what the ownership structure will be exactly, and part of it is the question of land protection,” he added, explaining that LACMA would make sense as a steward of the site only if it knew the land was protected — “LACMA is not big enough to be buying ranches in Nevada.”

That the protection of Garden Valley from mining is crucial to the future of “City” is further underscored by the political full-court-press that has emerged in the recent months, with two bills — the Garden Valley Withdrawal Act (S. 196), introduced by Reid on January 20 and referred to the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, and the identical H.R. 857, introduced by Democratic Representative Dina Titus on February 10, which made it to the House Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources last week. Both of these seem destined to follow in the footsteps of an earlier iteration of S. 196, S. 2820, introduced by Reid last year and expired in committee, with the government transparency website Govtrack estimating the chances of the active bills getting past committee at 15 percent and of being enacted at 5 percent. (These odds are slightly better than average: 15 percent of bills made it past committee and 3 percent were enacted between 2013 and 2015, according to analysis by Govtrack.) A private petition initiative called “Protect Basin and Range,” undertaken by the Conservation Lands Foundation, was announced last month and widely covered in the art press, and has drawn signatures from a number of museums and individuals with the goal of “urg[ing] Congress and the Administration to take whatever steps necessary” to protect the Garden and Coal Valleys. A February gathering to promote “Protect Basin and Range” was hosted in Nevada by Reid and Titus, and drew 300 members of the public to share their support for the effort with Deputy Secretary of the Interior Mike Connor and Bureau of Land Management Director Neil Kornze.

Meanwhile, the organizational fate of Heizer’s “City” hangs in the balance. “The idea is to solve the land protection first and then you have a lot of options for how to manage the long term of the project and whether to have it managed by an institution or multiple institutions,” Govan said. “We could beef up Triple Aught, which is an option, but I’m not sure it’s the best one in the long term.” It’s a delicate proposition, with the media-shy Heizer having told New York Times reporter Michael Kimmelman in 2005 that he would “dynamite” the work if its natural environment was compromised. Govan sees the artist’s fervor in a different light, however. “That’s a strong statement by an artist feeling some frustration about the need to recognize and protect art. I think you have to take that in context.... [Heizer] always said to me, ‘I’ll return it to desert,’ and everyone wants to interpret that in a really aggressive way but I think that it’s a really generous and thoughtful approach, because [“City”] had to be coherent and whole and integrated with the place, and he respects that place so much.”