

GAGOSIAN GALLERY
ART DESK



EARTH MAN

[illegible]

Nearing those Cor-Ten-clad depths was a breathtaking experience; they shone alluringly, as if daring you to approach. And back then, before the museum opened, you actually could. By lying on your stomach and carefully inching toward the edge, you could see into the voids, which turned out to be a cube that led into a second, darker cube; a pointed cone; a steeply angled wedge; and an inverted cone whose depths suggested an abyss. The experience was so terrifying and awe-inspiring that it completely dwarfed the Dan Flavin fluorescent-bulb works, Fred Sandback string installations, and Lawrence Weiner text pieces that hung nearby.

MICHAEL HEIZER, *preliminary sketch for Levitated Mass* (2011)
Courtesy of the artist

“SIZE IS REAL, SCALE IS IMAGINED SIZE.”



This piece, still on view at Dia—and now rendered crowd-safe with a Plexiglas barricade—is a variation on Heizer’s first earthwork, *North, East, South, West*, for which he built a model in 1967. He constructed a small partial version of it later that year, digging North and South into a plateau in the Sierra Nevada and lining their sides with wood and steel. Not until 2003 was Heizer finally able to realize the piece in its entirety, fulfilling a vision he’d held for thirty-six years.

Today this work is acknowledged to have had an enormous ripple effect on American art and culture, prefiguring negative-space monuments like Maya Lin’s 1982 Vietnam Veterans Memorial and Michael Arad’s design for the fountains at the National September 11 Memorial & Museum in New York. By 2003, however, Heizer had become a somewhat mysterious and legendary figure who’d been out of the limelight for decades.

But it wasn’t always that way: In the late 1960s throughout the 1970s, when he, Walter De Maria, and a handful of others were pioneering land art—sculpture made, literally, on and from the land—Heizer was a major star. Art magazines and more mainstream press outlets routinely covered his work, like *Five Conic Displacements* (1969), five cone-shaped holes, made by removing 150 tons of earth from Coyote Dry Lake, California,

which later filled up with rainwater, creating five transparent masses and *Double Negative* (1969), two parallel fifty-foot-deep rectilinear trenches cut into facing cliffs on a Nevada mesa. The latter sculpture, created by the displacement of 240,000 tons of sandstone and rhyolite, occupies a space longer than the Empire State Building is tall.

By the mid-1980s, Heizer had retreated to the Nevada desert to focus on an even more massive undertaking, *City*, a sculpture one and a quarter miles long and a quarter-mile wide, which he began in 1972. Roughly the size of the National Mall, it was projected to be the largest artwork ever made. And as Heizer struggled to complete it—and also to surmount polyneuropathy, a nerve disease that rendered him partly paralyzed in the 1990s—he gradually receded from view.

But since that 2003 Dia:Beacon installation, Heizer, now seventy and living in Hiko, Nevada, has been steadfastly thundering back. In 2012, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art presented his *Levitated Mass*, a 340-ton granite megalith that appears to float over a 456-foot-long concrete-lined channel hewed into the ground behind the museum, which he’d first conceived in 1969. Its execution involved more than four years of fund-raising, engineering studies, plus reams of legal red tape, culminating in the rock’s removal from California’s



All Eyes on the Desert

by CAROL KINO

Jurupa Mountains and its painstaking 105-mile, ten-day journey to downtown Los Angeles. Its procession snowballed into a giant social spectacle. “The rock became a rock star,” says filmmaker Doug Pray, whose 2014 documentary, also titled *Levitated Mass*, chronicled the work’s making.

In addition, Heizer’s first major gallery show in twenty-three years opened in May at New York’s Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea, revealing new sculptures and early paintings to an audience that, if it knows Heizer’s work at all, has mostly seen it in reproduction.

Even more amazingly, City itself, after forty-three years of stops, starts, and reversals, is finally nearing completion. This year, Senator Harry Reid of Nevada introduced a bill that aims to protect the work in perpetuity, shielding it from potential mining, nuclear, and real estate development by designating the 805,100-acre valley around it as a national conservation area. It will soon open to the public.

Soon, that is, if you’re counting by Heizer time, which likely means several years. “I would call it a speck of time in relation to how long he’s been working on it,” says Michael Govan, the CEO and director of LACMA, who has been instrumental in raising the funding needed to help Heizer accomplish some of his *grands projets*. Govan has worked closely with the artist since 1995, one year after he became the president and director of Dia, the position he held before moving to LACMA in 2006. And when you consider that City “is intended to last for thousands of years,” adds Govan, who often functions as Heizer’s spokesman, too, “we are talking about a very minor slice of time.”



Heizer’s City isn’t the only artwork to suddenly draw attention to work made with the earth. James Turrell’s Roden Crater, also begun in 1972, is nearing completion, too. Working at an extinct volcano near Arizona’s Painted Desert, the venerable light-and-space artist is transforming it into a grand, multi-tunneled version of one of his open-air Skyspace observatories. Now expected to open over the next decade, Roden Crater has long been one of the hottest—and hardest to get to—art tickets around, with access limited to those who contribute funding. A May fund-raising event, which would have admitted up to eighty donors for \$5,000 each, was canceled due to overwhelming demand and a desire for increased safety. LACMA director Michael Govan has also been working doggedly with Turrell to realize the project.

Other projects are shifting attention to the desert, too. In 2014, Richard Serra installed four steel plates in a nature preserve in Qatar. Called East-West/West-East, it spans over a kilometer, covering the greatest area of any previous Serra work. LACMA’s big summer show, Noah Purifoy: *Junk Dada* (through September 27), is a retrospective for an African-American sculptor who spent the last fifteen years of his life creating found-object assemblages in Joshua Tree, a California desert town two hours from Los Angeles that’s home to his ten-acre magnum opus, the Noah Purifoy Outdoor Desert Art Museum.

In 2016, the Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone will install a new public sculpture along Interstate 15 near Las Vegas: called “Seven Magic Mountains,” it comprises seven totems made of artificial stones painted in Day-Glo colors.

Marc Glimcher, the president of Pace Gallery, which represents Turrell,

attributes the attention to a growing interest in “abstraction that concerns itself with existential issues of the universe and human experience.” William Fox, who directs the Center for Art + Environment at the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno, believes the fascination also has to do with size. “It’s difficult to do big things anymore,” he says.

Fox also notes that the work is easier to access than it used to be: when Heizer set stake in Garden Valley, a visit from Las Vegas required an eight-hour drive; now you can get to it in three. Yet it’s still remote enough to be alluring. And some artists like Heizer and Turrell, actively try to keep the public out by leaving the location vague, fencing in the property, and patrolling its borders. “People are really attracted to that,” Fox says. “And as more people read things like you’re going to write, it produces great desire to go and see them.”

Heizer first made his mark on the art world in 1966, the year he moved to New York, showing an abstract painting made on a shaped canvas in a group exhibition at Park Place Gallery, an influential SoHo artists' cooperative. His paintings were often as much as eighteen inches deep, and he was soon making sculpture, too. In 1968, for the Whitney Museum of American Art Sculpture Annual—a forerunner exhibition to today's biennial—he dug a hole in the museum's sculpture court, lined it with metal, and filled it up with earth.

Concurrently, Heizer was working out his early ideas for negative sculpture—an artwork whose presence would be defined by the absence of material, achieved by digging, sandblasting, and excavation, and the volumes those absences implied. The aim, he later told *The New York Times*, was “to create without creating a thing.” In 1967, prompted by intense conversations with the somewhat older De Maria, whom he'd met while spray-painting artists' lofts, Heizer had traveled west to work on *North, East, South, West*.

The same year as his Whitney exhibition, in 1968, Heizer and De Maria headed for California's Mojave Desert, where Heizer began his Mojave Projects, a group of ephemeral sculptures, paintings, and drawings made on dry lake beds, achieved by digging holes that would be filled with rain, tracing lines with pigmented powder, and using a motorcycle to create tracks. Meanwhile, De Maria, working with lime powder and a wheeled football-field line marker, created his 1968 *Mile Long Drawing*: two parallel lines laid straight across the desert. Heizer, writing in *ArtForum* after his friend's death in 2013, called it “one of the greatest and most humble artworks to have ever been made.”

Other artists, including Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt, Dennis Oppenheim, and Britain's Richard Long began making earthworks around the same time, fueled by the urge to move beyond painting and sculpture while breaking free of architectural and commercial constraints. For many, however, Heizer and De Maria stand as the form's true progenitors. “I always describe Mike and Walter as being like Picasso and Braque inventing Cubism,” says Govan.

Yet unlike De Maria, who lived in New York until his death, Heizer never really came back. He maintained a studio in the city for years, but drawn by the lure of his own City—built in Garden Valley, Nevada, on land acquired for him by the art dealer Virginia Dwan—he eventually moved there full-time. (Dwan also procured the site for Heizer's *Double Negative*, now in the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.)

To those who know Heizer, his move west seems unsurprising, because for him it's home. Born in Berkeley, California, in 1944, he comes from a line of geologists and mining engineers, and his father, a professor of anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, was an authority on the stone-moving methods of pre-Columbian peoples like the Olmec. As a boy, Heizer spent time on archaeological sites in California and Nevada, and traveled throughout Latin America with his parents. (Later, he also accompanied his father on an expedition to Egypt.) So he returned to the desert, bent on creating uniquely American monuments, “it's not like he went to some strange place,” Govan says. “He's from there.”

Heizer took the forms he saw on those travels, including pyramids, ball courts, plazas, tombs, colossi, and burial mounds, as inspiration. Within the first few years of his career, he was making work that seemed to cycle through all the formal possibilities that this new sort of sculpture could explore. “I was interested in massive objects as well as the absence of objects,” he said in 1984.

In 1969, in Silver Springs, Nevada, he built the first of two *Displaced/Replaced Mass* sculptures, consisting of three granite blocks dropped inside three concrete-lined excavations. (By then he had the financial backing from dealers and collectors to use heavy earth-moving equipment.) For *Dragged Mass*, a 1971 installation in front of the Detroit Institute of Arts, he had two tractors drag a block of granite back and forth across the front lawn, creating the “ultimate Abstract Expressionist gesture,” as Govan says in *Levitated Mass*. In 1976, for a public commission for the city of Seattle, Heizer created *Adjacent, Against, Upon*: three slabs of granite paired with three concrete plinths in the relationships suggested by the work's title.

Although Heizer is renowned for being a man of few words, there's a lengthy interview with him in the catalogue for his 1984 retrospective at MoCA Los Angeles, *Sculpture in Reverse*, and it reads like a master class in sculpture. Talking with the show's curator, Julia Brown, Heizer discusses the difference between “object sculpture” (transportable, like Michelangelo's *Moses*) and “environmental sculpture” (inextricable from its environment, like Gutzon Borglum's *Mount Rushmore*, which he calls “a terrific work of art” and “the least understood major sculpture in the world”). Heizer explains his interest in sculpting with earth (“the original source material”); the impact of using modern building methods (an earth piece can be “very modern if made with modern tools”); and the difference between size and scale (“size is real, scale is imagined size”).



**“I WAS INTERESTED IN
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Michael Heizer's 2015 exhibition at Gagosian Gallery, his first show in twenty-three years, comprises monumental steel works, early paintings, and negative wall sculptures.

MICHAEL HEIZER, *Altar 3* (2015), weathering steel, coated with polyurethane (62.5 x 360 x 379.5 in.)

photograph by ROBERT MCKEEVER

Heizer also speaks fervently of his desire to “be a contributor to the development of American art.” In the late 1960s, as bigger planes were built and new telephone switching devices routed even local calls back and forth across the continent, “Things were being done that felt uniquely American,” he says. “A lot of them had to do with size.” And he defines a work of art as “simply something you have never seen before.”

That has clearly been Heizer’s aim with *City*. The sculpture consists of many different areas and forms: some are rectangular and quasi-pyramidal; others suggest ancient burial mounds; and a couple resemble discrete—if not gargantuan—sculptures themselves. *City* was built primarily with soil, sand, and rock excavated from the site, and those who have visited say you don’t notice *City* as you approach—and, when you finally do, it appears to have risen from the earth. As you walk up and down slopes to emerge near the form known as *Complex I*, its rectilinear face seems to break up, revealing a trapezoidal shape akin to an ancient Egyptian mastaba. And once you step inside, the surrounding valley and mountain ranges seem to disappear.

“When you are in the *City*, you lose sight of the landscape,” says art historian Ruth Fine, who has visited several times, most recently to write a catalog essay for the Gagosian show. “You’re not aware of the outer world at all.”

“It’s like being in an ancient Egyptian plaza or Mayan-like ruins,” says Pray, who also visited while making his film. “It’s so much of the place, and yet it’s transformed the place completely.” (Others have suggested *City*’s abstracted elements recall more modern structures, too, like billboards, industrial buildings, and nuclear-blast shields.)

Even the pilgrimage itself, currently about a three-hour drive from Las Vegas, is “a commitment and a challenge, which is part of the beauty of it,” says Charles Wright, *Dia*’s director from 1984 to 1994. He first saw it as a teenager in the late 1970s, back before the road had been built, with his mother, Virginia Wright, the Seattle patron who funded the city’s acquisition of *Adjacent, Against, Upon*.

“It was an awe-inspiring experience,” Wright says. “The ambition of it, the all-in commitment to a project in the middle of nowhere. All of that was life changing, just to see what it meant for an artist to be all-in, no compromise. Bold, bold, bold, to the point of self-sacrifice.”

Yet Heizer, focused intently on completing his masterwork—and keeping unwanted visitors out—has almost always refused to comment. “He just doesn’t see the need to speak for the art,” Govan says. “The art speaks for itself.”