

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Interview

Michael Heizer

Heiner Friedrich



Nine Nevada Depressions: Isolated Mass/Circumflex, 1968. Removal of Six Tons of Earth, 1,198 × 13 × 1', Massacre Dry Lake, NV. Photo: Courtesy of the Artist and Gagosian Gallery. © Michael Heizer/Triple Aught Foundation.

“This work has no measurements, as its limits are infinite.” So reads the exhibition notice for Michael Heizer’s 1969 earthwork at Galerie Heiner Friedrich in Munich. In the notice, the piece is referred to as Vague Depression, but it would live on in images and notoriety as Munich Depression. It is one of the great 20th century works of art you’ve never seen, and it was developed and constructed—dug, really, over the course of about a week—in a plot outside of the city center that was slated for residential construction during Germany’s postwar development boom. It was also an extraordinary moment in Heizer’s career. The then 24-year-old, California-born artist had already begun to generate sculptures on, in, and of the land—displacing the dirt, cutting into it, creating highly formalist and yet highly material-centric negations—in the Nevada and California deserts. Just as interestingly, Munich Depression narrowly precedes Heizer’s most iconic land piece, Double Negative (1969-70), a two-part trench cut into the Virgin River Mesa outside of Overton, Nevada. Heizer is considered a master of the American West, the closest figure the art world has to a radical libertarian who thinks in

gestures the size of highways and in weight that requires forklifts. Another iconic piece, *City*, which is an enormous multi-structured monument (perhaps the biggest contemporary sculpture on Earth) that rivals the Great Serpent Mound, is an ongoing project that began in the early 1970s and now extends over a mile in length through the Nevada desert.

Munich Depression, however, is a work produced in Europe (and it would be a mistake not to consider the symbolism behind an American digging a ditch in a West German capital less than two decades after the bombed-out city was released from U.S. occupation). With the vital help of his friend and enduring supporter, the great gallerist, collector, and curator Heiner Friedrich, Heizer excavated a hole in the ground measuring 100 feet in diameter and 16 feet deep. Visitors could descend into the hole and stare up—which is where the real magic began. The soft edges created a floating 360-degree horizon line that played optical tricks with the viewer's sense of scale, space, orientation, and the relationship of land, sky, and self. It was, from reports, religious in its psychogeology. *Munich Depression* only lasted about a month, but Heizer took photographs from inside the hole and, upon return to New York, co-designed his own projector, where he utilized the Munich photos for a piece called *Actual Size: Munich Rotary*. The black-and-white photographs beamed from six glass slides through six projectors create an exact life-size reproduction of the depression and its horizon line. It is this 1970 projection work that is being displayed this spring at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art. While the Whitney is the perfect institution to celebrate Heizer, previously it was unable to exhibit *Munich Rotary* because it lacked the necessary space to project the slides at life-size. Now at its new downtown home the museum will finally get to showcase the mysterious work that has been in its collection for 20 years.

This past February, Heizer, who lives in both Garden Valley, Nevada, and Manhattan, sat down with his old friend and collaborator Friedrich (whose numerous achievements include cofounding the Dia Art Foundation in 1974) to discuss the ins and outs and ups and downs of digging a gigantic hole on the outskirts of Munich and how they were flying on belief, adrenaline, and instinct at a time when there wasn't much support for works that might have seemed to an outsider like construction for construction's sake. But occasionally a bulldozer is needed to make a masterpiece. Also at the table were the Whitney's Donna De Salvo, the deputy director for international initiatives and senior curator, and Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, the Melva Bucksbaum associate director for conservation and research, who worked to bring *Munich Rotary* back to public view and helped to steer the conversation. The year 1969 was and wasn't a long time ago. —*Christopher Bollen*

HEINER FRIEDRICH: We first met in New York. But I also met you in Nevada where we were looking into many different sites. We were interested in having an artistic presence there.

MICHAEL HEIZER: That was '69. We did *Munich Depression* first, before I did *Double Negative* in Nevada.

FRIEDRICH: Yes, because that year you were invited to come to Munich to do an exhibit at my gallery. Most of our exhibitions were commissions by artists.

HEIZER: But we had done a lot of stuff together prior to that. I built you at least three works in the Mojave Desert in California. Together we built them—you were the art dealer and had some money, and we worked together.

FRIEDRICH: “Art dealer” is not a good word for what I did. I mean, that was way beyond “art dealer.” I was highly interested in your work and invited you to come to Munich to do a presentation in the gallery. You came probably a week before you decided you wanted to do the Munich Depression. At that time, I knew mostly of your work in the desert. Because it was an artist commission, there was no saying, “Do this,” or “Do that.” It was completely free for the artists to decide what to manifest. And we did these commissions with other artists around that time, too—Walter De Maria, Blinky Palermo, Cy Twombly, Andy Warhol.

DONNA DE SALVO: Michael, what was your first foray into the desert?

HEIZER: Well, I was born in California, but I was raised a lot in Nevada. I didn’t necessarily build stuff where I was running around as a kid, but I did to some extent. And I did a lot of stuff in the Mojave out of L.A. because L.A. was—

FRIEDRICH: Close.

HEIZER: Well, it was convenient to New York. By then a friend of mine lived out there, so he helped me build this stuff up in the high desert. It wasn’t like I went there because it was a theatrical backdrop; it was the part of the world I was from.

FRIEDRICH: You liked that world out there.

HEIZER: You and I did our first stuff together in the middle of the Mojave. We did a bunch of stuff. And with your help, we got the first equipment out there. You enabled some serious, heavy equipment to get hauled out. We had no permission from the federal government to do this on public lands. These were playas, dry lakes. But we just did it. We just got them built. We did a couple of really good ones, like the Five Conic Displacements [1969, a series of shallow round pits in Coyote Dry Lake, in the Mojave]. It preceded the Munich Depression. You have five circular holes but way smaller.

FRIEDRICH: The experience we shared working on the Munich Depression has never left me. It is present to this very moment. Nowhere in Europe can you see this total horizon, the sky ...

HEIZER: It was an artwork that wasn’t about art. It was about serious optical properties of the deprivation of vision, the erasure of landscape and all objects, and forcing your brain to turn your eyeball brain on. And I did optical studies—irregular optical retinal studies we did there. This is a serious artwork. It was weird.

FRIEDRICH: It was amazing.

CAROL MANCUSI-UNGARO: Did you actually go out looking for the land? You knew what you wanted, or did you just walk around?

FRIEDRICH: We had contacted this architect in Munich, and he had this property on the outskirts of the city that was being prepared for construction. It was completely flat. About two months after we dug through the ground there, they did erect the buildings. In the ‘60s in Germany, everything was up and down, up and down. But my greatest pain was having commissioned works and then letting them disappear. Now the site is a compound of buildings.

HEIZER: Munich was just growing.

FRIEDRICH: But the ground there is actually so good.

HEIZER: In Munich, you're looking at the Alps, and all that rock was ground and dragged down into the valley floor in the last Ice Age and filled up full of beautiful washed rock, granitic, good, hard rock—not soft, sedimentary stuff. It's ground-up mountains, good, clean. The ground was beautiful. No clay at all, just pure washed rock. The tactile aspect of that artwork was really, really nice.

DE SALVO: I'm just curious about the whole operation of digging.

FRIEDRICH: We were very experienced. [*laughs*] For instance, just before this, in the winter of '68, I went with Walter De Maria to Algeria. We got to the Sahara Desert to build the first part of the Three Continent Project [not completed; besides the mile-long North-South cut in the Sahara, the project was to have included a one-mile square in the United States and a mile-long East-West cut in India; aerial photographs of the three, superimposed, would form a cross with a square in the center]. Algeria had recently gained independence, and they requested that we not go into the desert. So we did it secretly and hired airplanes and a loader and all of this stuff. We landed in prison! They thought we were looking for oil and digging something out of the ground, which belongs to Algeria and not to us. And then we were sent out of the country. So we were very experienced in how these things worked. And it was very difficult to manifest these works of art publicly, because there was no support from museums and institutions back then.

DE SALVO: Did you have permits for the project in Munich?

FRIEDRICH: The architect was on our side. The city council said yes. It was temporary.

HEIZER: I think it only took a few days to dig.

FRIEDRICH: And there was nothing in the gallery except for a little table in the hallway with a notice on it. People would come in, go to the table to pick up the information, and then leave to see the work of art.

HEIZER: You're forgetting something. On the front door of your gallery was a sign taped up that read "Galerie Heiner Friedrich," and I scribbled it out with black marker.

DE SALVO: What was the public's response to the work?

FRIEDRICH: The response was exactly the same as happens today when a person witnesses a work of art revealing its presence. It's ecstatic. It was intensely visited, but sadly, it was only there for about one month.

MANCUSI-UNGARO: And you had the idea that you wanted to go inside and photograph it. Did you have a panoramic camera?

HEIZER: Heiner had a camera, a Nikon, and he had black-and-white film. We made nine images.

MANCUSI-UNGARO: Was your intention that you would use the images to make another work? Or was it more a question of documentation?

HEIZER: Actually, it was much simpler than that. If you wanted an image that showed the end result, you could stand above it and shoot looking down at the circular hole in the ground. Or you could go inside the hole and photograph up. If you take a picture of a painting on the wall, you can usually get all of it in on one rectangular format. But you can't do that with a circular, dimensional entity. So I was simply photographing it the only way I could. It wasn't artistic. Forget art. I didn't even own a camera. We'd been building art works all over the place and photographing them. But if you go out somewhere in Nevada and build something, you don't always take a picture. I was building a lot of stuff and taking pictures, but there was no big theory going on. I was just doing it.

FRIEDRICH: But, really, standing in the hole was so amazing. It hasn't left me a minute my whole life.

HEIZER: What Heiner is referring to is that if you go to the center, lean your head all the way back so you're just staring straight up, and then relax your eye muscles completely, which is hard to do, and then allow them to relax even more, what happens is you perceive the circle around you. You see this funny shape. It looks kind of like putting an egg in a frying pan with the yolk, the center, bigger than the side. It's actually the shape of an eyeball or a combo eyeball/egg-yolk-looking thing. So that is the shape of your vision. You saw the shape of your brain, the perception of your maximized peripheral halative vision.

FRIEDRICH: Planet Earth.

HEIZER: When you make artworks like this, it's hard to sell them. You spend the next 50 years broke. But it was about some very serious optical phenomenon. To me, the end result wasn't a hole in the ground; it was like it took me further than anything ever before and maybe anything since. That was a trip.

DE SALVO: Did you know the size of the hole in advance?

HEIZER: We didn't know anything. We were shooting blind. We were operating on our natures, and we were confident enough that we just did it. That's what we do. We're spiritual people.

DE SALVO: It's interesting that you are an American and European working so closely together, and making such monumental works on the land on both sides of the world.

HEIZER: It wouldn't have happened in the United States without Heiner. He's a European with a lot of cultural curiosity that most gringos do not have.

They just don't have it much. Maybe they do more now, but it was not a nation at the time that was really proud of its indigenous culture, or its contemporary indigenous culture. Now it's a bigger deal. There's more emphasis, more intensity, more appreciation. Back then, it wasn't so fun, was it?

FRIEDRICH: I was blessed that I had no ego. So I was serving what was necessary to be done

from day to day. This was our big journey.

MANCUSI-UNGARO: Michael, you came back to New York and the next year you started working on your projections, particularly Munich Rotary.

HEIZER: I have a genius friend named Maris Ambats, whom I talked to about making a projector to project an image at the actual size. The deal was to let the camera be a translator between reality and a replicated reality, which means making the photograph as big as the thing itself. So here it is. It gets squeezed down through the camera, and then it's blown back up to the same size. We didn't go out and buy a projector; we created our own. Who could afford to buy one, anyway? I saw a giant projection on the Playboy Club on the Sunset Strip a couple years later, some big bunny up on the wall. That's the first time I ever saw a projection in my life, other than colors blown on the side of some castle falling apart in Italy. So it was a necessity that we design and build this equipment ourselves.

MANCUSI-UNGARO: How many projectors did you make?

HEIZER: Six. And two extras.

MANCUSI-UNGARO: And the first time you showed Munich Rotary was in 1971 in Detroit alongside the exterior sculpture Dragged Mass Displacement [a 30-ton mass of granite dragged by bulldozers across the museum's lawn].

HEIZER: Sam Wagstaff [who was then the curator of contemporary art at the Detroit Institute of Arts] introduced photography to the modern-art market. He liked photography so much he wanted to show it in the grand hall in this classical museum. It's a big, big classical building—it's like the Louvre inside with huge rooms. He put my piece in this huge 200-foot room. It was really good, and it was intended to be a photographic offering, a photographic artwork. Wagstaff had the nerve to do that. The trustees wanted him to remove that sculpture of mine he exhibited, too, and he resigned because of it. But he had the nerve, and he believed in it. He was right. It's become so insidious. Photography is everywhere now. Back then, it wasn't an art-world technique. But, the thing is, you can't separate the film derivation from the real thing. *Munich Depression* and *Munich Rotary* are different works of art, but they come from the real thing. So you can't escape it.

DE SALVO: You can't uncouple them.

HEIZER: No point in trying to.

MANCUSI-UNGARO: Even from the photos of *Munich Depression*, though, you get the feeling of this enormous sense of space spreading around it. It looks almost lunar.

HEIZER: Yeah, because the edge was feathered out. It took a lot of time to just fade, fade, fade. I made a mistake of telling someone from a newspaper that this sculpture was radical because it has no definition, no edge. And then the newspaper said, "That arrogant punk," or whatever. But that was the intent. That's no hollow claim. That's what it was all about. We did a lot of work on that edge, softening that up so that you couldn't find it. There is no beginning. There is no edge. It wasn't just a negative object, like you'd take a thing and reverse it. It's not as dumb as that. This thing was a whole other deal. This thing began to appear; it was evanescent. Then it began

to have the appearance that the ground is subsiding. And then it intensified and dove in deeper. That's sculptural stuff if you're interested in what a sculpture is. That's what that was all about. It took a week or so to get that all just right.

DE SALVO: And your mind looks for the edge. That's how we orient ourselves. It's the idea of the sublime, the awe. I like to use the word *sublime* or *awe*. Can you think of anywhere in Europe that looks like this?

FRIEDRICH: No, you wouldn't find anything like that.

HEIZER: Well, we did a drawing show outside of Munich in a potato field. Remember that? A circle drawing. And the potato field had big mud blocks that were turned up by tractors. This buddy of mine said, "I'd rather ride the bikes." We had a couple of factory racing bikes we'd use to draw the circles, and this friend crashed and broke his leg trying to make this drawing out in that potato field. Then a lot of problems came. A lot of bad things happened after that.

HEINER FRIEDRICH IS AN ART DEALER AND COLLECTOR WHO CO-FOUNDED THE DIA ART FOUNDATION IN 1974.