

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Art in America

ONE TO ONE

Michael Heizer
standing in
Munich Depression
(*Final Stage*),
1969. Courtesy
Städtische Galerie
im Lenbachhaus
und Kunstbau,
Munich.

**Michael Heizer's museum
installations balance Land art's
monumentality with its mediated
representations.**

by William S. Smith

LAND ART WAS photogenic out of necessity. The large-scale outdoor sculptures that artists in the U.S. and Europe created in the 1960s and '70s, many of them in remote locations, became veritable sets for producing films and photographs.¹ Artists quickly realized that beyond offering documentation of the work for urban audiences and patrons, images produced in tandem with the construction of giant earthworks could greatly expand the works' aesthetic and conceptual range. It was through reproducible media that the practice of creating ancient-looking geoglyphs began to resonate with contemporary questions about how images and information circulate—or, in a few cases, resist circulation.

Land artists themselves frequently appeared in these pictures, their bodies revealing the scale of their gigantic sculptures. Some of the movement's most iconic images are in this vein: Walter De Maria photographed lying prone in the middle of the desert alongside his *Mile Long Drawing* (1968), or Robert Smithson, filmed from a helicopter, running the length of *Spiral Jetty* (1970) in the Great Salt Lake. Michael Heizer's work of the 1960s includes some creative contributions to this subgenre. Photographs from the period show him building or surveying his work in a range of guises, suggesting that as much as he trafficked in myths of the Western frontier as a virgin canvas, he was also adept at manipulating notions of artistic identity. He's a hippified cowboy action painter scattering colored pigments in huge arcs around the desert for his series "Primitive Dye Painting" (1969). He's a California badass doing donuts on a motorcycle for his *Circular Surface Planar Displacement Drawing* (1970).

In another image, this one strikingly somber, Heizer resembles a pensive Continental philosopher in the middle of *Munich Depression* (1969), a piece he completed in Germany. On a plot of land surrounded by construction sites on the outskirts of the Bavarian capital, the 25-year-old artist directed the excavation of a conical pit, in the process removing or—to use a favorite term of his—"displacing" some 1,000 tons of dirt and rock.

The photo of Heizer standing in the crater underscores the double entendre of the title. The artist is alone in his hole, which is surrounded in turn by a dreary landscape

CURRENTLY
ON VIEW
"Open Plan: Michael
Heizer," at the
Whitney Museum
of American Art,
New York, through
Apr. 10.



of fog-shrouded modernist buildings. It would be a fine image for the cover of an existentialist tome about urban alienation, and it's easy to get the sense that the young American artist is performing some version of Europeaness, one informed, perhaps, by Michelangelo Antonioni's *Red Desert* (1964), with its bleak depictions of industrial settings. But there's also tension in the performance arising from the strange impropriety of the whole tableau. Having been invited to create a work in a city that his country had helped bomb to smithereens the year he was born, Heizer chose to produce, of all things, a huge crater.

Munich Depression was among the first pieces that Heizer realized in an urban (or at least urbanizing) setting. Previously, the Berkeley native created most of his works in remote areas. The Moapa Valley in Nevada is home to his career-making *Double Negative* (1969-70), for which he dug two huge rectangular trenches on either side of a natural canyon. *Munich Depression* is also unusual because it prompted another photographic work, Heizer's most ambitious to date and arguably the culmination of his interest in the medium. *Actual Size: Munich Rotary* (1970), a slide-based installation considered a separate piece, is on view this month at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art. Using a large-format camera, Heizer photographed the interior of the crater while standing in its center. The black-and-white images, mounted on glass slides, are cast onto the walls of the gallery by a series of purpose-built projectors. These devices, six in all, are spaced so that the images appear in a 360-degree panorama. As the title implies, the projected images are full-scale: a rock six inches in diameter photographed at the bottom of the pit in Munich in 1969 appears six inches in diameter in the gallery in 2016.

In part because it requires a vast space and employs cumbersome optical devices, this work has rarely been shown. Prior to its Whitney appearance, it was displayed in 2012 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art as part of an exhibition marking the installation of *Levitated Mass* (2012), Heizer's permanent outdoor work for the institution, comprising a giant boulder suspended above a subterranean walkway.

Actual Size: Munich Rotary represents a strange, and in some ways counterintuitive, approach to photography. Rather than capturing visual information and translating it to a two-dimensional format, Heizer seems to have been concerned with directly transposing a literal experience of *Munich Depression*, to the extent that such a feat can be accomplished by an inherently illusionistic medium. The work can be regarded as a kind of super photograph, a rich "virtual reality" that requires the resources of an institution to be realized.² Simultaneously, the piece manifests an antipathy toward the medium, a distrust of its inherent ability to "fiddle with the scale of the world," as Susan Sontag put it.³

The work warrants comparison to Smithson's similarly ambitious film *Spiral Jetty* of the same year. If Heizer sought to convey a pure representation of size, the work of his erstwhile rival is all about "fiddling" with scale. Throughout the 16mm film we see Smithson's jetty in fragmentary close-ups; only at the end does the massive spiral come into full view. The figure of the artist reveals the work's size relative to a human body, but we also see microscopic images of the salt crystals on the rocks and blinding pictures of the sun, suggesting the spiral's place in a wider cosmos.

Heizer's commitment to representing actual size results in a far more static display, though one arguably animated by the viewer's

moving body. Achieving such a high-resolution depiction of the site, albeit in black and white, comes at a significant cost to other kinds of information that photographs can convey. The walls of the crater appear flat against the plane of the projection, a formal necessity because the size of objects starts to diminish with any perspectival depth. The horizon, above which a few rooflines are barely visible, is confined to a narrow band at the upper tenth of the image.

If space is compressed, so, too, is room for interpretation. There's no drama here and no brooding, unless the viewer, now in Heizer's place, chooses to mope around the gallery. In this one-to-one image, Heizer makes perfectly visible a pile of material, but in doing so he obscures the historical specificity of the project and its overtones of war and renewal. All the narrative richness of the artist playing Existentialist is excised—quashed, as it were, by a wall of dirt and rock.

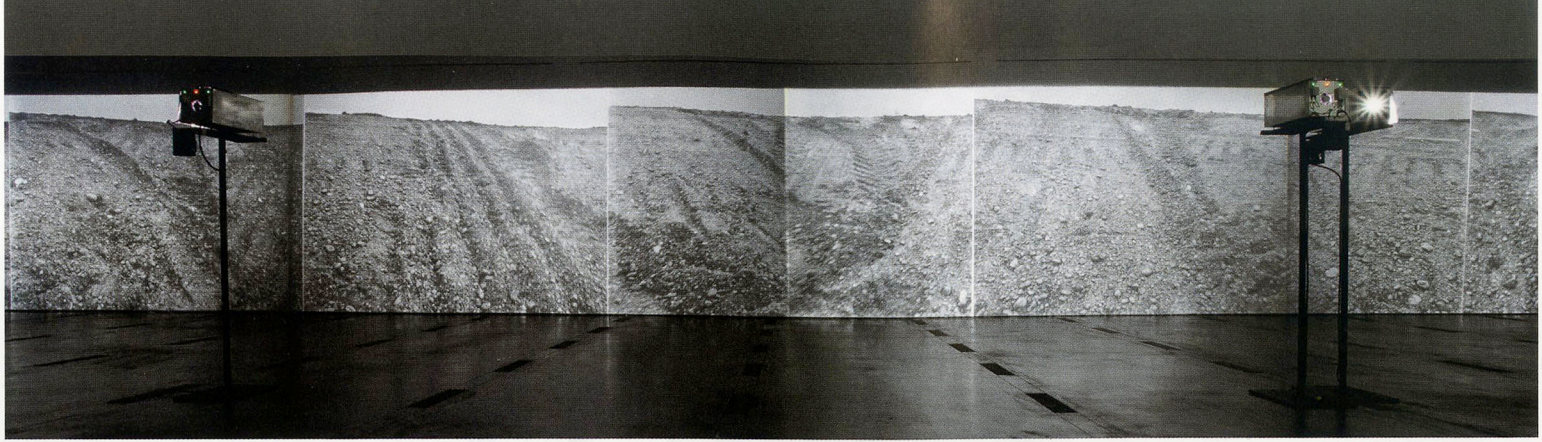
IT'S POSSIBLE TO imagine an alternate trajectory for Heizer's career with photography as the central force. In the 1969 Whitney Painting Annual he showed a large photograph of one of his outdoor "Dye Paintings." Heizer also produced images according to Conceptual art constraints, photographing certain pieces in the desert at predetermined intervals to capture the effects of time and climate. And he also seems to have had a canny understanding of how to use the art world's channels of communication. Shortly after the Munich piece, followed by a longer stay in Germany, he published a photo-essay in *Artforum* detailing his processes.⁴

Yet Heizer has also gone out of his way in recent years to deny the importance of visual media to his practice. Notoriously, he refused to participate in Los Angeles MOCA's 2012 survey "Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974," precisely because the curators focused on representations of sculptures that he felt had to be experienced directly.⁵ In reference to the desert mega-sculpture *City* that has consumed most of his attention for decades, he told the *New York Times* in 1985: "If you want to see the *Pietà*, you go to Italy. To see the Great Wall, you go to China. My work isn't conceptual art, it's sculpture. You just have to go see it."⁶

There are hints of this attitude percolating in some of Heizer's early statements. In a joint interview with Dennis Oppenheim and Robert Smithson in *Avalanche*, Heizer argued: "One aspect of earth orientation is that the works circumvent the galleries and the artist has no sense of the commercial or the utilitarian."⁷ Yet as critic and curator Lawrence Alloway observed, Land art was always tethered to the gallery, even, or perhaps most of all, when the artist attempted to resist or annul that relationship.⁸

In this instance, Heizer was in Munich at the invitation of Heiner Friedrich Gallery, which planned to mount a solo exhibition for the American artist in exchange for its support of *Munich Depression*. As his indoor contribution, Heizer submitted a statement announcing the exhibition's cancellation. In his *Artforum* piece, the artist further articulated a demand that the site of his depression be kept pure of any intrusions, especially from the nearby real-estate developments; in his ideal, the center of the pit was to remain free of any shadows cast by the new buildings.

Though this demand failed in real life, Heizer was able to convey an unobstructed view of the crater in the virtual space of *Actual Size: Munich Rotary*. Ironically, perhaps, the perfect realization of his idealistic "earth orientation" could be brought



to fruition in this case only through an elaborate virtual spectacle inside the pseudo-purity of the white cube.

ALSO ON VIEW at LACMA in 2012, alongside *Actual Size: Munich Rotary*, was another series of “actual size” black-and-white photographs from 1970, these showing giant desert boulders similar to the one trucked in for *Levitated Mass*. In most of the pictures, the artist or another individual is shown in front of the outcroppings. The human figure establishes the scale of the rocks, but his presence is also somewhat redundant, a double for the viewer in the gallery who is likewise dwarfed by the towering boulders. Though the photographs that Heizer continues to exhibit are uniformly large, their literalism may be their most distinctive feature. Repudiating the spirituality of Abstract Expressionism, this quality became pervasive in post-WWII American art. Summed up in Frank Stella’s claim about his own work, that “what you see is what you see,” the literalist sensibility finds expression in everything from Jasper Johns’s “device” paintings to Robert Rauschenberg’s body prints to Donald Judd’s specific objects. But attempts to present literal experience are more complex in relation to photography or film, despite the indexical quality of these mediums.

Heizer was among several artists exploring the “truth claims” of photographic media by controlling the size and scale of images. Conceptual artist Mel Bochner, for example, printed a series of photographs showing various body parts and objects at actual size. In *Actual Size: Hand* (1968), his arm appears against a wall marked with foot-long intervals. Bochner claimed that this approach reveals the tension between literal and pictorial space. Though suppressing the distortions in scale inherent in photographic mediation, the works, by their very existence as flat photographs, confirm the ultimately illusionistic quality of the medium. Similarly, Richard Serra’s 1969 film *Frame* features several shots, taken from different angles, depicting the artist as he measures a window frame. As the camera changes position, our view of the window shifts while Serra calls out constant measurements. According to a description endorsed by the artist, the deadpan piece “demonstrates the disparity in perception between what is seen by the cameraman looking through the lens and what is seen by a person looking directly at the same space.”⁹

In a recent study, art historian Jennifer L. Roberts grapples with these concerns in reference to an older precedent: John James Audubon’s *Birds of America* (1827–38). The famous 19th-century print compendium features 39-by-26-inch prints: actual-size depictions of hundreds of bird species. Working from specimens that he sometimes traced directly, Audubon engraved his images at a one-to-one scale, contorting large birds like flamingos to fit within the page. Roberts argues that the essential characteristic of

these works is not their unusual size, per se, but their literalism, noting how Audubon’s flat depictions interrupt the “virtualizing force of pictorial tradition.” She continues:

The picture plane here is not so much a window as a plane where reality and illusion, materiality and opticality, collide. If we must call it a window, it’s like a window that a bird has flown into: a surface that records a collision between a material body and the hard limits of a system built for illusion.¹⁰

If you substitute rocks for birds, such a description might equally apply to Heizer’s photographs. Audubon was committed to actual-size depictions, Roberts shows, in part because he knew the images would circulate widely and he wanted to secure their veracity against the distortions endemic in the process of transmitting pictures, which at the time relied on a network of printers, copiers and publishers—all of whom could introduce distortions of various kinds. Heizer’s actual-size photographs of *Munich Depression* establish control over the context in which they are viewed—a control he could never assert over the site on which it was made. Photographs of variable scale can be reprinted, republished, circulated and annotated in popular magazines. But the actual-size works have to be seen in person in a setting where the placement of the projectors can be tightly controlled. They are photographic oddities, resistant to reproduction and circulation. This resistance, too, comes at a cost, because it makes the work, conceived supposedly in innocence of “commercial and utilitarian concerns,” entirely dependent on institutions with the resources and space that Heizer requires. Indeed, the actual size of a forlorn crater in Munich becomes an occasion to celebrate the actual, sprawling size of the 21st-century museum. ○

View of Heizer’s installation *Actual Size: Munich Rotary*, 1970, six custom-made aluminum projectors with steel stands and six black-and-white film transparencies mounted between glass; at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2012. Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photo © Museum Associates/LACMA.

1. Curators Miwon Kwon and Philipp Kaiser have argued that “land art is a media practice as much as a sculptural one.” See *Ends of the Earth, Land Art to 1974*, Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2012, p. 27.

2. It’s telling that the current exhibition is part of “Open Plan,” a series of large-scale installations at the Whitney designed to show off a space advertised as the largest column-free gallery in Manhattan.

3. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York, Picador, 2001, p. 4.

4. Michael Heizer, “The Art of Michael Heizer,” *Artforum*, Dec. 1969, pp. 32–39.

5. The artist’s former dealer, Virginia Dwan, contributed a statement to the “Ends of the Earth” catalogue. See *Ends of the Earth, Land Art to 1974*, p. 95.

6. “Artist Known for Works Created in Nevada Desert,” *New York Times*, June 3, 1985, nytimes.com.

7. Michael Heizer, “Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson,” *Avalanche* 1, 1970, p. 62.

8. Lawrence Alloway, “Site Inspection,” *Artforum*, Oct. 1976, p. 55.

9. Richard Serra and Annette Michelson, “The Films of Richard Serra: An Interview,” in *Writings/Interviews*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 70.

10. Jennifer L. Roberts, *Transporting Visions: The Movement of Images in Early America*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2014, p. 99. See also pp. 69–115.