

# Foreword

Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* is, despite its physical isolation, among the most influential works of art created in the last two decades. Sited on a sixty-acre parcel in the Nevada desert at the edge of the Mormon Mesa, it is one of the earliest of the environmentally scaled, geographically remote sculptures to have been labeled "earthworks." The monumental sculpture was deeded to The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in December 1985 by Virginia Dwan, who commissioned Michael Heizer to create the work in 1969. MOCA thus became the first museum to include a permanently sited land sculpture in its permanent collection.

Monumental in scale and imposing in presence, the approximately 1,500-foot-long *Double Negative* is, as its title suggests, an absence, a removal. Two long, straight trenches, 30 feet wide and 50 feet deep and displacing 240,000 tons of desert sandstone, are cut into the "tabletop" of the Mormon Mesa, located approximately 80 miles from Las Vegas and 5 miles from the small town of Overton, Nevada. The cuts face each other across an indentation in the plateau's scalloped perimeter, forming a continuous image, a thick linear volume that bridges and includes the "negative" space between them.

*Double Negative* dramatically addresses many of the significant developments in contemporary art of the last twenty years, such as the expansion of scale and materials as well as the attention to questions of space, site, temporality, and experience. Such developments have led artists outside the familiar boundaries of the studio, gallery, and museum to challenge the potential location for a work of art, the traditional art viewing space, and the notion of art as a portable object. *Double Negative* sets an art historical precedent as one of the first works to reconcile all these issues.

Blurring the lines between sculpture, architecture, monument, archaeology, and landscape, *Double Negative* not only takes its surroundings into account, but literally is a part of them. Even the forces of nature that slowly erode its sandstone walls are intrinsic to the artwork. Yet *Double Negative*'s meaning still rests with its absence. It stands not as sculpture, but as sculpture in reverse; not as object but as void. *Double Negative* even negates its place in the traditional art market. With its massive scale, distant location, and immobility, the

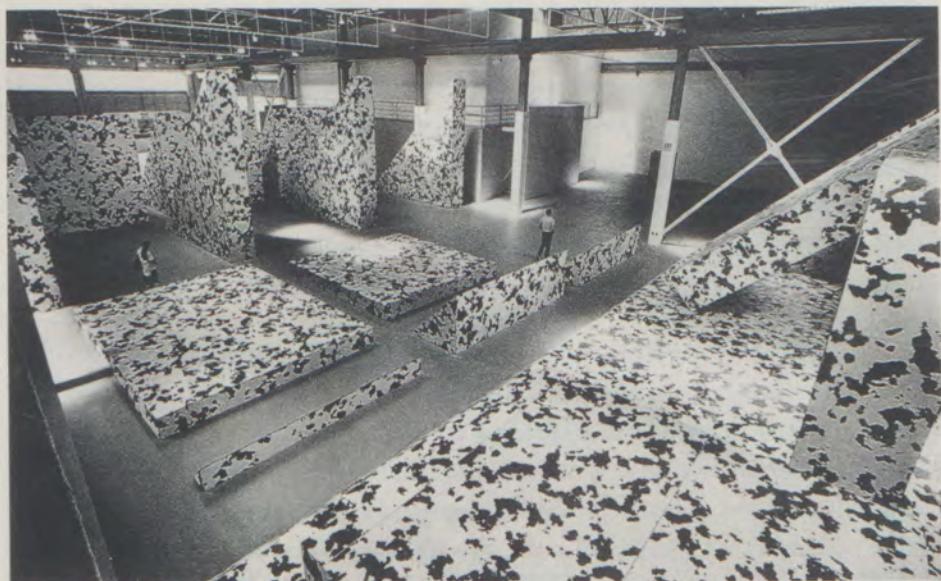
work obviates the studio-to-gallery-to-museum mode of production and in the process redefines how art is made, experienced, exhibited, and collected.

Certainly the concept that a work of art must be housed and displayed within the walls of a museum has changed radically in the post-World War II period. Happenings, performance, installations, conceptual art, video art, film, and other modes that rely on ideas, specific contexts, or temporality have forced museums to reconsider not only what and how they should exhibit works, but also what and how they should collect. It has become the responsibility of museums not just to enshrine works of art, but to foster the art of its own time. Museums have thus become places of support for artists, providing space, audience, and interpretive information and collecting not only objects, but also ideas and plans for the construction of works of art.

Consistent with this mission, MOCA commissioned Michael Heizer in 1984 to create an exhibition specifically for the spaces of the museum's Temporary Contemporary facility. His response— $45^\circ$ ,  $90^\circ$ ,  $180^\circ$ /*Geometric Extraction*—was to fill the museum with monumental free-standing elements made of cardboard and wood. The sculptural units were metaphors for material extracted out of the face of a "cliff," indicating the planes and angles of the original mass. Approximately 130 feet in length, 63 feet wide, and  $19\frac{1}{2}$  feet high, *Geometric Extraction* utilized the cavernous spaces of the Temporary Contemporary in a way that only a work created specifically for this site could. In the traditional "storehouse" museum, such an exhibition could not have been realized.

Similarly, with the acquisition of *Double Negative* in 1985, MOCA became not the caretaker for a desert plot, but a pioneer in the reassessment of how art is collected. Evidenced through this acquisition is the fact that museums can extend the boundaries of the institution—and the arena in which art may be experienced—beyond its four walls and into the real world. Art need not be defined by that which can be presented in a museum setting; a museum collection need not restrict itself only to that which can remain in its galleries. Unlike commissioned museum installations, which exist only as long as the exhibition continues, *Double Negative* cannot be disbanded or even temporarily removed. In this sense the work is truly monumental not merely due to its size, but because of its physical presence in the desert landscape.

Although *Double Negative* can only be properly experienced by driving the eighty miles from Las Vegas to see it firsthand, this does not forsake its integration into exhibitions generated by MOCA and other institutions. Indeed, this work has been represented by large-scale photographic blowups on numerous occasions, from MOCA's yearlong 1986 exhibition *Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art* to the 1991 *Perceptual Investigations: Light and Space Works from the Permanent Collection*.



Installation view of *45°, 90°, 180°/Geometric Extraction* at The Museum of Contemporary Art, the Temporary Contemporary, Los Angeles, March 17–June 10, 1984

The visionary and driving force behind MOCA's involvement with *Double Negative* is Virginia Dwan. Through the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Dwan Gallery in New York City represented Heizer and hosted numerous exhibitions of his work. In January 1970 Dwan celebrated the artist's completion of *Double Negative* with the exhibition *New York–Nevada*, which included an opening ceremony at the Nevada site and a simultaneous presentation of photographic documentation at the New York gallery. By donating this work to MOCA in 1985, Dwan evidences not only her long-standing support of Heizer's work but her abiding commitment to have *Double Negative* presented to as wide an audience as possible.

With this publication, MOCA hopes to fulfill that desire, to bring *Double Negative* closer to those too distant to visit it, and to provide a larger context for the understanding and appreciation of the work. In this regard, we are grateful for the invaluable contribution made by the book's essayist Mark C. Taylor, William R. Kenan Professor of Religion at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts. His text on Heizer and *Double Negative* provides an essential philosophical framework from which to consider the piece. In addition, he has done a remarkable job in communicating the awesome experience of visiting the desert site.

Critical to the book's realization has been the work of MOCA Editor Catherine Gudis, who has attended to the project through its years of incubation and maturation. She was aided by Editorial Assistant Sherri Schottlaender, who carefully compiled the bibliography reproduced herein and conscientiously attended to the many details involved with the book's production. Thanks are also due

to Curator Elizabeth A. T. Smith and the museum's registrarial and preparatory staffs, who have maintained the documentation on the work and ensured its proper presentation. In addition, former Editor Howard Singerman, former Editorial Assistant Elizabeth Mjelde, and former Intern Susanne Riedel contributed to the early stages of the project.

Additional members of MOCA's staff and board of trustees were instrumental in administering the acquisition of *Double Negative* and organizing Heizer's 1984 exhibition at the Temporary Contemporary. Former Chief Curator Julia Brown Turrell and Associate Director Sherri Geldin were critical to the realization of both the acquisition and the exhibition. In addition, we are grateful for the advice and assistance provided by MOCA trustees Joe Austin and Morton Winston. Additional legal assistance was provided, on MOCA's behalf, by Owen Olpin of the Los Angeles law firm O'Melveny & Myers and, on Virginia Dwan's behalf, by Bruce Trauner, of the New York firm Beldock, Levine and Hoffman. We thank them for their generous support and cooperation.

For this publication, Massimo Vignelli has provided an exquisite design that captures the monumentality and eloquence of the artwork. We thank him for his sensitive interpretation of the material. For her assistance, we would also like to thank Mary McBride, who produced the design mechanicals. We are also grateful to Rizzoli International Publications President Gianfranco Monacelli and to Associate Editorial Director Charles Miers for copublishing the book and working with us on all aspects of its creation.

Generous support for the publication has been made possible, in part, by a grant from the Nevada State Council on the Arts, a state agency. We are also indebted to the Nevada Institute for Contemporary Art, which has published this book in association with MOCA and has provided assistance in making *Double Negative* more accessible to the general public.

In addition to donating the work to MOCA, Virginia Dwan has been integral to the completion of this publication, for which we are greatly appreciative. Involved with the present publication as well as with MOCA's 1984 exhibition catalogue *Michael Heizer: Sculpture in Reverse*, Barbara Heizer has also generously provided support, information, and a wealth of additional resources. We thank her for her time and energy.

Finally, and most importantly, we would like to express our deep gratitude to Michael Heizer, who has patiently invested long hours discussing the work with us and helping us to present it. It is our sincere hope that this publication will do justice to his extraordinary sculpture in the land.

Richard Koshalek, *Director*  
Kerry Brougher, *Associate Curator*

# Rend(er)ing

Mark C. Taylor

The silence of the desert is a visual thing, too. A product of the gaze that stares out and finds nothing to reflect it. . . . For there to be silence, time itself has to attain a sort of horizontality; there has to be no echo of time in the future, but simply a sliding of geological strata one upon the other giving out nothing more than a fossilized murmur. Desert: luminous, fossilized network of an inhuman intelligence, of a radical indifference—the indifference not merely of the sky, but of the geological undulations, where the metaphysical passions of space and time alone crystallize.

—Jean Baudrillard, *America*

*Mass can be a vacuum if it is pervaded by a universe. Matter has a picayune density in physical fact. Matter to aura. Aura has a density of extreme and unknown proportions. Aura is dissolved matter. It no longer matters. Intact mass is pervaded by the residence of aura. The ephemeral lurks inside all facts. Its past and future threaten its present moment. The incomprehensible threat of fact is stung to whatever life it can attain by this discord, its aggressiveness only seems to be real. The sense that is affronted when confronting the real is the actuality of its hidden source, never to be seen. It will never be captured or put down to be observed, and art that deals with this quality of presence will aptly be misunderstood, never seen. Opaque dogmatists deny the issue, but they will eventually suffer the same fate as all aggressive mass.*

—Michael Heizer

There is an other desert. A different desert. Different Sands, different Dunes, an other Mirage. The other desert is the place or displace where nothing occurs or almost occurs. Across a continent, across an ocean eight years earlier, during our first conversation, Edmond Jabès paused for what seemed an interminable moment and then proceeded to speak in animated though measured words: “You do not go into the desert to find identity but to lose it, to lose your personality, to become anonymous. You make yourself the void. You *become* silence. It is very hard to live with silence. The real silence is death and this is terrible. It is very hard in the desert. You must become more silent than the silence around you. And then something extraordinary happens: you hear silence speak.” How can one become more silent than silence? How can one hear silence speak and see the silence of the desert?

Rend(er)ing . . . rend . . . rendering. Rending: tearing, cutting, splitting, dividing, lacerating. Rendering: paying, billing, returning, restoring, surrendering, relinquishing, yielding, melting, memorizing, clarifying, translating, depicting, reproducing, representing, especially by artistic means.

Rend(er)ing. How can rending be rendered? How can rendering be rent? Questions of representation. Does representation re-present presence or its absence? Absence or its presence? What is lost in translation—in rendering? How can loss be calculated . . . without

turning it into gain? How can absence be inscribed without presenting it? Questions of being and nothing or almost nothing. How to conceive nothing? Conceive a nothing that is not implicitly being? How not to avoid nothing? Avoid a-voiding nothing? How to figure nothing? Figure nothing without not figuring? Questions of negation. How can the negative be rendered without negating it? Perhaps by rendering duplicitously. Perhaps negation can be rendered in a rendering that dis-figures a certain double negative. Perhaps.

*We live in a schizophrenic period. We're living in a world that's technological and primordial simultaneously. I guess the idea is to make art that reflects this premise. My original impulse for getting out of the city and working with these basic materials had to do with the idea of the insecurity of society, the frailty of its systems, the dependence upon interdependence.*

—M.H.

As the helicopter slowly lifted off the ground and headed down the Strip, hotels and casinos sank beneath us. A sharp right turn to the northeast and we were quickly out of the city and over the desert. The flat expanse of sand and sage gradually gave way to massive rock outcroppings and sandstone hills among which wild burrows, mustangs, and bighorn sheep roam freely. The faces of the rocks and hills were etched with traces of ancient geological epochs. Seen from a height of six hundred feet, the land stretched below like a taut canvas covered with subtle patterns painted in rich earth tones. Deeper into the desert, hills became mountains erupting like petrified waves out of some prehistoric sea. As the copter nearly brushed the top of the highest peak, the Valley of Fire burst before us in a stunning array of brilliant reds, oranges, ambers, and lavenders. Monumental memorials to the immemorial appeared awesome even from the sky. In the distance, the Mormon Mesa rose from the valley floor. As we passed over the mesa and approached its far rim, the utter flatness, evenness, and horizontality of the land were broken by a rent edge. The copter banked sharply to the left and began to follow the tattered and torn margin of earth as it zigged and zagged, rose and fell as far as the eye could see.

Then suddenly, with an abruptness that was jarring, another cut . . . a different cut appeared on the surface of the mesa. This cut was not ragged but precise—surgically precise. Neither exactly one nor two, the duplicitous cut was a carefully crafted slit that extended from one edge of the mesa to the other. Whether a single cut interrupted by a certain absence or two symmetrical cuts joined by a certain presence, the middle remained empty. Absolutely empty.

*It is interesting to build a sculpture that attempts to create an atmosphere of awe. Small works are said to do this but it is not my experience. Immense, architecturally sized sculpture creates both the object and the atmosphere. Awe is a state of mind equivalent to religious experience. I think if people feel commitment they feel something has been transcended. To create a transcendent work of art means to go past everything.*

—M.H.

Reversal: from above to below, to below to above. This was not my first view of *Double Negative*. Two days earlier, I had approached it from a different direction. To reach *Double Negative*, it is necessary to go past everything. The drive from Las Vegas to Overton passes through eighty miles of desert. The mineral landscape appears more stark and cruel from the road than from the air. This desert is unforgiving.

The height of Mormon Mesa looms larger when driving up the twisting and turning red dirt road that leads to its top. From ground level, the barrenness of the earth's surface is violated not only by scrub sage but also by tracks of errant vehicles. Even a person who knows his way gets lost in this terrain. We roamed for a long time but could not find *Double Negative*. Like Heidegger's *Holzwege*, all tracks and traces were "chemins qui mènent à nulle part." With darkness approaching, our search became more agitated. We drove ever closer to the mesa's precipitous edge. At every turn, the cut seemed to appear. But as we drew near, the illusion of the cut's presence was broken and the mirage lifted. Turning the truck around to make a final sweep, the cut or cuts unexpectedly opened in front of us.

Neither a sculptural nor architectural object but something else—something other—*Double Negative* beckons to approach, indeed, to enter. This work of art cannot be appreciated from without but must be viewed from within. To enter the tear, I had to descend the steep and uneven slope of the rent earth. Only beneath ground level did the stunning proportions of this extraordinary work clearly emerge. The sculpture measures 1,500 feet long. The two cuts, which are 50 feet deep and 30 feet wide, are surrounded by walls of 90 degrees and ramps pitched at 45 degrees. The 240,000 tons of sandstone displaced to create the opening cling to steep spill slopes far below. From the bottom of the cut, the precision of the lines, surfaces, and planes dissolves. The work is eroding. Its walls crumbling and its floor littered with refuse and debris from ancient eons, the *Negative* is a constantly changing ruin. This work of art was not constructed to escape time but to embed us in it ever more deeply. As I passed below the surface, I realized the profound truth of what I had long suspected: to dig down is to go back . . . back through layers and layers of space and time to an *arche* that is, perhaps, "older" than the beginning of our world, the world, any world.

The walls of the tear display vast murals, rich collages, assemblages, and combines of unspeakable beauty. Colors and shapes, forms and figures too intricate and complex to have been crafted by any human hand suggest a haunting anonymity, a terrifying impersonality, an inhuman intelligence. Enduring yet fragile sediments release a disturbing fossilized murmur. At the edge of the work, the ground grows even more insecure. Loose sand and gravel fall from beneath my feet, adding to the ever-changing shape of the spoil. The work of art continues.

The late afternoon light of the gray winter day created a somber mood. In the distance, the Virgin River wound its way along the base of the Arizona mountains. Standing in the midst of the earthwork and gazing across the canyon to the far side, the cleavage seemed to separate as much as unite. At this edge, on this margin, the void was truly unavoidable. As I turned from the unsettling emptiness of space to the expansive corridors of time, silence unexpectedly rushed toward me. Not just any silence but an overwhelming silence that pressed palpably on my ears, creating a pressure that was almost unbearable. But I did not flee; rather, I paused to linger with the *Negative* in the faint hope that I might become more silent than the silence around me. Then something extraordinary happened: I heard silence speak. At this moment silence became visible. *Nothing appeared.*

*Double Negative* is the strangest of works. Frustrating the expectations we have for the work of art, this negative not only inverts but *subverts* the opposites that support the edifice of Western religion, philosophy, and art: primitive/modern, nature/culture, permanence/change, one/many, purpose/chance, placement/displacement, completion/incompletion, active/passive, time/space, speech/silence, sense/nonsense, visible/invisible, appearance/disappearance, form/formlessness, figure/ground, presence/absence, being/nothing, positive/negative. . . . Like a gift from some long-lost civilization, this overwhelming petroglyph cannot be decoded but must be read and reread without end.

Modernity is obsessed with negation. More precisely, modernity is obsessed with discovering ways in which negation can serve as an indirect means of affirmation. Transcendence is negated to affirm immanence; essence is negated to affirm appearance; the modern is negated to affirm the primitive; individuality is negated to affirm universality; the objective is negated to affirm the nonobjective; form is negated to affirm formlessness; ornament is negated to affirm structure; figuration is negated to affirm abstraction. All these gestures can, of course, be reversed. But such a revolution really changes little, for, as Kierkegaard once observed, to do the opposite is also a form of imitation. What unites these disparate strategies of negation is a complex dialectic in which negation is affirmation and affirmation is negation. The goal of this dialectic is, in the final analysis, the negation of negation. From this point of view, modernity is inseparable from a preoccupation with what might be described as the double negative.

Though poets and artists have struggled to figure the double negative, its most sophisticated conceptual articulation is presented in the writings of Hegel. Hegel's entire systematic philosophy is based upon a complex analysis of negativity. According to Hegel, negation, which is the foundation of all determinate identity, can be properly conceived only when it is grasped as double negation. Double negation, in turn, is the structure that underlies all reality. As such, the double negative is nothing less than the Absolute.

In order to explain and defend his position, Hegel reconsiders the logical principles upon which all Western thought is based. From the time of Aristotle, the fundamental rule of logic had been the law of noncontradiction, according to which something cannot be both itself and its opposite at the same time. A, in other words, cannot be B, and vice versa. Within the framework of this logic, a double negative is impossible. Contrary to Aristotle, Hegel insists that everything is inherently contradictory. Opposites are not simply opposite but are co-implicated in such a way that each becomes itself in and through its own other. To return to the example cited above, A is A insofar as it is *not* B. B, in turn, is B insofar as it is *not* A. Though not immediately apparent, A and B are essentially double negatives. In formulaic terms: A = not-B, and B = not-A, therefore A = not-not-A. Conversely, B = not-A, and A = not-B; therefore B = not-not-B. For Hegel, the relationship between A and B is thoroughly dialectical. The structure of the dialectic that is the *ground* of all being is double negation, and, I have noted, double negation is the Absolute. When the ground of being is understood as double negation, it is the "Absolute Ground."

In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel explores the "Absolute Ground" by examining three polarities: "Form and Essence," "Form and Matter," and "Form and Content." "*Ground*," he explains, "*is essence that in its negativity is identical with itself.*" Negativity is identical with itself insofar as it relates to nothing other than itself. Since all determination is negation, the relation of particular entities presupposes negativity's relationship to itself. To clarify this point, it is helpful to consider the determination of the Absolute Ground that has been crucial not only for philosophy but also for art: form and matter.

According to the principles of classical philosophy, form and matter are opposites that are not inherently associated with each other. Thus their relationship must be constituted by an extrinsic third. Throughout the history of philosophy, various schemes have been devised to explain the unity of form and content. Plato, for instance, envisions a mythic Demiurge who brings together transcendent forms and formless matter to create the world as we know it. The example most often used to illustrate Plato's point is the sculptor who forms an uncarved block of stone. By cutting and carving, the sculptor imposes form on formlessness. In this way, sculpture allows mute matter to speak. Hegel rejects all previous accounts of the synthesis of form and matter. Following the principles of his dialectical logic, he reasons that form and matter are not simply antithetical but are inextricably bound in a relationship that is mutually constitutive:

Matter is that which is indifferent to form, but this indifference is the *determinateness* of self-identity into which form withdraws as into its basis. Form *presupposes* matter in the very fact that it posits itself as sublated and consequently relates itself to this, its identity, as to an other. Conversely, form is presupposed by matter; for the latter is not

simple essence, which is immediately itself absolute reflection, but it is essence determined as the positive, that is, essence that only is as sublated negation.

—*Science of Logic*

The relation of form and matter conforms to the structure of double negation defined above. Since form is the absence of matter (non-matter) and matter is the absence of form (non-form), each is the negation of its own negation. When negation is doubled, it is no longer merely negative but becomes positive. The term that Hegel uses for this process of double negation is “*Aufhebung*.” Though usually rendered “sublation,” the German word carries connotations that are lost in translation. *Aufhebung* implies both destruction and preservation. Insofar as negation itself is sublated, it is both negated and affirmed. In such dialectical affirmation, however, negation is affirmed as negated.

In the preface to his system, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel makes his point in less abstract terms. The Absolute is Spirit, which is the vital pulse of all reality. “The life of Spirit,” Hegel explains, “is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment [*Zerrissenheit*], it finds itself. . . . Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and lingering with it. Such lingering with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being.” This “magical power” negates every negation: parts become whole, many become one, nonsense becomes sense, individuality becomes universality, representation becomes presentation, nothing becomes being, and absence becomes presence. By negating negation, the power of double negativity reconciles opposites in a totality that appears to be harmonious. In this way, speculative philosophy overcomes the dismemberment—*die Zer-riss-enheit*—that plagues both nature and history. Within Hegel’s all-encompassing system, no *Riss*—no rift, cleft, crevice, crack, breach, rupture, split, fissure, or gap—remains. Thus, *nothing is rent*.

No previous thinker in the history of the West thought the negative more thoroughly and consistently than Hegel. But did he think the negative radically enough? For Hegel, the negative remains penultimate. When doubled, it produces a “higher” positivity. The task of art, religion, and philosophy, as well as human existence, is to negate negation. The importance of this insight is not limited to the Hegelian system. Hegel is not just another philosopher; he is the modern philosopher par excellence, in whose thought the history of the West reaches closure. From its beginnings in ancient Greece to its conclusion in contemporary culture, occidental religion, philosophy, and art have been devoted to surmounting the negative aspects of life. Though not always explicitly religious, there is undeniably a salvific dimension to this struggle. When philosophy and religion fail to bring the redemption they promise, art attempts to take their place. But art



TOP LEFT: *Untitled #3*, 1967. MIDDLE LEFT: *Rift*, 1968. BOTTOM LEFT: *Isolated Mass/Circumflex (#2)*, 1968–78. RIGHT: *Displaced/Replaced Mass*, 1969 #s 1–3.



also fails, repeatedly fails, inevitably fails to render whole that which had been rent. When art promises salvation, it lies. Only at this point does the full force of Georges Bataille's observation become obvious. Hegel, Bataille insists, "did not know to what extent he was right." Hegel was right to recognize the pervasive power of the negative. His error was that he did not think the negative with sufficient rigor. The negative is more profound than even Hegel realized, for it can never be negated. To think negation radically, it is necessary to linger in the *Negative* with a patience Hegel could never muster. Such lingering is the rending work of art.

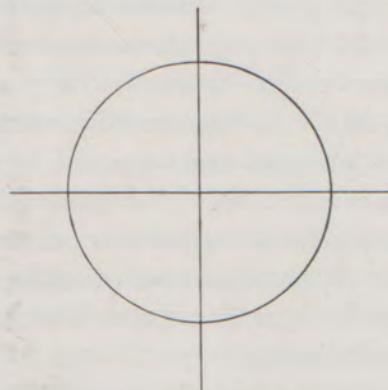
*In Double Negative, there is the implication of an object or form that is actually not there. In order to create this sculpture, material was removed rather than accumulated. The sculpture is not a traditional object sculpture. The two cuts are so large that there is an implication that they are joined as one single form. The title Double Negative is a literal description of the two cuts but has metaphysical implications because a double negative is impossible. There is nothing there, yet it is still a sculpture.*

—M.H.

"The implication . . . of an object . . . or form . . . that is actually not there. . . . There is nothing there, yet. . . ." Michael Heizer is obsessed with negation. More precisely, Michael Heizer is obsessed with discovering ways in which negation can be affirmed without negating it. The question that pervades Heizer's work is the question of rend(er)ing the negative. How can rending be rendered? How can rendering be rent? The interrogation began on canvas: *Negative Painting* (1966), *Untitled* (1967), *Untitled #1* (1967), *Untitled # 2* (1967), *Untitled # 3* (1967). From nameless paintings, Heizer proceeded to "negative sculpture": *North* (1967), *Windows* (1968), *Interstices* (1968), *Disipate* (1968), *Rift* (1968), *Isolated Mass/Circumflex* (1968–78), *Displaced/Replaced Mass* (1969), *Five Conic Displacements* (1969), *Munich Depression* (1969). . . . In each of these works, the space of the negative, which is not necessarily negative space, is opened by a certain rend(er)ing. Heizer's artistic strategies are multiple. He cuts canvases, breaks planes, interrupts lines, carves earth, displaces ground, and replaces stone. His traditional and untraditional tools are many: paint, brushes, hammers, chisels, saws, picks, shovels, trucks, bulldozers, loaders, cranes, motorcycles, blasting powder, even his own body. Yet not until *Double Negative* did the scope and scale of Heizer's undertaking become clear. Through a relentless investigation of the nature and (in)significance of negation, Heizer refigured the work of art.

*Double Negative* is not precisely a *work of art*. It is a work that is a nonwork—a work that works by not working. "To me," Heizer avers, "the subject matter of sculpture is primarily the object itself; sculpture is the study of objects." While usually identified as a land sculpture, *Double Negative* is not really sculpture according to Heizer's own definition. This work is not an object but "the implication of an object or form that is actually not there." Neither simply present nor absent,

*Double Negative* is the presence of an absence that is the absence of presence. And vice versa. Heizer does not attempt to negate or sublate absence in order to affirm or re-present presence. His art is nonrepresentational in a way different from any earlier art. In Heizer's case, the erasure of representation does not re-present something more original or primordial than superficial figuration. For example, the removal of figure does not reveal the presence of a structure that is deemed absolute, an essence that is considered transcendent, or a form that is believed pure. To the contrary, Heizer's work presents and represents the *impossibility* of presence and thus the failure of re-presentation. The work of art (impossibly) *represents nothing*. Paradoxically, this failure is its success.



To represent nothing without ceasing to represent, Heizer must recast the ground of figuration by refiguring the figure-ground relation. Hegel, we have seen, attempts to establish and secure the Absolute Ground of all appearances. In contrast to Hegel and all his followers, Heizer seeks to remove the ground on which we—indeed, on which everything—stands. “It is a reversal of issues,” he explains. “Since the earth itself is thought to be stable and obvious as ‘ground,’ I have attempted to subvert or at least question this.” Heizer’s subversion of stable ground is not only figurative; it is also literal. To create *Double Negative*, he “accumulates nothing,” but “removes ground.” The *Negative* is first and foremost a cut or two cuts, tears, rifts, fissures, faults. Its construction is, in a certain sense, a deconstruction. The absence of ground is figured by the removal of earth. As ground withdraws or is withdrawn, figure appears. The shape of the work is formed by subtraction instead of addition. In this incalculable zero-sum game, figure figures the absence of ground, and the ground that grounds figure is groundless. The absence of ground is not, however, a simple absence. The groundless ground that releases figure is, in Maurice Blanchot’s terms, a “nonabsent absent absence” that nonetheless is not a presence.

The play of figure and ground staged in *Double Negative* creates a clearing that allows disappearance to appear. This appearance of disappearance occurs not only in the *between* created by the walls of the cut but also transpires in the midst of the empty center between which the two tears on either side of the canyon are suspended. The deeper



LEFT: *Munich Depression*, 1969.  
RIGHT: *Complex One*, 1972–1974.

one digs, the more negation proliferates. The rifts themselves are rent. "Double Negative" names the two cuts that rend the sides of the mesa, as well as the gap that breaks the line traced by the two symmetrical cuts. Clearly *Double Negative* is not one; it is at least two, for the double negative that it opens (and that opens it) is itself doubled. This endless duplicity marks the site of what Heidegger labels the "origin of the work of art":

And yet—beyond what is, not away from it but before it, there is an other that occurs. In the midst of beings as a whole, there is an open place. There is a clearing, a lighting. Thought of in relation to what is, to beings, this clearing is in a greater degree than are beings. This open center, therefore, is not surrounded by what is; rather, the lighting middle itself encircles all that is, like the nothing we hardly know.

—“The Origin of the Work of Art”

The clearing that is the origin of the work of art is not a secure foundation that underlies appearances but is a groundless abyss. This open place is a no place that is unfigurable. The unfigurable is—but, of course, it is not—the nothing we hardly know. Lingering questions . . . questions of lingering: How not to avoid this nothing?

The site of the work of art is inseparable from a certain blindness. In order not to avoid nothing, the void itself must appear. If the void is to appear as void and not as implicit plenitude, it cannot be represented by a mere removal of representation. Perfect emptiness is indistinguishable from perfect fullness, even as pure nonbeing is identical with pure being. The unavoidable void, which neither is nor is not, must be rendered by a figure that is a disfiguring. Disfiguring breaks figures without breaking with figuration. In different terms, disfiguration uses figure against figure to figure what cannot be figured.

*The aggressive mass of the earth submits itself aggressively to the subterfuge of its own volume. Its identity is mass, an opaque mass. It is fact. The physical makes itself known by its fact. It does not matter which ideas support the idea of the physical; it supports itself by its fact. It is of common opinion that such a blatant fact as the physical needs justification. The human fact (physical) will cry out as it disintegrates the dominance of fact while it, by its example, denies it. The victor will be the death of the mass, the elusive underlying presence, withdrawn. Invisiblatory substance makes itself known by its presence. Corporeality (flesh existence) is both fact and fiction. ½ of life cannot be seen, and is not fact. It is elusive and can only be experienced. Art, to be seen, must also be experienced. It matters little what it looks like. All art looks like something. It must transmit, beyond the realm of the apparently consciousable.*

—M.H.

Heizer disfigures the ground. He cuts it; he tears it; he rends it; he mars it; he scars it. His work of art is nothing other than a complex process of disfiguring. In contrast to the strategy of abstraction in

which dis-figuration is simply the removal of figures, Heizer's disfiguration allows figures to appear. Subtraction adds and erasure inscribes. Rending creates the space in which forms become articulate. The intermediate space of disfiguring is a cleavage that simultaneously holds apart and brings together opposites whose strife is ceaseless. "To cleave" (from the Greek *glyph*, to cut with a knife or carve, and the Latin *glubere*, to peel) means to part or divide by a cutting blow, to split, to intersect, to fissure, to separate. "Cleavage" is "the action of cleaving or splitting crystals and certain rocks along their lines of natural fissure; or the state of being cleft." A "cleavage" is "the fissile structure in certain rocks" or "the direction in which a crystal or rock may be split." But there is another rhythm to the word "cleave." "Cleave" means not only divide, separate, split, and fissure, but also adhere, stick, and cling. Cleaving, therefore, simultaneously divides and joins, separates and unites. To clarify this point, consider the operation of cleaving in *Double Negative*. The walls of the cuts stand in a state of tension that is created and supported by the emptiness of the between. If the work is not to fall to the ground, its walls can neither fly apart nor collapse together. Furthermore, the two cuts assume their artistic proportions by the proximity and distance created by the space of the canyon. The entire work is suspended in the void by the alternating rhythms of cleaving.

It is important not to overlook the strange alogic of cleaving. As the operation in and through which opposites emerge and remain suspended, cleaving cannot be defined or expressed in terms of the identities and differences that characterize ordinary cognitive activity. Eluding the either/or of classical logic and the both/and of dialectical logic, cleaving entails a neither/nor that is not negative without being positive. In a certain sense, cleaving is unthinkable. But this unthinkable is not simply the absence or negation of thought. To the contrary, cleaving is the condition of the possibility and the condition of the impossibility of thought. In other words, that which makes thought possible cannot itself be thought *sensu strictissimo*. It can, however, be figured, if only by disfiguring.

"To sculpt" (from the Greek *sek*, to cut) is to cleave, and to cleave is to rend. Formation is never peaceful but always involves a struggle . . . a strife. Inasmuch as it enacts an undecidable alternation between differences and oppositions, the strife that rending releases is endless. Since formation is a function of the strife of rending, the work of art, the labor of production, is unavoidably painful. "But what is pain?" asks Heidegger:

Pain rends [*reisst*]. It is the *Riss*—the tear, cleft, crevice, fissure, gap, break, crack, flaw, breach, rift, rupture, split, *rent*. But it does not rend into dispersive fragments. Pain indeed tears asunder, it separates, yet in such a way that it at the same time draws everything together to itself. Its rending, as a separating that gathers, is at the same time that drawing, which like the predrawing [*Vor-riss*] and sketch [*Auf-riss*],

draws and joins together what is held apart in separation. Pain is the joining in the rending [*Reissen*] that divides and gathers. Pain is the joining or articulation of the rift. The joining is the threshold. It delivers the between, the mean of the two that are separated in it. Pain articulates the rift of the difference. Pain is difference itself.

Pain has turned the threshold to stone.

—“Language”

Stone bears the work of the sculptor. “Difference itself”—which harbors a certain rending—is not *a* difference. Nor is it the opposite of identity. Difference cuts more deeply; it is a more “primordial” difference; a more “originary” difference that clears the space and creates the time for every identity and all differences. As such, it seems to play the role once assigned to the Creator. Though his labors are solitary, the artist does not work alone, for he is always haunted by an other he cannot name. Which other? What other?

Never an omnipotent Creator, the artist is as passive as he is active. Heizer realizes that he does not control the forces he unleashes. Explosives and dozers “begin” a process that something else continues. The spills grow; spoils accumulate; cuts expand and contract. Sun and heat, wind and rain, frost and snow extend the work of art. Indeed, the elements are always already continuing the work of art. Through this process, the work is not completed but becomes even more incomplete. It is rendered an unmendable fragment . . . an irreparable ruin. Heizer remarks: “I am sure that I learned as much about art in obscure locations as I have from commonly available sources such as museums. Perhaps my exposure to remnants and fragments and the respect accorded them because of the information they contain has affected my view of so-called nonclassic form. Fragments and forms of evidence interest me more than works of art that are intact.” The fragments that fascinate Heizer are not parts of what once was whole. Since art “originates” with cleaving, it is always already rent. The question the artist perpetually faces is how to render rather than repress this rent.

Fragmentary space . . . ruinous time. The space of the fragment and time of the ruin intersect in *Double Negative*. Just as the space of the *Negative* is not a presence and hence is never present, so the time of the *Negative* is not a present and hence is never a presence. Ruinous time is what Blanchot describes as “the time of time’s absence, [which] is not dialectical. In this time what appears is the fact that nothing appears. . . . The reversal, which, in the absence of time, constantly sends us back to the presence of absence, but to this presence as absence, to absence as affirmation of itself, as affirmation where nothing is affirmed, where nothing never ceases to affirm itself, in the torment of the indefinite—this movement is not dialectical. Contradictions do not exclude each other in it, nor are they reconciled.” The time of time’s absence points toward an other time, a different time that Emmanuel Levinas labels an “unrepresentable before.” Such radical anteriority is an absolute past—a past that was

never present and, therefore, cannot be re-presented. In the midst of *Double Negative*, tattered fragments of earth's compressed (p)ages sound depths that cannot be fathomed. Ground crumbles, spills, falls, revealing not an *arche* but its absence—not the archaic but the anarchic.

*Acquisitive reactions are vital; so are dissipatory ones. This book about the Nine Nevada Depressions introduces and recalls to mind their existence. It would be acceptable if they survived, but it is doubtful that they will remain. Others could be constructed to remain as facts. The sense of this issue is the ignorance of such characteristics in favor of more fugitive but equally impressive memory. The memory of the project remains within the book.* —M.H.

"The memory of the project remains within the book." To be sure. But what about the work that is not a project? Does the memory of this work also remain within the book? "The book," Blanchot explains, "rolls up time, unrolls time, and contains this unrolling as the continuity of a presence in which present, past, and future become actual." If the work of art (re)presents the impossibility of realizing presence, the memory of the work remains *outside* the pages of the book. That which is not and cannot be inscribed within the Book—any book—eludes memory from the beginning, indeed, before the beginning. An-arch-y is the trace of an origin or *arche* that can never be re-membered. This prehistoric remainder is immemorial. It is "outside" memory not because it is eternal, but because it harbors a temporality more radical than tensed time. The un-re-present-able before is the "terrifyingly ancient" that is, according to Blanchot, "outside of time in time":

Time, time: the step/not beyond, which is not accomplished in time, would lead outside of time, without this outside being timeless, but there where time would fall, fragile fall, according to this "outside of time in time" toward which writing would draw us, if it were permitted of us, vanished from us, from writing the secret of the ancient fear.  
—*Le Pas au-delà*

This ancient fear draws us together by driving us apart. The outside of time in time separates us from each other as well as from ourselves. Time spaces . . . spaces us out.

*To delve, flee, and then to remember leaves the senses in a state of questioning far more acute than the interminable, eye-to-eye contact that results from prolonged attempts to experience. Experience is momentary. Prolonged experience is mundane, daily life. It is best to live life in the mundane way in which it presents itself, and to let art prophesize, returning to divert the senses into a beatific sensibility, not commonly felt. Attempts at placing its nightmarish celebrations in front of ourselves vary in quality and effect. The attempt is to be supported, the effect is to be questioned. When it is successful, when its*

complexity derives from sources other than the human condition, it should be able to be called art. Human is not art.

—M.H.

"Nightmarish celebrations . . . sources other than the human condition. . . . Human is not art." . . . Art is not human. To delve . . . to remember the immemorial is to remember what can be neither remembered nor re-membered. This failure of memory dismembers, for what cannot be re-membered rends. If "human is not art," art is a memorial to a haunting anonymity, terrifying impersonality, inhuman intelligence. Art that is not human, and yet is not divine, is a memorial to the im-memorial, a memory of the impossibility of remembering. In this case, to remember is not to forget that it is impossible not to forget. The site of the memorial to the immemorial is not a site; its place a dis-place.

*Double Negative* beckons to approach; indeed, to enter. As I descended the steep and uneven slope of the rent earth, the walls seemed to expand and contract, first approaching, then withdrawing. One moment too near, the next moment too far. At the bottom of the tear, I discovered an inside that is not inside but outside, an exteriority that is not exterior but interior. Contrary to Hegel, this outside, this exteriority, can be neither inwardized (*er-inner-n*) nor remembered (*erinnern*). By entering an "inside" that is "outside," I fell into an "outside" that is "inside." With this "inside," *I share nothing*. This "exteriority" was terrifying, yet alluring. Its attraction—"the attraction of (pure) exteriority or the vertigo of space as distance, fragmentation that only drives us back to the fragmentary." Dividing us from each other and from ourselves, this fragmentary disrupts, dislocates, and displaces. The place of *Double Negative* is the displacement that appears when the ground (of being) disappears. Displaced . . . Replaced . . . Displaced. . . . The process is endless. To suffer displacement is to undergo exile. And the (dis)place of exile is the desert.

The momentary expansive acceleration away from the inhibitions of the objective, factual-minded Westerner's idea of reality is personified by such phyla as dematerialization, inaccessibility, anti-form, disintegrative structure, the negative, and the void. The absolute condition would be invisibility. This is not possible even as semi-fact. Conceptual extremities border on the vernacular. They fail as solutions since they provide answers. Answers are as impossible as invisibility. Dissolute offerings only provide definitions on the way towards the desired condition. Offerings combining the anachronistic real and the non-real negate themselves as completely as possible. Indefinity is the only mystery. Palpable suggestions cannot be ghosts. Perhaps the stimulus of this intent is the belated acknowledgment of the death condition in other senses than deprivation and loss.

—M.H.

From time immemorial, the desert has been the place of wandering and roaming, nomadism and errancy. Even for its settlers, the desert

remains unsettling. Jabès, the poet of the desert, writes:

The unsayable settles us in those desert regions that are the home of dead languages. Here, every grain of sand stifled by the mute word offers the dreary spectacle of a root of eternity ground to dust before it could sprout. In the old days, the ocean would have cradled it. Does the void torment the universe, and the universe in turn vex the void? Roots buried in sand keep longing for their trees. The deepest weep for their fruit. They are reborn of their tears.

—*El, Or the Last Book*

Reborn of tears. Reborn of tears. The dream of the West—and not only the West—is to wipe away the tear, to mend the tear that rends human life. Rending can only be healed if negation can be negated. To negate negation would be to overcome exile by finding a way out . . . the Way out . . . out of the desert and into the kingdom that is the Radiant City. But the desert is the place of mirages and illusions. And no mirage is more powerful than the mirage of a way out, no illusion harder to overcome than the illusion that the desert can be escaped.

Michael Heizer does not believe in mirages. Through his art, Heizer struggles to dispel rather than to create illusions. His works lead us ever deeper into the desert. In the midst of the desert, Heizer deserts us. He leaves us on our own, which is not to say alone. Winds scatter the sands, erasing the traces of the Way, any way, every way. The negative, Heizer insists, *cannot* be negated. In its irreducible duplicity, *Double Negative* refuses to negate negation. This work opens rather than closes the rift in which we are destined to dwell. Heizer's art offers no cure for the wounds we suffer. That which is rent cannot be made whole. His lesson—if he has a lesson—is to teach us to linger patiently with the *Negative*.

Rend(er)ing . . . rend . . . rendering. Rending: tearing, cutting, splitting, dividing, lacerating. Rendering: paying, billing, returning, restoring, rend(er)ing, relinquishing, yielding, melting, memorizing, clarifying, translating, depicting, reproducing, representing, especially by artistic means. In *Double Negative*, Heizer accomplishes what has not been accomplished before: he renders rending by rending rendering.

A return to the question. Does representation re-present presence or its absence? Absence or its presence? What is lost in translation—in rendering? How can loss be calculated . . . without turning it into gain? How can absence be inscribed without presenting it? Questions of being and nothing, or almost nothing. How to conceive nothing? Conceive a nothing that is not implicity being? How not to avoid nothing? Avoid a-voiding nothing? How to figure nothing? Figure nothing without not figuring? Questions of negation. How can the

negative be rendered without negating it? Perhaps by rendering it duplicitously. Perhaps negation can be rendered in rendering that disfigures a certain double negative. Perhaps. But "answers are as impossible as invisibility."

Near the end, we approach the beginning—without having come full circle.

What the work says is the word *beginning*. But today the work is the work of art: art is its starting point. And it says "the beginning" when it says "art," which is its origin and whose essence has become its task. But where has art led us? To a time before the world, before the beginning. It has cast us out of our power to begin and to end; it has turned us toward the outside without intimacy, without place, without rest. It has led us into the infinite migration of error. . . . We appeal to art's sovereignty: it ruins the kingdom. It ruins the origin by returning it to the errant immensity of an eternity gone astray. . . . There before any beginning, the somber ebb and flow of dissimulation murmurs.

—Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*

Art ruins. The murmur of art dissimulates nothing. Somber murmur . . . fossil murmur. The petrifying murmur that lets us hear silence speak and see the silence of the desert in an uncertain *Double Negative*.

*Sculpture, paintings, and drawings using the materials of the earth are, to my mind, a proposal and a projection about a period that may exist on this planet when synthetic and amalgamated industrial products will be unobtainable because of social dysfunction.*

—M.H.

When all is said, what remains to be said is the disaster. Ruin of words, demise of writing, faintness faintly murmuring: what remains without remains (the fragmentary).

—Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

With night drawing near, I lingered in the *Negative*. I picked up a fragment from the debris in the midst of the tear. It was a remarkable object or assemblage of objects. Ancient, yet fragile, terribly fragile. Its shape, almost pyramidal; its size no bigger than the palm of my hand; its colors, multiple. Pink, rose, brown, amber, umber, lavender, rust, red, yellow, orange, black, white, and charcoal—pebbles and crystals held together by sand strong enough to withstand the shifting winds of time and weak enough to crumble when touched. It would be hard to imagine a more intricate or more successful work of art.

Lost in reflection, the silence that surrounded me was suddenly shattered. At first, I thought a violent desert storm had erupted. The walls of the rift shook. Sand, stones, and gravel slid to the bottom of the *Negative* and beyond to the canyon far below. Startled, I turned

toward the distant mountains. Framed by the trembling walls of *Double Negative*, I caught a fleeting glimpse of two fighter bombers engaged in mock combat, disappearing over the horizon. As the deafening noise of the planes waned, Heizer's words echoed in my ears: "We live in a schizophrenic period. We're living in a world that's technological and primordial simultaneously. I guess the idea is to make art that reflects this premise."

*Le pas au-delà*: beyond the edge of *Double Negative*, beyond the border of Mormon Mesa, beyond the remote mountain range, there is an other desert, a different desert. In the midst of this desert lurks another abyss: Ground Zero. Zero Ground . . . groundlessness . . . absence of ground . . . absolute absence of Absolute Ground. Ground Zero/Zero Ground is the dis-place of an unnameable disaster whose tremors shake our world.

We are on the edge of disaster without being able to situate it in the future: it is rather always already past, and yet we are on the edge or under the threat, all formulations that would imply the future—that which is yet to come—if the disaster were not that which does not come, that which has put a stop to every arrival.

—Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

On the edge of disaster . . . always on the edge.

Night;  
White, sleepless night  
Such is the disaster:  
The night lacking darkness,  
But brightened by  
No light.

Into this unsettling desert night, Michael Heizer invites us to wander . . . roam . . . err. . . .

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