

*The great projects of Michael Heizer, with their quest for a titanic dimension, constitute the last manifestation of the adventure of Western art.*

*They serve a sacred, cosmic vision of construction, in which earth and stone become symbols of an ideal projection towards building a bridge between the earthly and the heavenly. Like the builders of the pyramids and ziggurats, Heizer seeks to crystallize a view of art as the demiurgic instrument of a creation of the real, identified neither with the ephemeral, transient object, nor with the stable formation of a territorial, urban physiognomy.*

*To re-examine his entire life's work in a single book therefore entails retracing an itinerary through the real landscape of the American deserts and valleys. It means walking along the edges of canyons and crossing the great plains to experience his environmental and architectural interventions.*

*Over the course of the last two years, I have had the privilege of making several "pilgrimages" by helicopter, automobile, or on foot, to the places "sculpted" by Michael Heizer in Nevada, Illinois and California. Each journey constituted an enrichment of experience that reached its culmination when, with the generous support of the Fondazione Prada, I was given the chance to work with Michael Heizer in the realization of this book.*

*On this occasion, during the long, pleasant days spent on his ranch in Nevada, our relationship of mutual friendship and esteem grew, deepening my understanding of his work in a manner I would have previously thought impossible.*

*This book, which can be considered the first large monograph study of Heizer's oeuvre, almost a general catalogue of his artistic undertakings, owes its existence entirely to his generosity and energy in making available to me the time, information and memories necessary for its realization. I thank him for allowing me to realize a dream, that of creating a titanic book on a titanic artist, but even more for making possible an experience that renewed and strengthened our creative and historical syntony and solidarity.*

*Getting started on a book that would reflect, in illustrative and informative impact, the expressive and concrete power of Heizer's work, demanded the participation of a team of excellent "constructors" who devoted much of their time to "building" this volume. I would like, first of all, to thank Jennifer Mackiewicz, who guided us through the labyrinth of the artist's archive. Together with Mary Shanahan, she was an illuminating, magical presence who gave direction to my scholarly "excavations" of hundreds of documents, photographs and images.*

*In going through the materials for the book I had the good fortune of having as my fellow-traveller Pandora Tabatabai Asbaghi, who with her sensitivity has helped me to give personality and artistic cachet*

*to the publication. As concerns the scholarly aspects, I relied on the considerable and specific editorial contributions of Anna Costantini and on the patience and tenacity of Gaia Battaglioli, who were assisted by the timely and efficient coordination of Giovanna Amadasi. For the book's visual and graphic aspects, I am indebted to Pier Luigi Cerri's exquisite sensitivity and mastery of images.*

*With the sophisticated support of Ginette Caron and her assistant Salomé Nascimento, Pier Luigi has continuously proved himself a magician at transferring the data of art to the realm of the book. In the various phases of the volume's research and execution, the consolidation of information and images was achieved with the help and collaboration of many individuals and institutions. For this I thank Carol C. Corey of Knoedler & Company Gallery, New York, for her willingness to make the gallery's archives and bibliographical materials available to us.*

*On behalf of the Fondazione Prada, the book's publisher, my thanks go out to The Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, The Menil Foundation, Houston, the Musuem Ludwig, Cologne, Germany; the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich; and the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel, for having granted us, free of charge, the reproduction rights to the works in their collections. I am also indebted to The Art Institute, Chicago, The St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel, for the help they provided in tracking down information, and grateful to Kristina van Kirk of Ace Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles, to Miles Bellamy of the Oil & Steel Gallery, Long Island, New York, to Tim and Pam Hill of The Hill Gallery, Birmingham, Michigan, to Thomas Schulte of the Galerie Frank + Schulte, Berlin, and to the Hans Mayer Gallery, Hafen, for the help they provided in the illustration of the volume.*

*And special thanks, on behalf of Michael Heizer, also go out to Curt Weiss, Schrader Heizer, G. Robert Deiro, Nat and Almeda Colins, Frank and Nadine Packer, Wendy Rudder, Torsten Wiesel, Buddy Mann, Jerome Posner, Jules Labat, Tony Holton, Helen, Gail and Bonnie Shofield, for their support of the artist. Lastly, to conclude these acknowledgments, I cannot forget Miuccia Prada and Patrizio Bertelli, without whose influence, generosity and enthusiasm for art, it would not have been possible to embark on so complex an undertaking as that of putting together a titanic book on Michael Heizer. My thanks go out to both for this magnificent experience, which has provided me with the opportunity to give further completeness and a new dynamism to my dialogue and friendship with Michael Heizer. Thank you.*

Germano Celant



Michael Heizer

Germano Celant

"Mass can be a vacuum if it is pervaded by a universe."

Michael Heizer, 1969

### A Metaphysics Between the Banal and the Primary

In the early sixties, when Michael Heizer set out to become a painter and sculptor, the representative state of American art was linked to the will of a generation to reconfirm the end of Abstract Expressionism and Action Painting from William De Kooning to Jackson Pollock, in order to deliver art from gesturality and irrationality and bring it into the cold, absolute space of the mind and the gaze. Pop and Minimalist artists from Claes Oldenburg and Roy Lichtenstein to Donald Judd, Ellsworth Kelly and Frank Stella, who began to appear on the scene around 1961–62, attempted to individuate the principles of a visuality no longer bound to the luxuriant, narcissistic image of the self and of one's individual, private identity, but rather grounded in the impersonal, anonymous flow of the everyday universe, which is made up of icons as well as spatial and temporal phenomena consumed and travelled by human beings. The goal was to disengage and liberate oneself from reflecting on one's inner eye, to find an indispensable rigor and strength of purification through which one might recover an incisiveness in the analysis and interpretation of the world.

The idea was thus to put oneself in harmony with the world of concrete things, so that communication might not be subjected to the distortions of individuality, but would become one with the perpetual flow of objects, products, fetishes, and artifices. Art thus affirms itself as a magnetic intercommunication between artist and reality. Instead of enclosing itself inside a womb of solitary, mystical reflection, à la Arshile Gorky or Barnett Newman, it presents itself as mediator between spectator and image or thing, introducing an interpretative element of the object as sign and icon, volume and form. The loss of identity and psychological perspective gives way to an *identification* with the overall structure of social and popular signs, such as advertising and cartoons, photography and design, and to an interpretation of the formal and spatial codes that come into play in defining the primary elements that make up the universe and underlie all structures of communication and perception of volumes and environments.

The shift is from the direct representation of the internalized participation of the subject, with all its libidinal and mystical charges, to an exposing of the image produced and constructed by the subject, who is a consumer of figures and forms. While in Action Painting and Abstract Expressionism art tended to cancel itself out in the rational and irrational presence of the self, in order to become a disruptive force and poetic impulse, in Pop Art and Minimal Art it is transformed into the emblem of a force that pulls everything outside. Art turns its attention to effigies and simulacra, to all that repeats and reflects the movement of life as spectacle and phenomenon, pure and impure, redundant and reductive. The improvisation of strokes gives way to a preference for the framing, editing, the visualization and cadencing of images and forms, so as to produce a split between the visual experience of the individual "I" and the directions for the use and application of the objects and things autonomously presented as images of the collective "I."

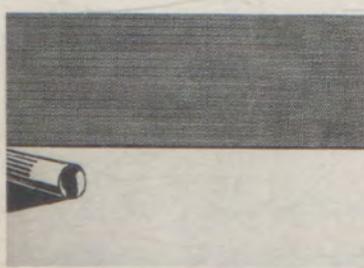
The supports of the Pop and Minimal conception are thus not a mystical communion between material and gesture, color and action, but rather the *mental gaze* into the vortex of mass culture and into the factuality of the things that happen around us. The ideal, for Pop and Minimal Art, is a distillation of



Ellsworth Kelly, Blue on Blue,  
1963



Donald Judd, solo exhibition, Green Gallery,  
New York, 1963



Roy Lichtenstein, Landscape with Column,  
1965

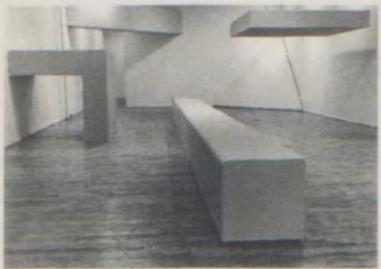
life into its scenic factuality, as a place of the occurrence of the industrial imagination, and its phenomenal factuality, as the place of a spatial and temporal codification of primary elements. What, in those years, was coming to fruition in the United States was an awareness that the artistic life should not be devoted only to the narcissistic protagonism of the individual, who had recently emerged from the crisis and tragedy of the postwar years, but should also, and above all, be geared toward sparking an analysis of the *nervous* system of the imagination and the visual faculty from a scenographic and propagandistic point of view, and from the point of view of the conceptualization of the perception of the object. Having emerged from the illusion of an art that had hoped to replace, through the sacrifice of its heroes, the ugliness of the real, Pop Art and Minimalism, between 1961 and 1964, through a conscious immersion in the ephemerality and concreteness of the elusive, tangential world of the real, broke away from the ecstatic communion that had accompanied the disproportionate growth of the centripetal force of the ego, and began a subtle, critical distillation of the laws of the theatricality of things, products and objects. Both movements foregrounded the morphology of images, their power to involve us, which is absolute. Art, therefore, not as synthesis, but as attention to the visual text, ambiguous and dubious, offered by society in the form of icon and structure. "I think," says Jasper Johns, "the object itself is a dubious concept."<sup>1</sup> Their investigations of the nature of their existence as industrial and structural spectacle are a continual attempt to redefine their relationships with this elusive system, which is ever about to mutate and disappear — shadow and double — and seeks only to protect the movement that exceeds life and art. From this arises the *metaphysical* element that Pop and Minimalism share, inasmuch as they both embody a genealogical analysis of the opposing concepts of the real world and the apparent world. On the one hand, there is Pop that seeks, by appropriation, to impede or negate the development and multiplicity of the social; on the other hand, there is Minimalism, which operates on the principle that it is above all worldly dimension. Both aspire to overturn the appearance of reality, seeking — mystically — an unattainable definition, both on the level of iconic artifice and on that of formal and structural concept.

It is hardly an accident that they were born contemporaneously, coming to light within the same span of time, wending their ways through the same New York galleries and museums — from the Green and Leo Castelli galleries to the Jewish Museum and the Guggenheim — whose Puritan spirit still upheld a neoplatonic vision of the real: appearance as the manifestation of the intelligible world. From different perspectives, such figures as Lichtenstein, Kelly, Oldenburg, as well as Walter De Maria, Morris and Stella, betrayed a concern for saving *phenomena*. They all operated according to an idealistic metaphysics that might re-evaluate the appearance of a cartoon or a box, or the essence of a portal or a line. Each work was aimed at re-evaluating the positive and the negative, the meaning or emptiness of appearance, in favor of being, such as it was moralistically maintained by Pollock and the Action Painters.

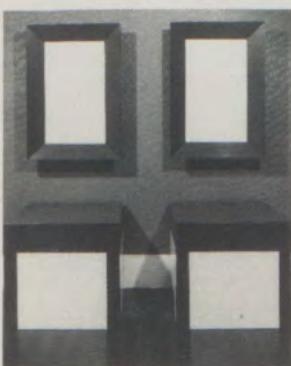
Although considered antithetical for decades, Pop and Minimalism maintained a relationship of harmony and affinity. Each gave speech back to things, whether these were simulacra or phenomena, pure or impure appearances, symbols or structural systems, copies or originals. They tended, in fact, to replicate objects or to reveal, by artificially constructing them, the primary phenomena of construction. Whether it is Oldenburg reformulating, in soft materials, the appearance of a hamburger or an ice



Claes Oldenburg, Bedroom Ensemble, 1963



Robert Morris, solo exhibition, Green Gallery, New York, 1964



Richard Artschwager,  
Mirror-Mirror/Table-Table,  
1964

cream, sensualizing their outwardness and strangeness, or Judd concretizing something that *does not exist*, such as the geometrical sequence of a volumetric entity at once present and absent and proliferating in time and space, such as a cube or parallelepiped, both artists aim at demonstrating the significance and splendor of “appearances,” whether real or abstract. They glorify their presence in itself, bringing it out into the open and solemnly celebrating it, metaphysically offering its intelligibility to the gaze of all. In the two-year period of 1963–64, this syntony emerged in the attention both groups gave to cold and mechanical mediums, in the common use of industrial materials, of superficial, flat, and monochromatic applications of paint, and of impersonal languages.

In 1963, when Andy Warhol turned his energies to shooting a film like *Sleep*, Lichtenstein substituted the technique of the sketch for images projected onto the canvas, while Oldenburg was abandoning objects of plaster and painted canvas in favor of synthetic vinyl and formica, in *Bedroom Ensemble*, 1963. At the same time, starting in 1964, the primary constructions of Judd, Morris, De Maria and Dan Flavin, abandoned their manual aspects and natural materials such as plywood, in favor of impersonal, industrial execution and such materials as steel, fluorescent lights, lead, aluminum and galvanized iron.<sup>2</sup> In the sphere of Minimalist painting, Stella and Kelly, also in 1964, abandoned symmetry in their paintings and shaped their stretchers and outlines in such a way as to echo the idea and volume, open and irregular, of the object and the thing.

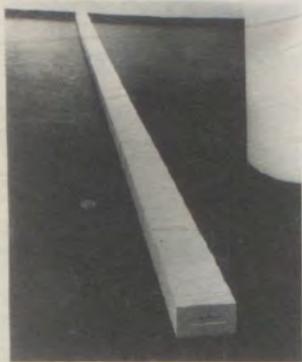
Once the heroic identity of the artist, who through his self-sacrifice shaped and planned the orientation of his existence, fell into crisis and then ceased to be, Pop and Minimal artists no longer felt themselves to be repositories of a truth or energy capable of promising redemption. They did not isolate themselves, nor did they live in the malaise of a past marked by tragedy or in the desire for a utopian future. Rather, they tended to inhabit the present. They accepted it and adapted themselves to the situation, passing through it without wanting to transcend or negate it. In this sense, their journey was open to every sort of contamination and ambiguity — to the point where, as of 1964, their paths met,<sup>3</sup> and even intersected and overlapped, as in the case of Richard Artschwager, in whose work the everyday object and primary structure merge.

When Michael Heizer frequented the San Francisco Art Institute for a short period in 1963–64, at the age of twenty, the news about the New York movements had mostly to do with Pop Art, which received immediate recognition in the Berkeley area, at the Oakland Art Museum, with the show *Pop Art in the USA*, 1963. This was complemented in Southern California by the steady flow of shows organized at the Ferrus Gallery and Dwan Gallery in Los Angeles, which exhibited Lichtenstein, Warhol, Johns, Rauschenberg, Samaras, and Stella. The Art Institute was instead strongly marked by the work of artists such as Voulkos, the ceramicist John Mason and “funk assemblage” sculptors such as Harold Paris, Robert Arneson, Robert Hudson and William Geis. All the same, information circulated via *Artforum*, the magazine founded in Los Angeles and edited by John Coplans, who in a review put Lichtenstein’s Pop and Stella’s cold, mental painting on the same plane.<sup>4</sup>

Faced with a whirlwind of definitions and choices ranging from the representative and material confusion of the Bay Area artists, who were still under the sway of a radical spirit linked to formlessness and gesturality, to the painterly, iconic coolness of recent New York import — expressed as much in the mechanistic, consumeristic vision of Pop as in the formal and chromatic extremism of Stella’s paintings and sculptures — Heizer, after a brief student period devoted to figural paintings in



*Primary Structures*, The Jewish Museum,  
New York, 1966



Carl Andre, *Level*, 1966



Frank Stella, solo exhibition,  
Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, 1966

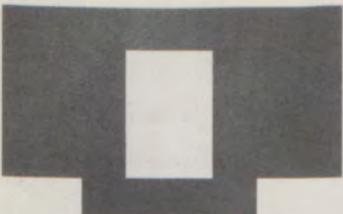
which the human image is nevertheless submerged in vast monochrome surfaces, finally opted for a cold, geometric approach, objective and plastic, to painting.

In early 1965, he painted some large canvases (roughly 8' × 9') in acrylics which feature a visual joining of elliptical and curvate forms covered with patterns and colored stripes. These were followed in early 1966 by paintings in enamel on masonite, such as *Untitled*, [p. 3], which feature interlocking geometric forms and monochrome colors, such as blue and orange. The surfaces are uneven, because their contours are shaped and dictated by the internal forms. With these first contributions, which establish a dialectic between color and canvas or rigid surface, Heizer immediately distinguished himself from dominant California painting, represented by Sam Francis, John McLaughlin, Clifford Still and Richard Diebenkorn. He was venturing into the universe of the "shaped canvas," made of raw or industrial materials, which would leave its mark on the art scenes of San Francisco and Los Angeles in the works of such artists as Bruce Conner, Jay de Feo, Larry Bell and Craig Kauffman.

This first linguistic step was taken when Heizer left the Art Institute and California altogether and moved to New York in 1965. Here the artist found himself confronted with the absolutism of Judd and Kelly, the cold, industrial chromaticism of Artschwager's sculpture-objects, the free surface intersections of Stella, the reductivism of Morris' compositions of plywood painted grey, the two- and three-dimensional orchestrations of Sol LeWitt, and the brick sequences of Carl Andre — all of whom were showing in New York in 1965 and 1966, and many of whom would find recognition in the *Primary Structures* exhibition that opened on April 27, 1966 at the Jewish Museum, the same institution that had given the first large museum shows to Rauschenberg and Johns in 1963 and 1964, respectively.

Organized by Kynaston McShine, this exhibition brought together works by American and British artists who, since the start of the sixties, had been developing a reductive, primary, *minimal* approach to sculpture.<sup>5</sup> Embracing the motto of Ad Reinhardt, taken from Mies van der Rohe, that "less is more," these artists definitively rejected illusionistic, lyrical and personal elements, not to mention iconic and figural references, and turned their interests to standard units such as lines, planes and volumes, which in their essentiality precluded all associative references yet proved to be tautologically meaningful.

Typical of this position are the works of Andre, Judd, LeWitt, Morris, and Flavin, with their arrangements and agglomerations of simple geometric or volumetric *modules* or standard forms drawn directly from mass production, such as fluorescent tubes, planks, metal sheets and bricks. The units are organized on the floor or on the wall, so that their definition stems entirely from their position and arrangement in space. They possess nothing singular about them, but produce quantities of negative and positive space, verticals and horizontals, which change the topological significance of the standard units. The resulting compositions are "groups of meaning," whose significance derives from the constructive process and their positioning in the space. The construction and repetition of simple volumes in accordance with a symmetrical pattern influences the spatial *totality* in such a way that these works tend to incorporate, without distinctions of value, the surrounding space. The integration of spatial conditions occurs through the variation of scale, as in the works of Judd, Morris, Ronald Bladen and Robert Grosvenor, which create a physical connection between floor and ceiling, painted surface and wall. The structure becomes architecture and the components lose their connotations as objects, becoming a primary unit that establishes a back-and-forth relationship between elementary structures.



F.A.X., 1965



Untitled, 1966



Untitled, 1966

The dialogical movement among symmetrical and equivalent parts, whose sculptural quality lies essentially in the simplicity of elements that either repeat one another or establish interactive relationships, is also reflected in the painting. In September of the same year, the show *Systemic Painting*, curated by Lawrence Alloway, opened at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of New York. This was the first attempt by an American museum to offer painting that stepped beyond the Greenberghian boundaries of Abstract Expressionism and Action Painting and beyond the definitions of Color Field painting.<sup>6</sup> To this end, Alloway presented an alternative art that featured smooth, polished surfaces, compact colors and monochromes, and followed controlled, geometrical forms and structures. The reference to minimalist sculpture was clear, since this painting used primary abstractions and non-relational colors delineated by reductive, minimal forms that rejected all sense of disorder and sinuosity. Among the artists invited and cited in the catalogue were Reinhardt, Newman, David Novros, Al Held, Kelly, Agnes Martin, Stella, Robert Ryman and Robert Mangold. Centered around the basic principles of painting, their work pushed painting toward a procedural analysis of which the signifiers and signifieds were surface, support, form, pigment and application, always considered as units.

The historical points of reference were clearly the absolute formal standards established by Piet Mondrian, Kasimir Malevich and Aleksandr Rodchenko — reprised by Reinhardt's monochromatic, nihilist radicalism — which preclude all incident, symbol, image or sign, and turn one's theoretical attention to order and the conceptual process of painting.

### The Substratum of the Visible

In 1966, having immersed himself in the New York art milieu, which featured the dual dimension of Pop and Minimalism, Heizer did not aspire to an art that might span both, but rather focused his energies on a nihilistic, reductive approach, aimed at a negation of negation itself. His works of this period, called *Displacement Paintings*, rather than aim at a formalization of the relationships between primary elements such as color and surface, actually tend toward a dematerialization: they work toward the absence or the "displacement" of the material, dissolving the reality of painting in order to let us see its absence. What matters most in them is the vertigo of the void or the nothingness that takes its place at the center of the painting, which is viewed *in the negative*.

Compared to the formal dynamism and chromatic vivacity of the *Systemic Paintings*, Heizer's works tend towards an absolute iconic silence. They go beyond Stella's interaction between stripe and support and Kelly's color/form dialectic, basing themselves on a logical, impersonal constructivism that tends to stress only the unveiling of the metaphysics of painting. They bring out into the open an inner spatiality, absent and immaterial, something that lies *elsewhere*. What one should look at in them is not so much the perimeter, the thickness or the industrial color, but rather the center, the place where an absence, a form in the negative, appears: as in *Negative Painting*, 1966 [p. 7], which seems cut out from inside the surface and looks like a recess dozens of centimeters deep. The artist's task is not to form or to organize, to combine or to integrate, but rather *to remove*. These are mental operations aimed at finding an intimate link between phenomenon and *logos*, a connection given expression through the geometric definition of something that "does not manifest itself": the void, absence. This act of rendering the negative manifest bears witness to a will to give shape to the consciousness of a



Untitled, c. 1966

metaphysical entity that must be seen. The substance of his painting thus becomes the mute, evocative force, silent and absent, of an enigmatic presence, immaterial and non-physical. That absence and the negative are the hidden ciphers of his approach to painting becomes clear from the analogy between emptiness and fullness or between white and color, which carry on a dialogue with each other from a distance in some paintings since destroyed. Compared to the paintings of Stella and Kelly that "speak" of the articulation of forms and colors, these works of Heizer are looking for the breath buried within art. They are an *excavation* in search of painting before painting. They point to the authentic, metaphysical antecedent of visuality, contain images awaiting to become physical. The void and its negativity thus have a positive value, as a magical, interrogative operativity.

The act of registering an absence upsets the architecture of the painting, makes it resonate from within. The surface is transformed into a duet between presence and absence. The internal pneuma, in "breathing," between systole and diastole, modifies its physical perimeter, which pulsates and produces a gestation of forms without end. In 1966 and 1967, Heizer turns the painting into a cauldron of transformations from within to without, instilling it with a dynamic based on the dialectical relationships between color and light and between fullness and emptiness. The path is linear: first he describes the obsession with the center in the negative: *Untitled*, 1966 [p. 8]; then he brings out its centrifugal force, between opposite poles, from which signs and linearities radiate: *Rectangular Painting 1* and *Rectangular Painting 2*, 1967 [pp. 10, 11]; finally he arrives at its determinant force on the skin/membrane of the painting. In the *Untitled* series, 1967 [pp. 14–25], the center, as void or absence always subjected to simple, logical and geometrical control, radiates in every direction. It makes the painting's color and forms fibrillate, as it seeks to continue to join opposites, ever a fulcrum between the material and the immaterial, between positive and negative, high and low, left and right, inside and outside, fullness and emptiness.

It is clear that in these paintings Heizer is looking for an opening onto *infinity*. The search takes him inside the cavity of the surface, as if seeking to incubate a second birth. This passage, which transforms the color graft into a mass of light that passes through the material, is established in the 1967 sequence that begins with *Untitled 3* [p. 35], leads to *North, East, South, West* [model, pp. 30, 31], and finally arrives at *North, South* [pp. 37, 38–39], a negative space cut into the landscape of the Sierra Nevada in California.

The sequence marks the transition from a mental painting to a material intervention of light in earthly matter, from a structuring of two-dimensional vision to an architecture of light and immateriality in the land. It fixes and *physically* stabilizes the metaphysical element of his work: "In 1967 I completed a large body of work and decided that the physicality of the paintings had grown to the point where they became sculptural. They had become diagrams of dimension. Two of these paintings gave me the basis for my first underground sculpture [...]. I was a painter. I didn't like sculpture. I didn't want to make objects. What was interesting was the chance to make something metaphysical. I had photographs of big rocks from Peru, Bolivia, and Mexico, and I began to feel that I wanted to work with those materials and forms. It just started to come together, though it was very complicated. I was interested in massive objects as well as the absence of objects."<sup>7</sup>

Heizer's gaze, which in the paintings dwelled on the two-dimensional dialectic between interior and exterior, makes a leap at the very moment in which he "recognizes" another surface: that *on* the



Eccentric Painting, 1967



North, South, 1967



Richard Long, England, 1968

ground, or that of the ground. This, too, offers the possibility of foregrounding an invisible, immaterial point that only the inner eye can explore. Beyond its surface value, typical of painting, where the conjunction of geometric figure and ground or floor takes place, the secret, enigmatic space of absence and presence, immobile and disturbing, can assume the valence of a rising and a sinking. Initially, these movements are projected, and exist in the two models of *North, East, South, West*, both consisting of four volumes (a cylinder, a cuneiform triangle, a cone and the aggregate of a cube and parallelepiped), defined by metal surfaces that in one model rise up, with their presence as mass, from a base [p. 31], and in the other sink down in the base in their absence as mass [p. 30]. The model is a hermeneutic passage between the sensible and the supersensible, between open and closed, emptiness and fullness, physical and metaphysical. It makes manifest the dual direction, positive and negative, of the possible path to be taken in Heizer's sculpture, which, over the years and through the various works — from *Double Negative*, 1969–70 [pp. 205–239], to *City: Complex One*, 1972–74 [pp. 264–285, 288–289] and *City: Complex Two*, 1980–88 [pp. 440–465] — will reveal and celebrate the dialectical relationship between the presence and absence of mass, identifiable both in matter and in immateriality.

However, the transition from painting to models which, even in their mental articulation, still retrace a sculptural condition of Minimalist derivation, seems to necessitate a third dimension that might differently absorb, incorporate and hold the essence of being. The new condition springs from the identification of a different *membrane*, that of the earth, which for Heizer becomes a potential area for expanding the embryonic energy already in the cavities of the paintings. In *North, South*, 1967, his sculpture sprouts from the earth, from the positive/negative of two forms, the cone and cube plus parallelepiped, which spill into the fullness of the Sierra Nevada. Here the dialogue between physical and metaphysical, between material and immaterial, presence and absence, takes on cosmic dimensions. Art becomes a telluric force, not rocky but fluid, because it is able to accept the flow of forms and volumes, of signs and incisions. The chasm of pure volumetric form allows contemporary art to express a feeling that one might call panic (from the god Pan) and fabular. We see a return to the archetype of an art as metaphor of the human being who demiurgically constructs, or rather shapes, the universe, so that it may house his earthly self-projection. Plunging forms and images into the earth means *spatializing* the origin, anterior art: the place before birth. It is a locus rich in references to the archaic conception of nature, as Heizer perceived it in his early adolescence and youth, which were marked by the presence of his maternal and paternal grandfathers, experts both in excavation and mining maps, and by the influence of his father, a well-known scholar of Pre-Columbian civilizations. Indeed Heizer transforms the terrain of the Sierra Nevada into a womb, a generative receptacle, a matrix in which one may find the matter that forms all: where matter and all are in perpetual transmutation between life and death.

With *North, South*, 1967, Heizer's art, and contemporary art along with it, enters the sphere of pure process. It brings the creative act back into the formless cavity of primary energy that produces all forms, into the place where all archaic, ancient and modern cultures have always found and situated this energy. He returns to the primordial substratum of the world, to what has existed from time immemorial. Where the sovereign and indifferent activity of all *visibility* occurs.

This effective conception of the energetic and the conceptual, the immaterial and the terrestrial, which before 1966 had been at times formulated<sup>8</sup> but never physicalized, much less put on exhibit, put



G. Robert Deiro, 1971  
Photo Michael Heizer



Petroglyph (detail), Silver Springs, Nevada

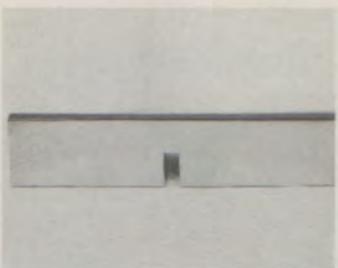
Heizer among the ranks of such champions of philosophical art as Joseph Kosuth and Christine Kozlov, among those tending toward the conceptual and non-physical, such as LeWitt and Robert Barry, and among those who were attempting to recuperate the transformative power of natural — animal and vegetal — materials by combining them with artificial materials, such as Mario Merz, Jannis Kounellis, Richard Long and Jan Dibbets.

It was in February 1967 that Kosuth organized, at the Lannis Gallery in New York, the show entitled *Non-Anthropomorphic Art*, which featured works based on theoretical declarations emphasizing the conceptual and philosophical value of art. In June of that same year LeWitt published his "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" in *Artforum*. At the same time, in Europe, there was a growing anti-Minimalist tendency in such groups as Arte Povera and Process Art, which were beginning to use such materials as air, smoke, sand, sulphur, stones and fire. They proposed experience itself as a value, and aspired to integrate far-fetched practices and subjects, excluding no procedures or materials. The origins of signs were to be found in natural being and sensory activity, which would produce a bodily, physical attitude re-linking culture with nature. This inversion of the sign was reflected in a generational turbulence that demanded an autonomy expressed in the recuperation of the "individual" value of the materials and of the forces that the preceding society had dismissed, for reasons of sex or race, age or class. Dogmas crumbled and absolute truths eroded, systems tottered and power blocs disintegrated. The broadening of participation was exceptional, because it acknowledged no limits. Forbidden subjects and perceptual limits exploded, the armor of internal repression was de-activated, and each element was "allowed to speak." One no longer accepted the concept of a partial art, isolated from the world and from nature, from life and from death. The goal was a *pan-aestheticism* capable of involving any and every kind of material and language.

Heizer's emphasis is on the re-emergence of a material, earth, and of its physical, environmental and territorial components. The action that inspires him, however, while having its roots in sacred Olmec and Inca ritual, remains the expression of a modern American perspective. It is informed by the idea of a living culture bound to the transformation of energies and capable of infusing the organism of art with the magnetism of nature.

This is an important point, because Heizer never forgets he is an artist and an American. He wants to maintain contact with the aesthetic and formal language of his present day, and to continue expanding it through the use of autonomous, not European, matrices. In this sense his efforts have been inspired by artists like Adolph Gottlieb, who strive to recuperate a Native American iconography, thereby re-evaluating the magic naturalism of the elemental materials found in the sierras and mesas, the deserts and canyons of the United States. "I was determined to be a contributor to the development of American art, not simply to continue European art. By European art, I meant paintings on canvas and sculptures that you walk around and that look like Balzac or Moses. I was intentionally trying to develop an American art, and the only sources I felt were available were American: South American, Mesoamerican or North American."<sup>9</sup>

Facing the task of reflecting the world-view of an enormous, highly organized and technologically equipped country, Heizer broke free of New York, the "last" European city, to retrace the pre-urban cultural experiences that had come to maturation in the endless expanses of the American West. He sought to detach himself from the artistic cell and its communitarian subordination in order to find, by



Walter De Maria, Death Wall, 1965



Walter De Maria, Mile Long Drawing, 1968

himself, an environmental and cultural totality bearing deposits of new forms of knowledge — new because unexpressed and unexplored by contemporary art.

In 1967, he returned to the West, travelling first through Nevada and the Mojave Desert in search of sites and lands, petroglyphs and primitive architectures. During his travels he became aware of the dialectical encounter between the ancient, archaic world that still permeates the great American expanse and the very advanced technological development of a powerful nation like the United States. He rediscovered the religious, ritual structures of Mesa Verde, the rock paintings, the urban settlements, the ceremonial centers and holy sites of the Native American cultures, as well as the tremendous natural beauty of the places.

With its narrowness and cultural and artistic incestuousness, New York, a city of technological monoliths without magic or mystery, became intolerable to him. He asked himself whether it would be possible to extend its gigantism beyond its confines, and thereby to continue the dialogue between art and an environment other than the urban one. He found the answer to his question in the virgin earth, which offered untouched, raw materials, and the possibility of serving as a medium for art.

Going back to the zero-point of a given physical site reconciled him to the destiny of art. More than this, however, he rediscovered the sources of life and sought to master them through consciousness, technique, indifference and fury. His was a wholly pioneering act, typical of the vanguards of modern art, who were forever interested in realizing gestures capable of grasping or subduing the unknown.

In 1966, Heizer moved to Mercer Street, in the heart of the Manhattan district that would later be called Soho. Since 1964 artists had been moving into industrial buildings there, and enterprising dealers and artists had been opening up galleries or "downtown" contemporary art spaces, such as the cooperative Park Place Gallery, where Heizer exhibited a painting in a group show entitled *F.A.X.*, and the later Paula Cooper Gallery and Richard Feigen Galleries.<sup>10</sup> In the space of a single year the area was transformed into a neighborhood that combined studios, galleries, co-ops, bars and restaurants like Fanelli's and Max's Kansas City.<sup>11</sup> Here artists gathered to exchange ideas and news on the state of art. Here, in 1966, Heizer met De Maria, and in 1969, his path crossed with that of Robert Smithson. They would discuss political events, such as the war in Vietnam, and matters of artistic survival. They would talk with the young gallery owners, such as Paula Cooper, who even before opening her Soho gallery in October 1968, had already given De Maria his first solo show. They would take part in events that featured films and performances.

When the paths of Heizer and De Maria crossed, the latter was already a mature artist, ten years older than Heizer. He had already had three solo shows in New York, where he exhibited objects — made of plywood and metals such as zinc, steel and aluminum — with a strong symbolic, metaphysical charge, in search of another dimension that was supposed to transcend the boundary between life and death. Yet while De Maria's work had its historical reference-points in Minimalist absolutism and Fluxus conceptualism, Heizer's roots sank three generations deep into the Nevada deserts, where his family had been living since 1880. And it was Heizer who invited and prompted De Maria and Smithson to "leave" New York and venture out into the great American expanse in search of a new aesthetic territory for art. Except for the precedent of Jean Tinguely, who in 1962 realized the project *Etude pour une fin du monde n. 2* in a dry salt lake in a desert near Las Vegas, no artist, before Heizer, had ever explored such areas of silence and emptiness. Like Heizer and De Maria, Smithson too was



Foot Kick Gesture, 1968



Foot Kick Gesture, 1968

interested in finding a way out of the Pop and Minimal dialectic, and took off from the latter to enter a new dimension of perception. Between 1965 and 1967, he produced constructions with mirrors intended to confuse all definitions of form and volume, and oscillating towards a confusion of elements instead of seeking to give them linear, primary definition.

What did these artists have in common? Aside from their friendship, their mutual associations, their contacts with Morris, Andre and Virginia Dwan, they shared a wish to leave New York and a passion for working in the deserts and mountains of the vast American territory. They were all in search of a different *dialectic* between art and the environmental context. They drew inspiration from science, metaphysics and mineralogy. They were drawn by lithic materials, visited quarries, and planned ways to relate their work, through drawings and maps, to the land of the American continent.<sup>12</sup> Of the three, Heizer was the most intolerant of the limitations of New York, and the one most active in travelling to the lands of the West, determined to create a vision of transnational art. "I had been in New York for a while and pretty much learned about the limits [...]. I was trying to extend the reach of New York, because I was informed by the spirit and dialogue of New York."<sup>13</sup> In 1968, Heizer hired G. Robert Deiro to accompany him in the search for lands and open spaces in which he might execute interventions. This same Deiro would later help De Maria in his search for plains and desert. At times the two artists travelled together to Las Vegas, to the Lava Site and Mojave Desert, in Nevada.<sup>14</sup>

There, during one of their surveys in the Mojave, De Maria, with Heizer's help, realized the *Mile Long Drawing*, consisting of two lines of white chalk, four inches wide and about four yards apart, running parallel for one mile across an expanse of desert sand. The drawing was intended as a preliminary draft for the construction of *Walls in the Desert*, the 1964 conceptual project composed of two parallel walls, a bit taller than human height and one mile long, inspired by metal sculptures in the shape of cross, swastika and star, which contained a moving sphere inside.

Both Heizer with *North, South*, 1967, and De Maria with *Mile Long Drawing*, 1968, give precise definition to the goal of re-immersing art in the aura and sacrality of the archaic ritual typical of Mesoamerican religious culture. Their aim was to rekindle the cosmic sense of creativity and project it into the space of the primordial substratum of earth. On its crust or in its bowels, all images intersect. De Maria's vision is *constructive*, and aims to reflect an edification that falls within the tradition of sculpture and architecture, while Heizer, coming from a *planar* conception, believes in integrating and crystallizing sign and matter *on the surface*, so that they become a fulcrum between gesture and form and achieve a shift of energy and a visualization of space and light. This difference becomes apparent in the first works, executed between January and May 1968, such as *Windows 1, Gesture, and Field*, which were followed over that summer by the *Nine Nevada Depressions*, a series of works commissioned by Robert C. Scull, a New York taxi magnate famous for having acquired, in the early sixties, great numbers of New Dada and Pop works by Rauschenberg, Johns, Oldenburg and Warhol. *Nine Nevada Depressions* consists of nine elements arranged in a linear sequence covering 520 miles, making it the largest work of sculpture ever realized.

Between January and May 1968, in the Nevada desert, using such tools as pickaxes, shovels, wood and cement, Heizer constructed nine new interventions on the surface of the desert. These works across the map of the earth further his concern with the profound dialectical relationship between pneuma and matter, between light and darkness. Art presents itself as a void that sucks in energy in order to



Atomic test, Nevada, 15 April 1955  
Photo Frederic Lewis, New York

leave its mark on the surface of nature. Like the paintings that dealt with negativity and “displacement,” these works treat the removal and lack of weight and density. They are fissures or wedges created by defining a space within the terrain, in the surface of which they open up a great cavity that underscores an absence of mass. As dissections, they do not add, the way traditional sculpture does; rather, they subtract or remove, opening themselves up to a metaphysical unleashing of force and casting thought into matter itself.

Like the abyss that yawns at the center of the first *Untitled* paintings (1966–67), the *incisions* in the earth replace the normal construction of sculpture with a *transparent* and *invisible* architecture, a kind of immaterial mercury that penetrates and marks the desert’s crust. Inspired by the paintings, these interventions all have to do with a desire to amplify “painterly” action: the line is replaced by light, the surface by the terrain. This transition is evident in the transposition of the visual pattern serving as the structure for *Untitled*, 1967 [p. 45] and *Field*, 1968 [pp. 46–47], in which the points of intersection of the lines become the points where light passes through the earth. The same can be said for *Collapse* [pp. 56–57], *Trough* [p. 59], *Gesture* [p. 42], *Windows 1* [p. 43], *Slot 1* [pp. 60–61], *Slot 2* [p. 63], and *Compression Line* [pp. 52–55], which were all executed in 1968, the titles of which already reflect an “incising” and an approach similar to that of the early paintings. Thus if these works can be seen as a transfer of the canvas surface onto the earth, we can likewise reverse the reading of the paintings and see them as architecture for hanging on walls, innervated models of a geometrical method that, by breaking up into forms and neutral colors, produces chasms and ditches as well as mounds, obelisks and elevations. This work anticipates the incised and woven mountain of signs of the great hieroglyphic of *Double Negative*, 1969–70.

That these works derive from the folding and cutting of canvas and masonite is clear from the wood planks and voids of which, in *Compression Line* and *Collapse*, they are made up. The method is always to remove and to excavate, to immerse oneself in the womb of painting or the earth, *Ground Incision/Loop Drawing* [pp. 68–69], in order to find its breath or sacred pneuma. Only in the case of *Circular Surface Drawing* [p. 51] is the spiral, in a graphic shift, made of the same material/earth as that which forms the design.

One could say that subtending this first group of interventions is a signic exploration of the line, which lies somewhere between drawing and incision. This is immediately followed by a second, equally seething and intense group of works, although these are more chromaticized, packed with colors, gestures and dispersals of energy. We see this, for example, in *Black Dye and Powder Dispersal 1* and 2, Coyote Dry Lake, California, 1968 [pp. 70–73], where the pure chromatic material, in the form of pigment, is spread over the ground with the wind’s help and comes to form another dissipation of the breath of art: “The *Dye Paintings* and drawings on the ground were made in recognition of the possibility of a synthesis of previous traditions in art that are available to us, reintroducing them within the limitations of pre-technological imagery. The sculptures were developed first, and the drawings and paintings came later. They were essentially an expansion and completion of this way of working.”<sup>15</sup> Finally, there is the last group of works, which, while keeping intact the prior linear register, with occasional chromatic connotations, asserts the prominence of the *macrosign*, the earthen hieroglyph, highly compact but immense in size. These are the *Nine Nevada Depressions* [pp. 82–107], all executed at the same time, during the summer of 1968.



Large Nazca Triangle, Peru, c. 600–900  
Photo Marilyn Bridges



Dissipate, 1968



Primitive Dye Painting, 1969

### Deserts of the Imagination

With more operative possibilities at his disposal in the construction of *Nine Nevada Depressions*, 1968, Heizer was able to use machinery of greater environmental impact. Thus even while continuing his dialogue with earthen materials and the land itself, his interventions became larger in size, to the point where, to be seen in their totality, they must be viewed aerially. Evident in the new works, however, was the development of the germinal complex of the *Nine Nevada Depressions*, which in fact, as a whole, contains all the possibilities of process and form, of plan and concept, that will be formulated on a macroscopic scale in the coming years. The line defining *Isolated Mass/Circumflex* [pp. 102–107] is over one hundred feet long and was created by removing several tons of earth from the soil of Massacre Dry Lake, in Nevada. The same can be said for *Rift* [pp. 82–85], a zig-zag line marking the surface of Jean Dry Lake, Nevada. Lastly, there are the *Interstices* [pp. 80–81], in which the important thing is the interweaving of straight line and curve. These works, too, are the result of a consistent development that starts with the *Negative Paintings* of 1966 and leads to the *Negative Sculptures* of 1968, except that these are scattered across an area of over 500 miles and to experience them as a whole, one must undertake a nomadic journey across the Nevada expanse, which for Heizer has become the expanse of his imagination. In this sense, these macroscopic interventions echo the *Nazca Drawings* discovered in Peru by Maria Reiche<sup>16</sup> except that Heizer, like De Maria, sees them in purely linear terms, beyond all sacred and ritual representation.

Their dispersal or scattering over a vast territory is not an accident, of course. It serves to establish an awareness of art's new surface: the continent itself. This choice underlies and opens up a perspective of great distance, whereby the contemplation of art, henceforth, can only take place in accordance with the optics of Renaissance perspective, revolving around a vision rather close to the object or thing, the sign or the line, but only as seen from above, according to maps and geographical and topographical surveys, which can be of assistance in the journey and the discovery.

This position enabled the artist to rediscover the world and become attuned with the manned space flight that was first started in the early sixties. At the same time, the extraterrestrial projection onto the terrestrial was linked to the environmental impact of the dramatic, new technological discoveries in construction and destruction. “I knew I was doing something new and I knew it had a vague relationship to other disciplines such as architecture. In my case the sensibility was based on a feeling that we were coming close to the end of the world. The idea of living in the postnuclear age informed everything. The clock was ticking.”<sup>17</sup>

The *Nine Nevada Depressions*, in their totality, imply a earthly displacement of art, where the artist positions himself in a helicopter or airplane to connect with the whole of his work. It thus becomes clear why Heizer’s first declarations had to do with a negation of, or at the very least a removal from, the system of museums and galleries, and why his contributions to shows and exhibitions consisted of photographs or large ektachromes. The photographs of his sculptures were intended as tools of communication; they are not, therefore, “art photos,” but should rather be seen as means of disseminating information. To *Earthworks*, for example, the New York exhibition organized at the Dwan Gallery in October 1968 to document the projects of such artists as Morris, Andre, De Maria and Long, who were interested in an art made of earth and of materials drawn from the earth, Heizer contributed a photograph of *Dissipate 2*, Black Rock Desert, Nevada [pp. 98–101].

Everything moves toward the disappearance of the object and the foregrounding of the conditions of life. The latter cannot be fixed, they must be accepted as they are. Thus the *Nine Nevada Depressions* also contain, within themselves, their own dissipation and decomposition, and their eventual total disappearance. At the same time, the acceptance of a metamorphosis bound to the natural conditions of existence makes it inevitable that marks traced on the earth's surface will be transformed as atmospheric, solar and climatic conditions evolve.

Already existing elements determine some of the works: *Double Compression* [pp. 88–89], is defined according to the fissures in the rock and the shadows in the landscape, while *Cilia* [pp. 90–91], is constructed as a solar “machine” capable of breaking up or registering solar rays and shadows, following a continuous rhythm.

Also requiring contemplation from above are the *Primitive Dye Paintings* [pp. 109–123], realized in early 1969 in Coyote Dry Lake in the Mojave Desert. Their initial purpose was clearly to transpose macroscopically the painterly gesture, from the Native Americans to Pollock, into earthen stratifications. However, their inevitable ephemerality and disappearance were finally brought together, against the artist's will, by a transformation not natural but technological: that is, their documentation on film. In 1968, the German director Gerry Schum approached Heizer with an offer to film one of his interventions for a piece devoted to “Land Art” (the filmmaker's term), entitled *Fernsehausstellung*, that would be aired on television. Like De Maria, Dibbets, Long, Dennis Oppenheim, Marinus Boezem, Smithson and Barry Flanagan, Heizer agreed to let himself be filmed while executing *Primitive Dye Painting 2*, 1969 [pp. 122–123]. The encounter with Schum was part of a broadening of the artist's contacts with Europe. Critics and curators such as Wim Beeren, Harry Szeeman, and Germano Celant, and gallerists such as Heiner Friederich, invited him, over the course of 1969, to take part in group shows such as *Op Losse Schroeven* at the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam, and *When Attitude Becomes Form* at the Kunsthalle of Bern, Switzerland. He was also included in books such as *Arte Povera* and had a solo show organized for him in Germany.

Given the restrictions of environment and landscape in Europe, however, Heizer was unable to realize any major interventions there. He therefore tried his hand instead at microscopic dimensions, at Dusseldorf, with *Windows 2* and *Matchdrop*, 1969 [p. 125]. He got back on track, in any case, with the help of Friedrich, who first commissioned *Five Conic Displacements*, 1969 [pp. 134–143], where for the first time he was finally able to use machines such as bulldozers and excavators to move the earth; then, together with Franz Dalhem, Friedrich commissioned the artist for an intervention in the city of Munich. The macroscopic quality of the first project lay in the five cone-shaped hollows arranged along an axis of three hundred feet long and dug into the desert plain of Coyote Dry Lake, California; the second work, *Munich Depression*, 1969 [pp. 145–151], involved the excavation and moving of a thousand tons of soil in order to create an enormous hollow one hundred feet wide and almost sixteen feet deep, also conical in shape: “The point of *Munich Depression* at the time was that it could be built anywhere in the natural world. In Munich I was surprised to work with beautiful gravels. At that time I was developing ideas for using heavy equipment and producing work in the Mojave Desert. When I went to Munich the *Depression* was the next work I did. By exposing its materials, this work became an analysis of the place.”<sup>18</sup> *Munich Depression*, 1969, strives to explore the city's hidden breath, creating a geometric valley, or negative Gothic chapel, in the urban terrain. It brings up from below a space of



Circular Surface Planar Displacement Drawing (in construction), 1970



Circular Surface Planar Displacement Drawing, 1970

emptiness and light that becomes, once we are immersed in the middle of it, a scenic instrument for hiding from the panorama of the city.

Heizer opposes the fatedness of architecture with the immobile, illuminating presence of nature, renewing the cosmic, primitive human being's superiority over the artificiality of life. At the same time, the *Munich Depression* hollow is also an attempt to transpose the American model of interpretation, which is based on moving great masses and using huge machines, onto a European context. It has a symbolic, metaphorical value, because it uses emptiness to read the fullness of history. It posits the absence of volumes against their presence, the calm of silence against the delirium of noise and traffic. By transforming the context, Heizer's work anticipates a critique, solicits a virtual, utopian image that brings art out of the realm of simple decoration, painting and sculpting, stripping and dramatizing the material and revealing art's purifying, alternate function, which is closer to transparency and absence than to opacity and the useless, obese occupation of space.

Bringing the human being back to earthliness is Heizer's constant premiss for re-arranging material, bearing the testimony of art through contemporary means. Rather than speak of landscape, then, we ought to speak of the transformation of the earth's surface through human action. Among the instruments used in the perceptive alteration of space and time, there is also the motorcycle, which in the anti-Hollywood film *Easy Rider*, 1969, becomes the symbol of a generation aspiring to liberation from political and consumeristic alienation. The film's individualistic, anarchic charge very closely matches the radical spirit of Heizer, who in 1970, continuing his work of moving material to create macroscopic figures and signs, drew enormous circles — the largest four hundred feet in diameter — in Jean Dry Lake, Nevada, using the tracks of a powerful motorcycle to trace them. This is called *Circular Surface Planar Displacement Drawing, 1970* [pp. 194–201], and *Tangential Drawing, 1970*.

Says Heizer: "When I made the negative sculptures I realized the possibility of an entire vocabulary. I felt that if you made sculptures like this with basic materials such as earth, you should also envelop the areas of drawing and painting so as to expose the whole vocabulary. I made the ground drawing and the ground painting with this index in mind."<sup>19</sup>

Until now, as we have noted, Heizer's work has been absolutely *planar* and *pictorial*. That is, it consists of a shifting of materials on a surface, of cutting or digging into its plane, of tracing incisions and tracks, lines and curves, of scattering colors and signs, circular or zigzagged, over the earth's crust. If not for the physical, territorial context, its creation would always evoke a *virtual* space reminiscent of the painting, which is never formalistic or illusionistic but simply spatial. In this sense, Heizer's oeuvre reaffirms its ties to the spatial specificity of Minimalism, but goes beyond its system of treatment and exhibition, because he establishes an absolute, irremovable equivalent — the third dimension, which Minimalism lacks — between the structure of perception and the context.

In Heizer's case, the correspondence of surfaces between painting and sediment, which leads to an equivalence between terrain and canvas, earth and color, excavation and cutout, precludes the tradition of an isolate *object* exhibited in a delimited space or on a base cut out or constructed for this purpose. Up to the *Nine Nevada Depressions*, 1968, the concept of artistic surface informing Heizer's work is the infinite, immeasurable surface of the Earth. It is *limitless*, but more than this, it is the starting point of all need for expression, of every work of art. Hence the need not to transport its elements from one point to another, nor to separate them or isolate them from it. From its soil, in fact, is generated the



Displaced/Replaced Mass 1 (detail), 1969



Displaced/Replaced Mass 1 (details), 1969

life as well as the death of art. The decision to work in deserts is likewise a consistent one: the desert is a limitless space, an inexhaustible territory without visible boundaries, a totality beyond which there seems to be nothing. For this reason Heizer adds nothing at all to it, but uses what already exists there, transforming it and verifying its possible evolution without fixing it within rigid, limiting contours. He works between the limit and the infinite, with an awareness of the negative, dissolving principle that sustains nature. He does not obstruct the evolution of the formless, disorganized state of nature, since with inclemencies and atmospheric changes his work ceases to be recognizable. The ideas of evolution and dissolution are thus the material substratum that make his interventions visible and imaginable. One work follows upon the other, and they dissolve one after the other, swallowed up by the boundless desert.

All the same, this acceptance of a return of artistic activity to the state of pure potential and natural energy has been subjected to continuous challenges over the course of the centuries. Think of the construction of the pyramids and ziggurats, the Great Wall and the mausoleums, in Egypt, the Yucatan, China and Mali.<sup>20</sup> These fantastic constructions, creating by moving millions of tons of stone and rock from the mountains to the deserts, have remained in Heizer's historical memory. As a very young boy, he received, read and studied his archaeologist father's books on Egyptian techniques of transporting enormous blocks of stone, and he visited some sites of magical and ritual practices: "My father did the petrography, the rock analysis, of the diorite used to make the two Colossi of Memnon at Luxor. He found the quarry source 400 miles away near Cairo and developed how they were floated up the Nile. I went to Peru and Bolivia at the age of 18 to document data on the *piedras cansadas*, the huge tired rocks found all over the Ande, stopped in transport."<sup>21</sup> What fascinated the artist at the time was the mythic idea that makes the human being one with the *possession* of nature, that is, with the construction of a habitation (derived from the Latin *habere*, to have, to possess) or a work of architecture intended to house life and death.

In the natural world's ephemeral state, this possession is effected through the control of *stone*, sign of permanence and immortality. Stone and rock embody both the earthly and the heavenly, emptiness and fullness; they thus perfectly reflect the dialectical universe of Heizer. Because of their mass and durability they symbolize eternal objects that flout time. They therefore do not figure among the materials for dispersal and dissolution thus far used by the artist. As solidified pneuma, stone is a *surrogate* of corporeal mass; it cannot volatilize or dissolve. It is fixed, that is, permanently constructed, erected and built not by human beings but by nature herself. And since sculpture has always been built to the measure of the body as a path between the earthly and the heavenly, the human and the divine, stone can be considered a natural sculpture. It is with this awareness in mind that Heizer approaches it, using its weight and mass as sculpture in *Displaced/Replaced Mass 1*, 1969 [pp.

163–191]: "I used 30, 52, and 68-ton rocks because they are surrogate objects. In other words, a piece of rock can be a sculpture; you don't have to make the sculpture. I want the thing to have power, so I find something that has power. I don't care that much about what it looks like. The idea of the rocks was that they were surrogate objects, replacement objects, replacement for the art object. Something in lieu of a consciously created, highly surfaced, highly detailed, academically studied work of art. A piece of rock in exchange of all of that. What carries it? Massive weight. That implies another tradition, one that was prevalent in primitive times. At that time rock was the only permanent material there was."



Dragged Mass, 1971



Displaced/Replaced Mass 3, 1993

They didn't cast concrete or metals, but they did work with dirt. In our times there's a real question about modernity and how far it stretches. My real feeling is that we have returned to a primitive stage.<sup>22</sup> Made equivalent to a sculpture, the rock, stone or boulder, in being an object, establishes itself as an entity, either immobile or mobile. In the former case, it is accepted and recognized through the photographic documentation, taken by the witness, and the technical data, the weight and relative dimensions, as in *Actual Size*, 1971 [pp. 249–251]; in the latter case, it is a ready-made sculpture that can be spotlighted by being brought into a different context. With the support of Robert Scull, in the summer of 1969 Heizer selected three huge masses from the crest of the Sierra Nevada, then brought them down the mountain by trucks. At the same time, at Silver Springs, Nevada, he dug three holes, covered their sides in cement, and as "displacement" and "replacement," had the three boulders placed in them. This was his first *sculptural* "insertion," "the first object sculpture,"<sup>23</sup> since it used "sculpted" objects such as boulders and provided them, in Duchampian fashion, with a negative base and/or constructed reinforcement in cement, a contemporary material. The orientation of the rocks inside the hollows dug into the desert corresponds to a precise rhythm: they are respectively placed diagonally, vertically and horizontally (at angles of 45, 90, and 180 degrees), as though Heizer wanted to "frame" them within a single system that would include every linear and dispositional possibility. The three sculptures thus create an area of their own, utterly devoid of color — the stones are grey, like the cement — in which one may read several different variants of how to make sculpture. Over the years, *Displaced/Replaced Mass* has spilled from the outside to the inside. It has lent itself to being transposed to an enclosed space, that of a gallery — in *Displaced/Replaced Mass 2*, 1977, at Los Angeles [pp. 329–333] and *Displaced/Replaced Mass 3*, 1993, at New York [pp. 510–511], where the stones become four in number, because the guiding variant, the horizontal, is constant.

The same operative logic is at work in *Dragged Mass*, 1971 [pp. 240–245], and *Levitated Mass*, 1982 [pp. 373–375]. The first consists of a 30-ton rock whose presence is defined not by its form or cut, but by its weight. And it is in fact weight and gravity that create the base, cutting out a bed in the earth as the rock is dragged back and forth in front of the Art Institute of Detroit.

Of opposite, antigravitational import is instead the *Levitated Mass*, 1982, the realization of which continues a use of sculpture as a study of objects and materials. Still based on the natural monumentality of the rock, this work, compared to the preceding ones that accepted the material in its pure, raw state, allows for cutting and refinishing. Resting on a bed of water, the rock has been tapered, and on its surface the artist has cut out some contemporary "hieroglyphics" — traced both on the rock itself and on its stainless steel container — that numerically indicate the object's location in Manhattan: "The cuts are basic numerical cryptologic code. It gives the address. If you count the cuts, it says 56 MAD (the rock is at 56th and Madison): it has five cuts for 5, six cuts for 6, thirteen cuts for M, one cut for A, and four cuts for D."<sup>24</sup>

Taken in sequence, since they were conceived in 1969, these works free up other metaphors of the relationship between earth and sky, fixed and volatile. If we read them in order, they define a gravitational relationship between these poles that, in *Displaced/Replaced Mass*, lies halfway between earth and sky, in *Dragged Mass* lies sunken into the earth, and in *Levitated Mass*, is lifted up from earth.

As for the range of "tools" and current materials used to bring out the rocks' magnetism, cement is



Double Negative, 1969–70



Double Negative, 1969–70

stone reduced to powder, not amorphous, while the cranes and trucks, the machinery used to move and transport the boulders from the quarry to the desert, are highly technological but remain extensions of the human being's arms and legs. Lastly, the numerical codes echo ancient hieroglyphics: symbols of the potential of our present day, they live and make us live the contradictions of a high-tech cognition that nevertheless has its roots in primitive traditions. What defines art, or work, is therefore the *transmutation* triggered by the dual, dialectical condition of an ancient idea being transformed into a contemporary modus operandi: "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."<sup>25</sup> In *Displaced/Replaced Mass*, 1969, aside from the encounter of fullness and emptiness, of positive and negative space, past and present, natural and artificial, there are other artistic dialectics as well, such as the dialogue between chosen and manufactured, between mobile and stable, horizontal and vertical, which are as typical of painting and sculpture, and subtended by the encounter between negative concavity and stone, as they are of architecture. Indeed, they represent the choice of an approach, and a building method, that presupposes a knowledge of techniques and secrets that could lead to the foundation of a monument, a work of architecture, and a city.

The effort of constructing spaces or hollows in which to keep and preserve the signs of nature, the divine and the human, is indeed what gives rise to architecture, a science particularly able to plan and build *settlements* at every corner of the Earth that reflect the primordial mythology and order and function as a link between the human and the superhuman.

The idea that the Earth itself is a great work of architecture, shaped over the centuries, is already present in *Displaced/Replaced Mass*, 1969, since the work resumes the process of a constructive encounter between elements drawn from different environments and from technical cultures separate in time. The transition from painter/sculptor to "architect" is therefore a logical one. When invited by Virgina Dwan to put together his first solo show in New York, Heizer suggested executing a macrosculpture in Nevada, of which the photographic documentation and plans/designs would serve as the gallery exhibition. After long reconnaissance efforts in the deserts and valleys of Nevada, the artist identified Mormon Mesa as the proper site for a "negative architecture." Thus began the construction of *Double Negative*, 1969–70.

### Negative Infinity

One of the principal features of Heizer's materialist perspective lies in the establishment of a continuity between human intervention and natural sites, summed up in the dialectic between material and place: "place is material, material is place."<sup>26</sup> The intervention and the site usually prove, by their nature and the process of selection, to be similar or, better yet, favorable to being linked together. This propensity is evidently due to physical adaptation, even when the human or artistic project is imbued with a symbolic or metaphorical connotation stemming from historical factors or anthropological and cultural circumstances. In November 1969, when Heizer, after having used heavy machinery for the sculptural definition of *Displaced/Replaced Mass*, 1969, begins the execution of *Double Negative*, 1969–70, the goal he has in mind is to go beyond the limits of sculpture itself. The result is titanic, and consists of a double incision in the sides of the Mormon Mesa, created by moving 240,000 tons of rocks and sand to make two cuts, each fifty feet deep and thirty feet wide and defined by 90 degree walls and two



Pyramid of Zoser, Saqqara  
Photo Beato Antonio

metaphysical project is an empiricism aspiring to a different consciousness of art, by going back, however, to atavistic, ancient principles. And in looking back to elementary, primary principles, the artist must first, to avoid Minimalist formulations, carry out the task of dissolving and dematerializing forms: from *North, South*, 1967, to *Nine Nevada Depressions*, 1968, which led to the development of a limitless approach in *Double Negative*, 1969–70.

The intervention at Mormon Mesa imposes itself as the basis of a further linguistic transition, capable of organizing itself into another system. *Double Negative* can be considered a natural, silent metaphysics that shifts the rewriting of art towards a different way of thinking and making. It elaborates a reflection on nothingness and the void, on spirit and pneuma, based still on procedural intuitions. These are acquired over the course of the construction, and thus are perceived and felt according to something unknown, according to the exercise of the eyes, together with the perception of mass and volume.<sup>32</sup>

It could be said that with *Double Negative*, 1969–70, Heizer arrives at a formalization of the metaphysical element. The next transition will therefore be to *design* it. The two moments are not opposed, but follow one upon the other. The *afterward* is represented by *City: Complex One*, 1972–74. Here we find the theme of birth and rebirth, of being eternal. The work demolishes a certain now bloodless and enfeebled experience of art in order to prepare its rebirth. This has ancient roots, present principally in the sacred architecture of primitive peoples and archaic cultures, and is here reflected in a modern vein: “When I built the *Double Negative* I realized I had built something as big as a building, something greater in length than the height of the Empire State Building.”<sup>33</sup>

The liberation toward the great transformation reveals yet another reading to Heizer, that of a horizontal architecture, a mass of volume or emptiness embedded in the Mormon Mesa. In addition to being enormous, *Double Negative* is a monolithic structure, like a skyscraper, and reflects the daily vicissitudes of weather and light. It was designed to have both an ideal and a social “function,” expressing the society of its time. It is a penetrable space that can be travelled through and lived in. It is a luminous and open space that recalls the natural morphological condition, creating an agglomeration within and outside its walls. More importantly, however, the megalithic design creates a change of mentality towards the construction of vital, energetic architectures, in a similar way to the sacred, spiritual buildings of antiquity, Chinese and Indian, Persian and Egyptian. “It is interesting to build a sculpture that attempts to create an atmosphere of awe. Small works are said to do this but this 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. As for a fundamental and personal sense in relation to larger ideas and memories, I think that the large sculptures produced in the sixties and seventies by a number of artists were reminiscent of the time when societies were committed to the construction of massive, significant works of art.”<sup>34</sup>



Castillo, Chichen Itza



City: Complex One, 1972–74

The installation of *Double Negative* is based on the fundamentals of archaic architectures, for it experiences nature as *animated*, permeated with an artistic spirit that makes it qualitatively different. It does not, however, distinguish itself from the sacred and ritual spaces, charged with numinous power, that have been built over the centuries. These *magnetic* architectures,<sup>35</sup> centers of energy and spiritual



City: Complex One, 1972-74



City: Complex One, 1972-74



City: Complex Two, 1980-88

action — such as the T'ai Shan in eastern China, the neolithic monuments of Avebury, in Wiltshire, the Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon at Teotihuacan, Mexico, the Great Serpent's Mound in Adams County, Ohio, the Temple of Queen Hatshepsut at Thebes in Egypt, Chichen Itza in the Yucatan, Mexico, and the Pyramid of Zoser at Saqqara, Egypt — are familiar to Heizer, who has studied them carefully. He is aware, however, that their archaic mythology has nothing to offer to our epoch: "Who, in our time, wants processions for spirits, sacrificial platforms, or ceremonial buildings? These functions are no longer meaningful, but are interesting for contemporary society if phrased in terms it can identify with."<sup>36</sup>

The interaction between mythic architecture and the contemporaneity of art assumes the form of an "architectural sculpture" — *City: Complex One* [pp. 264–285, 288–289] — which the artist began constructing in 1972, in Garden Valley, Nevada, and finished in 1974. In design as well as vocabulary, it is a further, and concrete, example of the sculpture-architecture equation. Defined by sides of varying length but of equal pairs, *City: Complex One*, 1972–74, is constructed in the shape of a mastaba, through the accumulation of materials, sand, rocks, water, mined directly under and around *Complex One*, washed and then mixed, and reinforced or circumscribed by cement. On one side, considered the front, the earthy surface is defined by bands of reinforced concrete, including a T-shaped column and an L-shaped one, the visual combination of which, together with the fragments viewed frontally, creates a rectangle. The rear side is not organized and opens onto a ramp that gives access to the T structure. The other two smaller sides are in rough concrete and serve rigidly to define the whole, which is reminiscent of archaic architectures: "*Complex One* uses a mastaba form, which was the original mound over the burial vault of Zoser at Saqqara. What interests me about the Saqqara pyramid is how it was built and what primitive technology was used. I was able to use concrete technology to pour square, 90-degree end walls. The Egyptians couldn't do this. The Saqqara mastaba was eventually added to with three more mounds at 90-degree angles creating a square [...]. This was the first pyramid and the first big architecture [...]. I felt this was an important source of architecture and could be one way of defining the mass of *Complex One*."<sup>37</sup>

The analogies are not only technical. Even iconographically speaking, *City: Complex One* pays its debt to history, especially to that of the Yucatan, which Heizer visited in 1970. The lateral bands descending in parallel on the sides of the frontal plane recall the head of the serpent that outlines the staircase of the Castillo at Chichen Itza, while the projecting T structure recalls the head of the serpent, the Aztec god Tlacoc, who oversees the Great Ball Court, also at Chichen Itza. As for the science of vibrations and energy, the references may instead lead to Ayers Rock, the enormous red sandstone monolith situated in the heart of the Australian desert, a cosmic, galactic analogy that can be linked to Heizer's postnuclear vision.

Like *Double Negative*, 1969–70, *City: Complex One*, 1972–74 involves a metamorphosis of existing material, except that the earth here is not pushed downward but upward, and the reading is no longer lateral or linear but frontal. If one looks carefully at the outlines, however, one will note that the profile of *City: Complex One*, when seen from the smaller side, is strongly similar to the sequence of sides (frontal diagonal of 40 degrees, upper level horizontal at 180 degrees, rear diagonal of 40 degrees) of *Double Negative* (45 degrees, 180 degrees, 45 degrees), except that its arrangement is reversed, turned upside down. "One might almost say," wrote Elizabeth Baker in *Art in America*, "that *Complex One* is



City: Complex One, 1972–74, Complex Two, 1980–88

*Double Negative* made positive.”<sup>38</sup> In this sense the two sculpture/architectures are complementary: the void of the excavation has now become the fullness of the embankment, and where the opening of the valley was, there is now the vault of the heavens. And all is permeated with light: “I was left with nothing except light, just the sky.”<sup>39</sup> And the light is the visible proof of the energy and recurrent motif of metaphysical goals.

The complementary relationship between light and material guarantees both the continuity of the pursuit and the dialectic between earthly and heavenly. In *City: Complex One*, there is also a sequence of linear fragments the frontal sight of which leads to a frame that marks the outline of the mastaba and optically transforms the diagonal plane into a vertical plane. The juxtaposition, or integration, of a compact whole and a fragmented whole mirrors the artist’s awareness of two different versions of building, that of the past and that of the present: “The way I understand it, there are two kinds of societies: megalithic societies, which used and worked with massive pieces of material and created large structures, and piecemeal societies which also built large structures, but made them out of many small rocks, putting all the little pieces together to make the big object. The megalithic structures aren’t as big as the piecemeal structures but they have more impact, and more feeling. We are a piecemeal society. We make big things out of little things. Our buildings are millions of fragments stuck together.”<sup>40</sup>

In comparing two building systems, Heizer inevitably comes to juxtapose two artistic systems as well: sculpture and painting (mastaba and frame), which in his work are equivalent and become intertwined in the architecture of *City: Complex One*, 1972–74. The *City* project also includes the construction of *Complexes One, Two, Three and Four*. Indeed, if *City* wishes to present itself as a contemporary cosmos, it must of necessity be a “piecemeal” structure, a dialectics of creative parts of a complete architecture of sight and perception. From an aerial view, the combined space of *Complex One* and *Complex Two* looks like part of a Precolumbian city, being almost identical to La Venta, the Olmec ceremonial complex in the Yucatan; yet it is also similar to other ceremonial structures such as Trajan’s Forum in Rome and the great constructions of Luxor, Giza and Teotihuacan, all timeless edifices. All the same, Heizer’s complex also displays contemporary building features and morphologies, as if fit to sustain the impact of an earthquake and the tremendous heat and shock of an atomic bomb. After a number of years during which he devoted himself to painting and making sculptures, Heizer resumed building *City* in 1980, and brought *Complex Two* to completion in 1988.

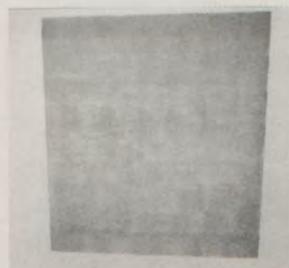
The artist shapes and reshapes the already existent into new forms and organizes it into unusual complexes. His is a science of metamorphosis; he manipulates earth and gives it new appearances. *City: Complex Two*, 1980–88 [pp. 440–465], arises from the land facing *Complex One* and consists of a removal and displacement of earth for the purpose of creating a space half above and half below the level of the horizon. The lowering is by about twenty feet and creates a descent and an open square from the center of which it is possible to take in both *Complex One* and *Complex Two* in a single glance, cancelling out the view of the surrounding landscape: “I didn’t come here for the context. I came here for materials, for gravel and for sand and water, which you need to make concrete, and because the land was cheap desert, a flat and totally theatrical space. There is no landscape.”<sup>41</sup> The broken-up earth serves to constitute, on the left, another mastaba, whose less rigid, less geometrical contours are marked by a cement seam that accentuates its linear and curvilinear limits. The new



Robert Smithson, Spiral Jetty, 1970



Walter De Maria, Lightning Field, 1974-77



Untitled 10, 1975

sculpture/architecture, inside, in the part that looks toward *Complex One* and the square, presents a three-sided structure whose facades are made solid by the mix of cement and earth. On the longer side of this geometrical vertical hollow, Heizer has erected three monoliths that lean diagonally against it. The result, taken as a whole, echoes the City of the Gods at Teotihuacan or Chichen Itza, in Mexico, which have central structures and pyramids forming the surroundings. These castings of cement and earth have other resonances as well: as tongues of land, slick rocks, and compact masses of lavic magma. They lie next to one another, like gigantic instruments of ritual. They are great unitary constructions that seem to possess hidden virtues. Their presence transforms *City*, infuses it with life, fecundates it and engenders a new symbology of lithic hierophany that underscores, in the obstructions of earth and stone, the presence of an occult spirit, that of the lost speech of art as reflection of the cosmic order.

### Earth-Destiny

During the space of time, from 1969 to 1974, in which Heizer was completing *Double Negative* and *City: Complex One*, the world art scene was undergoing important transformations.<sup>42</sup> The strong anarchic and individualistic element that had marked the late sixties died out under the weight of mass consumerism. Homogenization affected all cultural systems, which suffered from a generalized conformism that shrank the space allowed to radical and personal choices and expanded the spheres of mediocrity and indoctrination typical of a society that, in the mutual association of its products, tends to abolish dissociation and discussion. Art, too, became associated with this process, and confused its artifacts with the decor and redesign of history, with the result that any sign of change or effervescence was dis-integrated. Indeed, to avoid the risk of being disassociated, one moved toward a passive imitation of history, which, recycled through experimental quotation, became a "contemporary" product, thus satisfying the demands of the consumer. This transformation of the new into recognizable and manageable decor by the market and the information industries, which had felt marginalized by the reductivism, dematerialism, sensuality and territorial displacement of Conceptual Art, Arte Povera, Land Art and Body Art, was brought about by an economic crisis created by the fall of the image of America in Vietnam and of the dollar in the wake of the Yom Kippur war. The market sensed that the moment had come to redistribute power in the art world and drastically reduced support for experimental and radical initiatives. No more overstepping of boundaries, and in linguistic disciplines, art must return to the mainstream of controlled gestation. Hierarchies between the artist and the gallery/museum were re-established, as were the spatial dictates of a decorative, domestic role for the visual artifact. The uses of the city, the body, nature and the desert were over; rather, the locus was compressed onto the walls of apartments and lofts. As a result of this tactic, artists were forced to rethink painting and sculpture in reduced terms. Masked behind the whimsical play of paintings and sculptures "liberated" from philosophy and conceptualism, there emerged the new American trends of New Image Painting, Photorealism and Pattern Painting, which in the late seventies, under the umbrella of Postmodernism, would find continuation in European Neoexpressionism.

Although this re-emergence of a linguistic conservatism was not immediately felt, it was already forming in 1972. Alongside Minimalist and Conceptualist absolutism, a neo-Fauvism, also called Bad Painting, was drawing attention and presenting itself as a critique and rejection of the moral

assumptions and political commitments of the currents that looked to the utopian, rebellious spirit of 1968 for ideological self-definition. At the same time, the powerful uptown galleries, such as Leo Castelli and Andre Emmerich, moved downtown, to Soho; institutions such as the Whitney Museum and the Museum of Modern Art intervened heavily in the market in search of acquisitions, and as a result the auction houses began to concern themselves with contemporary art.

The utopian, idealistic spirit did not, however, fall immediately into crisis and lose strength. While artists such as Daniel Buren, Jannis Kounellis, Bruce Nauman, Mario Merz, Joseph Beuys and Vito Acconci continued to produce actions or interventions aimed at critiquing and interpreting the art and culture of the present, Heizer was carrying on his own adventure, executing great undertakings of sculpture/architecture in Nevada, and Smithson, before his death in 1973, was making gigantic gestures such as the *Spiral Jetty*, Great Salt Lake, 1970, *Broken Circle* and *Amarillo Ramp*, 1973. The same was also true of De Maria, who channeled his work, through the magnetic communication between being and nature, into limitless spaces: horizontally in *The Lightning Field*, 1974–77, on a mesa near Albuquerque; vertically in *Vertical Earth Kilometer*, 1977, in the garden in front of the Friedericianum Museum at Kassel; and globally, over the entire surface of the Earth, in *5 Continent Sculpture*, 1985.

The immersion into the materials of nature did not, however, lessen the continual preoccupation with the mechanisms of artistic communication. Indeed, during a period of narcissistic regression regarding their own identities and the individuality of expression, many artists, from Ryman to Luciano Fabro, vindicated the insuppressible aspect of operative difference in the fields of sculpture and painting, which could not be left to the vicissitudes of viscerality and decorativism.

In 1972 Heizer went back to painting, in an attempt to resume and redefine his experiences in that medium in 1966–67, as well as to physicalize, on a two-dimensional surface, the ecstatic void permeating *Double Negative*. The new paintings arise from a new optical awareness of line — *Munich Optical Painting* (diptych), 1972 [pp. 252–253]. The attempt is to give the line a perimetral efficacy that will define the essential, magical physiognomy of nothingness and the void. It is yet another re-integration of opposites, in which the surface, likened to the space of the mind or of nature, seeks to physicalize an inner cavity: the Descent of *Double Negative* thus becomes Ascent.

The liberation of the psycho-corporeal aggregate leads to the eclipse of the grey or black of the physical mass, rock or cement, and gives way to light and its dazzling whiteness. All that remains are the surrounding walls, now filled by light, as they were before by the void. Heizer's paintings — *Untitled*, 1974–75 — almost always consist of a large surface, elliptical, circular, square, rectangular or some variant thereof, with simple geometrical cutouts or inserts, such as a circle in a circle or a triangle in an ellipse, which present a broad, central area of whiteness surrounded by a homogeneous color of red, black or grey latex. *Untitled* 5, 1974, and *Untitled*, 1976, are, respectively, circular and rectangular, with black border and white central area. The colored border acts as an envelope that receives the metaphysical pneuma constituted by the outer appearance. The latter, which is highly reflective, optically balances the weight of the black, so that both become compact, solid entities, like rock. The use of opposing dyads spilling one into the other was defined by Malevich and the Constructivists, but in an inverse relationship: the black, symbol of dark forces, is immersed in the white, the radiant power. Heizer is aware of this historical valence, so much so that he actually entitled a series of



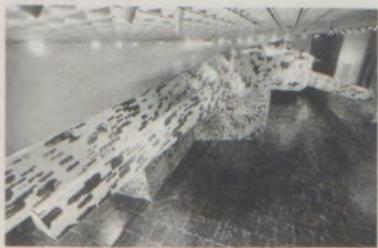
Adjacent, Against, Upon, 1976



Untitled 11, 1975



45°, 90°, 180°/Geometric Extraction, 1984



Dragged Mass Geometric, 1985

paintings *Russian Constructivist Painting* (triptych), 1974 [pp. 290–293], which present axial or side openings that create a tension in the center, void or nothingness. Through the appearance of side wedges, *Russian Constructivist Painting 1*, like *Untitled 7*, 1975 [p. 295], confronts the idea of the passage through the negative, while *Russian Constructivist Painting 3* deals with the theme of the double. Both motifs were present in *Double Negative*. When seen in relation to *City: Complex One*, 1972–74, this series of paintings, as well as *Untitled 5*, 1975, underscores the delimiting and reappropriative function of the limit, which, whether fragmented or whole, is an active, fundamental flow that makes it possible to understand the “glorious body” of nothingness or the void.

Like the sculptures in the desert, the paintings also reflect the dissolvent element of the materials. In 1976, Heizer again presents some geometrically segmented paintings similar to *Untitled 5*, 1967 [p. 17], and *Eccentric Painting*, 1967 [p. 12], but these have surfaces crossed by latex colors in light tones, such as the azure in *Untitled 6*, 1976, which seem to reflect a chromatic and formal erosion. “In his paintings,” writes Ellen Joosten, “erosion manifests itself as a phenomenon not so much in the material as in the form: through the interplay of closedness and emptiness (or transparency). The closed form (or material) is attacked from out of the white, while on the other hand form (the material) disturbs the silence of the (empty) canvas. In the earthworks the erosion is an extremely slow process that takes place almost outside him on account of its inhumanly slow tempo. His paintings are done rapidly in extreme tension, a great many of them being rejected and destroyed by him.”<sup>43</sup>

The breath of the metamorphosis of the materials also forms the subject of *Indian Red Triptych*, 1979, and *Platinum Violet Triptych*, 1979 [pp. 342–345], in which the process itself is what breaks up the image. The combination of latex and aluminum powder, as well as the oil paint, look like sloughs or ephemeral traces of a passage that is slowly reabsorbed by the background, as was also the case in *Dissipate*, 1968, and *Five Conic Displacements*, 1969.

All can be transmuted and permuted without losing the material, which is thus transformed. What is fixed crumbles and releases another energy. Thus the cement that in *Displaced/Replaced Mass 1*, 1969, and *Displaced/Replaced Mass 2*, 1977, functioned as a recess or womb, a metaphysical reality in which to immerse the rocks, is transformed into an active support of diverse polyhedral volumes in *Adjacent, Against, Upon*, 1976 [pp. 325–327], in Seattle, Washington. Here it represents a possible mode of countering petrified matter. The latent becomes manifest, the negative is reversed into positive, empty volume into full volume. Pushed to foreground the logic of the materials and the objects used, this work is a veritable storehouse of relationships between sculpture and support, surface and form, size and volume. As Rainer Crone so clearly describes: “*Adjacent, Against, Upon* is comprised of rocks of varying sizes, three, four and five-sided, each positioned in a different relationship to its pedestal: the largest pentagonal rock being placed adjacent to its pedestal, the middle-sized trapezoidal rock against its pedestal, and the smallest of these rocks, a triangle, lying upon the base allocated to it [...].

The base accompanying the largest rock has five sides, the medium-sized rock has a four-side base, and the third base has only three sides. All three objects have been placed in a specific relationship to one another, and any alteration in this relationship causes the principle of the sculpture itself, and thus the structure too, to undergo a change. This principle is founded on a concept that seeks to demonstrate, in the most forceful way possible, the three possible positions that can be adopted by two different objects: the first a man-made object with a particular, given shape, and the second the natural object



Untitled, 1986

with the indeterminate form [...]. Statements about the fundamental relationships between two objects: upon one another, in opposition to one another, and adjacent to each other.”<sup>44</sup>

Feeling the material and the sculpture means letting them speak, as though performing a work of excavation by virtue of which an element exists just long enough to be translated into something other than itself. The artist re-enacts creation, repeating the demiurgic gesture that gave life to the world as we know it. Taking cognizance of the laws of art, sculpture and painting means rediscovering their primordial creative power, the breath from below. The artist resumes the analysis of the object — whose composition may vary from granite to lavic matter — as it relates to a context, in 45°, 90°, 180°, 1982–84 [pp. 359–361, 364–365, 387–391], which revives and retravels the 45, 90, and 180-degree path of the rocks in *Displaced/Replaced Mass*, 1969. Here, however, the relationship of proportion and size, with respect to the support and its material composition, has changed, revealing a linguistic strategy aimed at the continual permutation of the sign for the purpose of enriching its charge of meaning. A further enrichment of the vibratory point of 45°, 90°, 180° lies in the movement toward an extreme de-physicalization. In the version entitled 45°, 90°, 180°/*Geometric Extraction*, 1984 [pp. 393–397], executed for the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, Heizer uses corrugated cardboard to create large volumetric fragments. On their surface, in a constant, homogeneous manner, he lithographically prints a “spotted” image, the product of a photographic manipulation of geological material: “The image is granite, photographed and enlarged many times leaving the biotite crystals and the quartz crystals visible.”<sup>45</sup> The use of corrugated board has its analogies and material references: “a humble material,” says Heizer, “similar to the dirt, gravel and rock I have used for years.”<sup>46</sup>

At the same time, on the surface of the large geometrical elements organized in the museum spaces in Los Angeles and New York [pp. 422–425], there appears a grain or spotted imagery, the product of chemical photographic processes and shots of details on stones: “One photograph is of silver nitrate from photographic paper. It’s the grain of the silver in the emulsion on the fiber paper — itself magnified — that has been exposed radically in an extensive twelve-minute exposure from twelve feet in the air. The enlarger, twelve feet from the paper, brings these grains up. And then it has been re-photographed and re-enlarged, and re-photographed and re-enlarged again. Another one is iron under a magnetic influence and a vacuum table plus a magnet run over it so it all gets charged up, starts to polarize against itself and all of that. Got the iron all perked up. One is a photograph of dry lake muds. A photograph of the ground just in the middle of the Coyote Dry Lake in the Mojave, a photograph of the inside of a hole — a sculpture I made. But the silts are minerals. Mud and minerals.”<sup>47</sup>

The spots on the photographic surface are little zones of intensity that exasperate tactility, making the blocks or structures approach a substance made of fullness and emptiness, of opacity and transparency, evoking the surface of lavic rocks and granite. The photographic grain corresponds to powdered stone. It is a sign of transformative potential, just as stone is the sign of sculptural design and thought: *Chaotic Geometric Sculpture*, 1987.

Between photograph and stone, the gap is gravitational, of greater or lesser weight, but not qualitative and quantitative. Both can be shaped to create force fields based on orchestrations of elementary forms. Already in *Circle 1*, 1976 [pp. 318–319], Heizer had experienced the significance of an elementary form, the circle. Its perfection spurred the artist’s need to confront sculpture not only in the negative,



Great Serpent Mound, Adams County, Ohio  
Photo Museum of the American Indian,  
Heye Foundation



Effigy Tumuli: Frog, 1983–85



Effigy Tumuli: Catfish, Frog, Waterstrider,  
1983–85

but in the positive as well, “built out” as well as “built in.” This work, executed during the same period as the last paintings, is an attempt, like the later *Ghana*, 1977, and *Guenette*, 1979 [pp. 334–335], to test his mettle with the system of sculpture and its modernist traditions all the way up to Minimalism. Heizer’s contribution does not concern form, however, but the dialectic between gravity and balance. It is sculpture as visual weight, occupation of space and land, complementary elements to the negativity of the works before 1976. By thrusting volumes and forms into space, the artist echoes the vibratory, formal power of the stone/rock. In it he finds relationships of volume, harmony and spirit, and turns it into a material for arithmetical construction, a kind of musical geometry resonating in the city. *This Equals That*, 1976–80 [pp. 338–341], gives concrete reality to the mathematical axiom that “the whole is equal to the sum of its parts and greater than each of them.” The creation of a unitary conglomerate reveals Heizer’s desire to change the unifying gesture of his sculpture from single, compact elements to combinations of disparate but harmonious units and to avoid aesthetic shapes. It is an attempt to find an all-embracing form that is not only physical but mental. *This Equals That*, through pure geometry, puts together a fragmented whole. The same thing happens in *Negative Sculpture - Québec*, 1980 [p. 353], *Negative Sculpture - Vermont*, 1980 [pp. 354–355], and *Negative Sculpture - Escondido*, 1981 [pp. 356–357], in which the rocks that were on the horizontal, like a floor, in *Displaced/Replaced Mass 2*, 1977, are now arranged vertically, like a wall, establishing among them a more active relationship made up of exchanges, echoes and responses that seem to put the sculpture in the dimension of an everchanging stone painting. The splendor of the material is mirrored from rock to rock, as in a Constructivist painting from square to square, engendering a union on the basis of fragmentation. These are works charged with an intensity that transforms every part offered up to our eyes, in accordance with a dialectic between surface and volume, weight and lightness, material and immateriality.

Antithesis underlies all of Heizer’s research, and for this reason his path has been a continual rethinking, or rather, a pulsation between opposites that anchor the image to the earth. The prolonged attention he has given to gravity and ponderability, as crystallized in primary forms, has always sought expression outside a figural, mimetic image of reality. The volumes, cut out or constructed with the idea of a negative or positive fullness, have always followed the metaphysical schema of a process of abstraction from the real. The emptiness and fullness never constitute a figure; they are always structural and geometrical.

The artist, however, is conscious of the use that ancient cultures have made of emblems and symbols, figural forms identifiable in divine beings with human and animal features. The exorcistic charm of Olmec, Aztec, Mayan and Incan representations gives shape to iconic narratives where dragons and unicorns, centaurs and serpents, fishes and eagles constantly appear and reappear. They are cadenced by an imaginary geography based on bestiaries of hidden meaning, at times ferocious and terrifying. Until now Heizer, with all his archaeological and anthropological knowledge, has never made use of such representations. While a symbolical formulation is present in his work, it is conveyed through an imagery that is abstract and conceptual, never figurative and mimetic. In 1982, this approach was called into question when the Ottawa Silica Company Foundation, presided over by Edmund Thornton, proposed that he realize a work in an extensive mining area in Buffalo Rock State Park, Illinois. After a series of photographic and environmental surveys, the artist named his project *Effigy*



Drawings of arrow and spear points,  
Great Basin, Nevada



Crescent, 1988



Small Pendant, 1993

*Tumuli* and focused his concerns on the history of the Midwest and the Native American traditions that mark the whole area. These include the construction of earth tumuli or mounds, which the Native Americans used as funerary and ritual sites. Committed to carrying forward an American tradition, Heizer sees this activity as an artistic and political choice, the recuperation of an ancient mode of construction whose roots reside in a history that belongs to him: "The Native American tradition of mound building absolutely pervades the whole place, mystically and historically in every sense. Those mounds are part of a global, human dialogue of art, and I thought it would be worthwhile to reactivate that dialogue [...]. It's an untapped source of information and thematic material, it is a beautiful tradition, and it's fully neglected. And it's from a group of people who were genocided. So, in a lot of ways, the *Effigy Tumuli* is a political and social comment."<sup>48</sup> Completed in 1985, the *Effigy Tumuli* [pp. 399–415], consist of an area 244 acres large, covered by five huge reliefs in the form of animal figures. The project was executed with bulldozers, which were used to move the earth to form mounds and embankments representing a catfish, a frog, a snapping turtle, a waterstrider and a snake. With its consideration for Native American tradition, the work is not in opposition to contemporary art and its anarchic individualism. Rather, it stands in profound harmony with history. Heizer accepts to digress from his structural, primary vision to enter into an iconic one, assuming the position of cultural vindication. He sticks to a dynamic interpretation of the historical events of the place, giving expression to a still living "American" perspective linked to the transformation of the earth's energies, in keeping with the conception of the early Indians. The Native Americans saw the divine word in nature, and thus animals and plants inspired their ritual and sacred procedures. Heizer offers a new image of them, since their presence was once a sign and symbol of virtue and revealed truth. In reviving this interpretation and applying it to an area devastated by excavations and pollution, he symbolically reclaims its virtuous and natural significance, in a positive sense.

The desire to seek the sources of the artistic and constructive life of his own culture was then translated into a series of works, including *Tools*, 1987, and *Offerings*, 1988, which could be defined as a further means of investigation of the object. The tools into which human beings have transplanted their creativity are here enlarged, monumentalizing their physical and visual impact. By transforming a blade or perforator [pp. 467–469, 478–479], into sculpture in 1988–89, the artist is trying to find the wellsprings of art in the useful knowledge of history. He attempts to link them to the present and to translate their archaic power into a contemporary language. His goal is to control the destiny of the object, to master it through analysis and action, so that what was once a tool — hatchet or arrow, stick or fork [p. 507] — or a perforated object [pp. 502–503, 504–505, 508–509], is turned, in 1990, into megaliths of a secret science, powerful instruments of liberation.

From the start, Heizer has known that nature and its history of configurations have always possessed a knowledge whose keys of construction and interpretation must be discovered if one is to explain and exalt their metaphysical value to contemporary culture. His entire adventure expresses the desire to impress a new destiny on earthly existence through the use of earth itself, and its mass, weight and image.

Heizer's release of a superhuman energy that disturbs matter and creates new elements likens his work to the uncontrolled, uncontrollable force of nature herself. Indeed it reflects nature's internal reach and fermentation, without altering her essence: art as burning nature.

<sup>1</sup> D. Silvester, *Jasper Johns at the Whitechapel*, BBC Third Program, London, December 12, 1964.

<sup>2</sup> B. Haskell, ed., *Blam. The Explosion of Pop, Minimalism and Performance 1958–1964*, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1984, pp. 105–108.

<sup>3</sup> The proof of this commonality, now accepted, lies in their similar movement across the same territory, in solo and group shows in private galleries and museums. Between 1961 and 1964, the galleries most influential in the American art world in the wake of Action Painting were the Green Gallery and Leo Castelli Gallery in New York. A list of their solo shows in that period includes: Green Gallery: 1961, Lucas Samaras; 1962, Jim Rosenquist, George Segal, Claes Oldenburg, Tom Wesselman; 1963, Morris, Judd; 1964, Rosenquist, Segal, Samaras, Flavin, Morris. Leo Castelli Gallery: 1961, Johns; 1962, Lichtenstein, John Chamberlain/Stella; 1963, Johns, Rauschenberg; 1964, Stella, Lichtenstein, Warhol.

In the area of museums, the interweaving of transition between Pop and Minimalism is equally evident: The Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, 1963, *Mixed Media and Pop Art* (Jim Dine, Johns, Lichtenstein, Morris); The Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, 1964, *Black, White and Grey* (Dine, Johns, Flavin, Stella, Lichtenstein, Morris, Warhol), curated by Sam Wagstaff; and the 1964 Venice Biennale, where the American Pavilion brought together Pop artists and Stella, Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis.

<sup>4</sup> D. Factor, "Review: Los Angeles - Frank Stella", *Artforum*, no. 1, May 1963, p. 44; D. McClellan, "Reviews: Los Angeles - Roy Lichtenstein", *Artforum*, no. 2, July 1963, pp. 44–46.

<sup>5</sup> G. Celant, *Preconistoria*, Firenze, Centro Di, 1976, pp. 9–10. I take, with slight modifications, the logic of the show and its implications from this source.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

<sup>7</sup> J. Brown, "Interview", in *Michael Heizer: Sculpture in Reverse*, Los Angeles, The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> An anticipatory contribution to this end can be attributed to the publication of *An Anthology*, edited by LaMonte Young and Jackson MacLow, New York, 1963, which featured writings by Henry Flynt, "Concept Art", 1961, an essay placing the concept at the center of the artistic subject, and Walter De Maria, "Art Yard", 1960, and "On the Importance of Natural Disasters", 1960, two essays that identify bulldozers, grab shovels, dodge explosions and natural disasters as the future artistic tools to be used to formally and visually modify the surface of the land.

<sup>9</sup> J. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> This was not the first time that artists and gallerists attempted to create, downtown, a center for living and exchanging information that would be managed by artists and independent from the uptown commercial

system. In the fifties numerous art spaces were opened around East 10th Street on the Lower East Side. These included the Hanza, Judson, Tanager and Brata galleries, which featured such artists as Held, Ivan Karp, George Segal, Oldenburg, Yayoi Kusama and Dine.

<sup>11</sup> For a full analysis and bibliography on Soho, see Soho Downtown Manhattan, Berlin, Akademie der Kunste, Berliner Festwochen, 1976.

<sup>12</sup> During the period from 1961 to 1964, De Maria, a Californian like Heizer, designed a series of projects that included the creation, in the desert, of two parallel walls, entitled

DESERT WALK. WALLS IN THE DESERT/THE ENTRANCE OR THE EXIT/VIEW [OF] PERSON IN THE WALLS AS SEEN BY A HELICOPTER/VIEW OF WALLS FROM 2 MILES (?) IN DISTANCE/VIEW OF WALLS FROM AN AIRPLANE/IMAGINARY VIEW OF THE LAST 40 FEET. However, compared to Heizer, in 1967 he had not yet constructed anything that involved the use of land. The first work in this respect was the *Mile Long Drawing*, 1968. The same is true of Smithson, who from 1964 to 1966 was making three-dimensional wall or floor objects using mirrors and fluorescent tubes, crystalline and elementary in form and expressing a search for asymmetry and disorder. He too, like De Maria, then tried his hand at environmental projects, such as *Tar Pool and Gravel Pit*, 1966, a work planned for the city of Philadelphia but never realized, which was to be made up of mud, gravel and tar; and at visual projects, resorting to maps of specific sites, structured according to geometric forms. In 1967, when Heizer was executing *North, South*

in the Sierra Nevada, Smithson was finishing his essay entitled "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey", published in *Artforum* in December 1967, in which the artist represented himself, neo-romantically, as a traveller across the American continent and mentioned acquiring the book *Earthworks*, by Brian W. Aldiss. Unlike Heizer and De Maria, Smithson did not actually work on land until 1970, with his *Partially Buried Woodshed*; but his true contribution remains on the theoretical plane, where the text serves as comment and integral part of the artwork. Cf. T. Kellein, *Walter De Maria*, Stuttgart, Staatsgalerie, 1987; *Walter De Maria. Two Very Large Presentations*, Stockholm, Moderna Museet, 1989; F. Mayer, *Walter De Maria*, Frankfurt, Museum für Moderne Kunst, 1991; R. Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*, New York, Cornell University Press, 1981.

<sup>13</sup> J. Brown, *op. cit.*, pp. 10–11.  
<sup>14</sup> G.A. Tiberghien, *Land Art*, Paris, Editions Carré, 1993, p. 29.  
<sup>15</sup> J. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

<sup>16</sup> The *Nazca Drawings* were discovered in 1939 by the New Yorker, Paul Kosok. But their real diffusion in the contemporary art world didn't occur until 1968–69, with the appearance of the book *Mystery on Desert. Nazca Peru*, by Maria Reiche, published in 1968 in Stuttgart, which

immediately became a cult book for Land artists.

<sup>17</sup> J. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>20</sup> D. Bourdon, *Design the Earth. The Human Impulse to Shape Nature*, New York, 1995..

<sup>21</sup> M. Heizer to G. Celant, 1996.

<sup>22</sup> J. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> M. Heizer to G. Celant, 1996.

<sup>27</sup> J. Brown, *op. cit.*, pp. 15–16.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>29</sup> Mark C. Taylor, "Rend(er)ing", in *Michael Heizer: Double Negative*, Los Angeles, The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1991, pp. 17–18.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>31</sup> J. Derrida, *L'archéologie du frivole*, Paris, Editions Galilée, 1990.

<sup>32</sup> The cuts are not planned, but discovered: "Double Negative" used gravity of excavation to a lesser degree because the tractor has to push the material to the edge. As the volume of material grew, the length of the cut became greater and the base longer. Ultimately, the decisive factor in recognizing the completion of the work depended upon the volume and shape of the two spills or spoils. Even though they look like 'results' of the cuts, they actually become the final forms to complete the work." J. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>35</sup> J. Westwood, ed., *The Atlas of Mysterious Places*, London, 1987.

<sup>36</sup> J. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>38</sup> E. Baker, "Artworks on the Land", in *Art in America*, New York, January–February, 1976, p. 93.

<sup>39</sup> J. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>41</sup> In B. Gabriel, "Works of Earth", *Horizon*, New York, January–February 1982, p. 48.

<sup>42</sup> What follows is a summary of Germano Celant, *Inespressionismo americano*, Genoa, 1981 (now in *Artmakers*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1984, pp. 157–158).

<sup>43</sup> J.E. Joosten, "Displaced-Replaced", in *Michael Heizer*, Essen, Museum Folkwang - Otterlo, Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, 1979, p. 64.

<sup>44</sup> R. Crone, "Mythopoetic Abstractions", in *Michael Heizer: Sculpture in Reverse*, cit., pp. 44–45.

<sup>45</sup> M. Heizer to G. Celant, 1996.

<sup>46</sup> D. Whitney, "Interview", in *Michael Heizer/Dragged Mass Geometric*, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1985, p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>48</sup> D.C. McGill, *Michael Heizer. Effigy Tumuli*, 1990, pp. 11, 22–23.