Infinity on Trial: Michael Heizer and the Post-War American Avant-Garde

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Introduction

In this paper, I will seek to position the work of Michael Heizer in the context of broader art movements – the New York City avant-garde of the 1960s, the sociopolitically-concerned artist-cum-theorists of institutional critique, and the landscape photographers of the New Topographics school. Born in 1944 in Berkeley, California, Heizer came to prominence in the late 1960s with a series of artworks created in the mountains of the Sierra Nevada and the deserts of Nevada. Realized in direct concert with the landscape, these works were shapes and forms carved out of the surface of the earth: geometric pits, trenches, and mounds. They often featured dramatically relocated megaliths, large boulders displaced from their original locations to the site of Heizer's depressions. The interplay between the Nevada landscape and contrived negative space was a hallmark of these works, which culminated in *Double Negative* (fig. 1), the most significant of Heizer's achievements during the 1960s. Excavated from the side of a mesa near Overton, Nevada, *Double Negative* consisted of two long trenches cut into the sides of a canyon created by the edges of the mesa. The trenches lined up across the void created by the canyon's natural shape – including this negative space, the trenches measured 1,500 feet long, 50 feet deep, and 30 feet wide. Publicity around *Double Negative* brought Heizer to art-world prominence, and he followed the "negative sculpture" with a series of works at different sites across both Europe and America, including site-specific pieces in Munich, Amsterdam, Düsseldorf, and Bern. With the help of his gallerist, Virginia Dwan, Heizer moved permanently to Nevada's rural Garden Valley in 1972, where he commenced work on his magnum opus, the monumental sculpture *City* (fig. 2). *City,* a nearly impossibly ambitious work, consists of a series of geometric edifices nearly a mile and a half long and a half mile wide. Made of earth, rock, steel and concrete, the massive structures variously recall ancient ceremonial cities, minimalist

sculpture, parking lots, and biomorphic forms. According to Heizer, the artwork cost approximately forty million dollars and, by all accounts, took 50 years to complete, finally opening to limited public access in 2022.[1] In the intervening 50 years, Michael Heizer accepted private and public commissions, showed some significant exhibitions, and, most notably, transported a massive boulder he called *Levitated Mass* (fig. 3) to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2012. But, by and large, Heizer stayed out of the public eye, granting the occasional semi-hostile interview in Garden Valley and working persistently and quixotically on *City*. Both the press and art history scholars regarded Heizer as a distinctly American oddity – a gun-toting, cowboy-esque outsider in contrast to the urbane, jet-setting commercial art world. Writers usually situated Heizer in the context of the land art movement – he worked in the landscape, came to prominence alongside foundational land artists Robert Smithson and Walter De Maria, and his retreat to Nevada coincided with the retreat of other canonical 1960s artists from the hustle and bustle of the Manhattan art world (Judd to Marfa, Texas; Chamberlain to Sarasota, Florida; Kelly to Spencertown, New York). Heizer was seen as a sort of enigma, an outsider, someone who didn't fit neatly into any of the disparate art movements of the 1960s or the 1970s. In an interview from 1999, Heizer makes one of his clearer claims to originality:

> But I figure, how much more original can you get than having nine different people doing what I did first, and none of them giving me credit? Actually, it's the academics who did not do a good historical job who are really to blame. I wasn't political enough to write articles about myself or go to cocktail parties, meaning that not only has my art been pirated and my intellectual property rights stolen, but my work has been misrepresented.[2]

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[1] Michael Kimmelman, "It Was a Mystery in the Desert for 50 Years," *New York Times*, August 19, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/08/19/arts/design/michael-heizer-city.html.
[2] Michael Kimmelman, "A Sculptor's Colossus of the Desert," *New York Times*, December 12, 1999.

And, as the century turned, Heizer's work seemed less and less current and increasingly idiosyncratic – the work of an eccentric maverick and art-world outsider. Why was he still working on *City*, and what exactly *was* it?

In this paper, I will seek to situate Heizer's work in the context of discrete art movements of the 1960s and 1970s. I will argue that Heizer's work is not that of a maverick outsider, but rather that of a worldly insider with strong opinions on both Western and non-Western art history and trends in contemporary art. Heizer's earliest works in the Nevada desert were executed with the physical assistance of his peers in the New York City art world, and they reflected an incredibly rich conceptual exchange with those same artists: De Maria, Smithson, Holt, and Serra. My first chapter will locate Heizer's work within the context of the 1960s New York City art world and further analyze the relationships between Heizer's work and that of his peers. My second chapter will position Heizer as part of a larger trend toward a collective trial of the art world's foundational institutions; I will argue that his work both reflects the influence – and embodies the tenets – of the art movement known as institutional critique. My third chapter, drawing inspiration from a 2008 lecture by photographer and Bard College professor An-My Lê, will discuss Heizer's relation to the artists of the groundbreaking 1975 photography exhibition "New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape." I will argue that the work of Heizer and the New Topographics movement share a common interest – updating the American landscape art tradition to reflect the enormous changes to the landscape of the American West in the years following the end of World War II. Finally, I will conclude with a discussion of Heizer's work in the context of a broader American landscape art tradition, calling for further scholarship on *City,* in light of its opening to the public in 2022. Crucial to each of the movements I argue Heizer embodies a questioning of established norms and narratives: the

minimalists' totalizing arguments for the authority of bare material, the organizing frameworks of the art world's foundational institutions, and the myth of the sublime wilderness at the heart of the American landscape art tradition. "Inside the museums, Infinity goes up on trial."[3] So sings Bob Dylan at the start of the fourth verse of his iconic 1966 song "Visions of Johanna." The 1960s and 1970s were a period of art marked by a new conviction that the then-canonical structures of the art world were arbitrary and possibly obsolete. The minimalists of the 1960s, the institutional critique movement of the 1970s, and the photographers of New Topographics – each movement I identify in this paper is part of that larger questioning of the art world's norms and foundational systems. Heizer's work from this era did not rail against – but rather embodied – this cultural zeitgeist.

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[3] Bob Dylan, *The Lyrics, 1961-2012* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 193.

Introduction Figures

Figure 1

Michael Heizer, *Double Negative* (1969), Mormon Mesa, Nevada

Figure 2

Michael Heizer, *City* (2022), Garden Valley, Nevada

Figure 3

Michael Heizer, *Levitated Mass* (2012), Los Angeles, California

Chapter 1

Much has been made of Michael Heizer's status as a sort of outlaw from the contemporary art world. Essays on his work inevitably take on a biographical slant, turning into miniature profiles of the artist, focused on both his long-term domicile in rural Nevada and his personality, one characterized by a stubborn single-mindedness and penchant for grandiosity. The 2022 opening of his monumental sculpture *City* received a significant amount of press coverage, much of it focusing on the scale and quixotic nature of the monumental project. Fifty years of labor in the unforgiving Nevada desert, forty million dollars of funding from various scions of American arts patronage[4] – it's an undeniably compelling story, one that embodies many currents running through American culture and history. Contemporary commentators often express a sense of awe at the unbelievability of Heizer's project – the sheer physical scale of the artwork itself (a mile and a half long and a half mile wide[5]), the scale of the labor and funds required, and the piece's utter remoteness. There is also the matter of the scale of Heizer's ego – in the *New York Times* feature that immediately preceded the opening of *City* in September 2022, Heizer describes his life's work as "a masterpiece, or close to it." [6] One may imagine that the creation of capital-G Great Art might actually necessitate this level of confidence or self-belief, but, in our postmodern world, all grand historical narratives, even that of the Great Artist, are subject to criticism and ultimately rejection. In the aforementioned *New York Times* feature, "It Was a Mystery in the Desert for 50 Years," critic Michael Kimmelman refers to *City* as "the art-world version of ancient Atlantis, a chimera."[7] Even Kimmelman, impressed and enamored with *City* as he is, describes the monumental sculpture as an unrealizable pipedream. Much of his piece

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[4] Kimmelman, "Mystery in the Desert."
[5] Triple Aught Foundation, n.d. http://www.tripleaughtfoundation.org/.
[6] Kimmelman, "Mystery in the Desert."
[7] Ibid.

focuses on the romantic aspects of Heizer's biography and characterizes him as a "Fitzcarraldo"[8] – the titular character of a 1982 film by Werner Herzog, in which Klaus Kinski portrays a mad opera-loving Irishman who attempts to portage a 320-ton steamship over a mountain in the Amazon to access rich rubber territory with which he can finance an opera in the Peruvian city he lives in. A sensitive lunatic, hell-bent on completing a Sisyphean task of enormous proportion, one that involves the sheer force of human endeavor overcoming a harsh and unforgiving landscape. Klaus Kinski in the Amazon rainforest, Heizer in barren Garden Valley, Nevada – the parallel is undeniable. *City* is a *Gesamtkunstwerk* – a "total artwork" in the modernist sense, where the artist exercises dictatorial control over an artwork that synthesizes different art forms and aesthetics. Grand, individual attempts to realize artistic transcendence have been anachronistic and even problematic for a long time – the idea of a "total artwork" itself is irrevocably associated with composer Richard Wagner, a legendarily egotistical polemicist who influenced the most noxious extreme of modernism – fascism. Kimmelman even admits that the word "masterpiece" is a "loaded, dated term,"[9] and Heizer is all too aware of the loadedness of his work. This loadedness is the point of *City* – in an era suspicious of grand statements and narratives, Heizer's *City* makes the biggest (literally) statement in American art history. He describes his magnum opus as "democratic art, art for the ages"[10] – but this arrogance is not an unconscious one. Critics try to make Heizer out to be an outsider, to argue that he was "not as deft at art-world politics"[11] as his frenemy Robert Smithson, but his track record of staged art-world provocations and spectacles in the 1960s and 70s serves as evidence of Heizer's willfully antagonistic approach. Most significantly, Heizer was fully immersed in New York

[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.

City's burgeoning 1960s minimal art scene, and his earliest works in Nevada involved collaborations with Walter De Maria, Robert Smithson, and his wife Nancy Holt – originators of the land art movement and pioneers of minimal and conceptual art. As early as 1977, Heizer discussed his work in the context of the minimal and conceptual scenes. He recalled:

> My work is fully independent of anybody else's, and comes directly out of myself. But during the '60s there was this crazy phenomenon. I mean Walter De Maria was thinking about that stuff. He had written a piece for *Fluxus*, and he made some drawings and so went into it. Smithson went into it. I guess Morris did too. It just came from everywhere. Claes Oldenburg was doing it and Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt. But whatever I was doing, I was doing it first. And whatever I was doing, I was doing it myself. My area hasn't changed at all, and this will become evident later. There will be no change. Other people's work probably won't change either, but distinctions will be more evident. At any rate, I don't consider myself an earthworks artist. I never was. Look, in a lot of my work I use steel liners. They have nothing to do with earthworks.[12]

Even as early as 1977, Heizer discussed his work in the context of the coterie of the minimal and conceptual artists who lived and worked in Manhattan in the 1960s. He acknowledges the similarities between his work and those of the other artists, but is quick to dismiss them and contend that his work is original and wholly devoid of their influence. But Heizer's cohort in the late 1960s included an even wider circle of artists, all of whom hung out together at Max's Kansas City restaurant and nightclub – Dennis Oppenheim, Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Frank Stella, Richard Serra, and De Maria. Max's was probably most famous for being the setting of a live rock album by the Velvet Underground, for whom De Maria was the drummer of an earlier

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[12] John Gruen, "Michael Heizer: 'You Might Say I'm in the Construction Business,'" *ARTnews*, December 1977.

incarnation. Heizer was even commissioned to make an etched drawing on Max's windows in 1972 (fig. 4).

While describing the milieu of Max's in the 60s, Heizer scholar William L. Fox focuses on sculptor Richard Serra and his influence on Heizer, describing how he "absorbed that lesson of how to deliver the flat, affectless, totalizing statements about art that were in vogue – such as another famous tautology from the time, this by Serra in 1964: 'Work out of your work. Don't work out of anybody else's work.'"[13] We see this influence in interviews with Heizer, where he couches aesthetic and cultural justifications for his work in willfully obtuse, opaque statements – "I have no interest in landscape in terms of art. I think American landscape art is one thing, but my work doesn't have anything to do with that, it has to do with materials."[14] All this to say that not only was Heizer's work often done in active collaboration with other artists, they left an indelible impression on his personal style, present even as he dismisses them or seeks to define his work as unconnected to theirs. In the 1977 interview quoted earlier, Heizer simultaneously claims to be aesthetically discrete from and the originator of the styles of a slew of other minimal and land artists. The former part of this statement is subjective and may be true, but the latter part is patently untrue. In his 2013 *Artforum* obituary for Walter De Maria, Heizer describes the constant trading of ideas that defined their relationship when they met in 1967 –

> The endless hours of foaming at the mouth, predicting the future of art, the museums, their purpose, the galleries, their value, the value of art, the personalities, the perilous future of the world, resulted in revolutionary ideas that we now intended to visit upon the art world. There was never any personal jealousy, only admiration for the other's vision and the awe of witnessing all this divergent thought getting mixed together.[15]

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[13] William L. Fox, *Michael Heizer: The Once and Future Monuments* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2019), 31.
[14] Michael Heizer, *Sculpture in Reverse*, ed. Julia Brown (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 11.
[15] Michael Heizer, "Walter De Maria," *Artforum*, November 2013.

Later in the obituary, Heizer recounts De Maria showing him his 1960 *Art Yard*, a Fluxus proposal to dig holes outdoors with steam shovels and bulldozers, where "The digging of the hole would be part of the art."[16] Completed later in 1967, Heizer's *North* and *South* pieces (fig. 5), executed in a clearing in the Sierra Nevada mountains, constitute reenactments of *Art Yard* – each are excavations in the shape of a cube and a cone, respectively, creating two negative spaces 4 feet across and 4 feet deep. These were the first negative sculptures that Heizer ever realized, and they seem to be more than directly inspired by De Maria's earlier conceptual Fluxus piece. But the influence of Heizer's peers on his early artmaking does not stop there – not only did *North* and *South* take their conceptual and practical catalysts from an earlier work by a peer, but Heizer's works in the Nevada desert in the late 1960s were physically realized with the help of the very artists whose influence he later denied. The first of Heizer's 1968 *Nine Nevada Depressions* (his second series of negative sculptures in landscape), *Rift 1* (fig. 6), was executed by a team of Heizer, Smithson, and Holt, all wielding shovels to create 52-foot-long, 1.5-foot-wide, 1-foot-deep zigzags in the surface of a Nevada dry lake bed, or playa. That same year, Heizer accompanied Smithson and Holt on a visit to Mono Lake that resulted in a collaborative film of their road trip, *Mono Lake*. Not edited until 2004 by Holt, *Mono Lake* is both shot by and features each member of the trio. In the film, Smithson even collects the volcanic scoria that later constituted his *Mono Lake Nonsite (Cinders Near Black Point)* (1968). These collaborations between Heizer, Smithson, and Holt predate the defining works of their late-1960s-early-1970s works, *Double Negative* and *Spiral Jetty*, respectively. Not only did other artists help Heizer complete the arduous task of creating earthworks in the harsh Nevada desert; Heizer assisted them. Besides showing Smithson and Holt around Mono Lake and documenting

[16] Walter De Maria, "Art Yard," essay, in *An Anthology of Chance Operations*, ed. La Monte Young (Köln: H. Friedrich, 1970).

the experience, in 1968 Heizer helped De Maria create his *Mile Long Drawing*, two mile-long chalk lines spaced twelve feet apart on the floor of a dry lake bed in Nevada. Heizer describes being shown the preliminary plan for *Mile Long Drawing* in his obituary for De Maria, and the work's central conceit – a drawing substituting canvas for the desert floor – echoes in Heizer's later works involving large-scale markings on playas. Heizer's *Circular Surface Drawing*, also from 1968, featured a series of circles drawn on the physical floor of the landscape, and the same year's *Primitive Dye Paintings* utilized the playa floor as its canvas. In these pieces from 1968 and 1969, there is a complex interplay between Heizer's work and the work of his contemporaries – he was neither the Fitzcarraldo-style outsider modern-day commentators make him out to be or the land art originator he claimed to be later on in the 1970s. In fact, his pioneering output in the late 60s was the result of concerted collaborations and exchanges between him and the peers he later repudiated. Heizer's work is not that of either an outsider or a solitary individual but of an insider with forceful opinions on contemporary art and aesthetics, trying to break new artistic ground (no pun intended) during a charged period in contemporary American art.

As evidenced by decades-spanning statements attesting to the originality and autochthonous nature of his artistic output, Heizer has made a point of positioning himself as an outlaw, a "rugged individualist" or Western cowboy figure at odds with the bourgeois art-world culture of New York City and the East Coast. Surprisingly, and rather paradoxically, much of Heizer's personal image-making project has come in the form of collaborative film projects – *Mono Lake* with both Smithson and Holt, and *Hardcore* with Walter De Maria. Filmed in 1968, *Mono Lake* documents Smithson and Holt's first visit to the West. Mono Lake is a saline lake in California, located near both Yosemite National Park and the border with Nevada. The lake is

renowned among travelers and photographers alike for its desolate, alien look, accentuated by tall tower formations of limestone known as tufa. *Mono Lake* opens with a shot of leaping flames overlaid with film score music, accompanied by text stating that the film was "caught on film" on July 27th, 1968, construing the artists' film as a sort of documentary. Deadpan voiceover narration describes some of the area's geological history, perhaps a reflection of Smithson and Heizer's respective interests in impermanence and permanence. The voice mentions a unique type of mineral crystal native to the area, reflecting Smithson's personal interest and artistic employment of crystals and crystal lattices. Preliminary shots show the trio driving and smoking cigarettes, listening to songs by Waylon Jennings. Aurora Tang writes – "Outlaw country music on the radio, a cigarette in hand, downing a beer, equipped with cameras and maps as tools, and donning sunglasses, cowboy boots, and hats—*Mono Lake* conjures a stereotypical portrayal of youth and the American road trip in the late 1960s, not so unlike *Easy Rider* (1969) or *Zabriskie Point* (1970)."[17] This personal aesthetic turn is in stark contrast to the trappings of the milieu of Max's Kansas City and New York art world. Here, Warhol's Factory, amphetamines, and the urban art rock of the Velvet Underground are exchanged for the Great Basin, Coors Banquet, and country rock. *Mono Lake* serves as proof of Heizer's active cultivation of an outlaw image, an active rebellion against his milieu in the New York City art world, and an embrace of a broadly Western counterculture ethos. The fact that the film was the result of active collaboration with Smithson and Holt is doubly significant when considering the implications of Heizer's rugged individualist pose – a rebuttal to Heizer's claims that his "work is fully independent of anybody else's, and comes directly out of [him]self."[18] *Mono Lake*'s evocation of the countercultural road film (I think of both *Two-Lane Blacktop* and *Easy Rider*) demonstrates that Heizer's biker-esque,

[17] Tang, Aurora. "Mono Lake: Ring of Fire." Holt/Smithson Foundation, June 2020. https://holtsmithsonfoundation.org/mono-lake-ring-fire.
[18] Heizer, " De Maria."

maverick stance was a contrived one, constructed in concert with, and in opposition to, his peers in the 1960s New York City art world.

Heizer's role in Walter De Maria's *Hardcore*, a film shot in the Black Rock Desert of northern Nevada a year after his collaboration with Heizer on *Mile Long Drawing*, demonstrates the same point. Starring Heizer and an unnamed actor, *Hardcore* stages a Western-film-style shootout on a dry lake bed. The film is rigorously non-narrative in terms of style and editing, opening with shots of farm animals accompanied by the sounds of cows mooing and moaning. After the opening credits, the camera cuts to a barren desert playa. The camera begins a slow pan across the seemingly empty landscape, then cuts to a pair of male legs clad in cowboy boots and blue jeans, the colors in stark contrast to the largely colorless playa floor. The camera quickly cuts back to another slow pan, emphasizing the vastness of the desolate Nevada landscape. Here, the desert appears as a black slate, a playground or canvas, enclosed only by the omnipresent mountains and sky. Another pair of legs clad in boots comes into frame, this time wearing more obviously anachronistic cowboy chaps, conjuring both the costume tropes of Western films and contemporaneous hippie fashions. Again, these clothes are a far cry from the more minimal, monochrome modish fare worn by the New York City hangers-on at Warhol's Factory. After more slow panning, Heizer unholsters a pistol, cocks it, and reholsters it. The other figure is shown loading bullets into a long gun. Twenty minutes into this quiet exposition, the camera finally moves to show quick cuts of the two duellists' faces, then moves to another slow pan across a new and scrubbier, more vegetated landscape. After nearly a half hour of buildup, Heizer and the unnamed gunman open fire on each other, releasing a continuous barrage of shots for almost thirty seconds straight (fig. 7). The glacially paced buildup, followed by an unrealistic volley of gunshots – depending on your view, *Hardcore* could constitute either a parody or an

artworld remake of the climaxes of then-recent Spaghetti Western films and the work of Sergio Leone. Either way, *Hardcore* is yet another example of active collaboration between Heizer and his New York City peers – a work that, though ostensibly part of De Maria's oeuvre, contributes to Heizer's reactionary image-making project. Here, ranch hand garb and a staged desert shootout act as symbols of Heizer's acquired outlaw persona. Cowboy poses were by no means limited to Heizer – in his 2012 essay "Earth Beneath Detroit," Julian Meyers writes that "Earth artists took an unironic pleasure in consuming this culture and the trappings of the American West. Smithson ordered a pair of snakeskin cowboy boots while he was in Utah; Walter De Maria pinned a map of Nevada to the wall of his studio; Nancy Holt took pictures of 'Western graves.'"[19] Heizer helped to introduce these artists to the eerily blank desert landscapes of the American West, landscapes whose wide-openness acted as an antidote to the metaphorical claustrophobia of the New York City art world. For Heizer, Smithson, Holt, and De Maria, the open spaces of the West were seemingly blank canvases upon which the proverbial rules of the art-world game could be transgressed and ignored. Ironically, it is these continual collaborations – with Smithson, Holt, and De Maria – that defined Heizer's early practice and persona, while also leading to his eventual disavowal and rejection of his colleagues as imitators and also-rans.

In contrast to his consistent track record of self-mythologizing (which is often taken uncritically by his critics and biographers), Heizer's art-making practice during the late 1960s (more often than not) emerged from, or was actively realized by, collaborations with his colleagues in the burgeoning New York City world of minimal and conceptual art. His early earthworks, *Mono Lake*, and *Hardcore* all stand as proof that Heizer was actively collaborating with his (later repudiated) peers in a highly productive give-and-take loop of learning, creating,

[19] Julian Meyers, "Earth Beneath Detroit," in *Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974*, ed. Miwon Kwon and Philipp Kaiser (Munich: Prestel), 142.

and producing. These collaborations challenge any notion of Heizer as a solitary figure existing in opposition to the art-world zeitgeist and illuminate the complex interplay between his work and the influences of his contemporaries. In my next chapter, I will seek to situate Heizer within a different context and will argue that his actions in the early 1970s reflect and embody many of the central tenets of the art movement retroactively referred to as "institutional critique" – a term used to describe artists who, inspired by the radical phenomena of the 1960s counterculture and the New Left, sought to examine and question the structures and practices of art world institutions in general.

Chapter 1 Figures

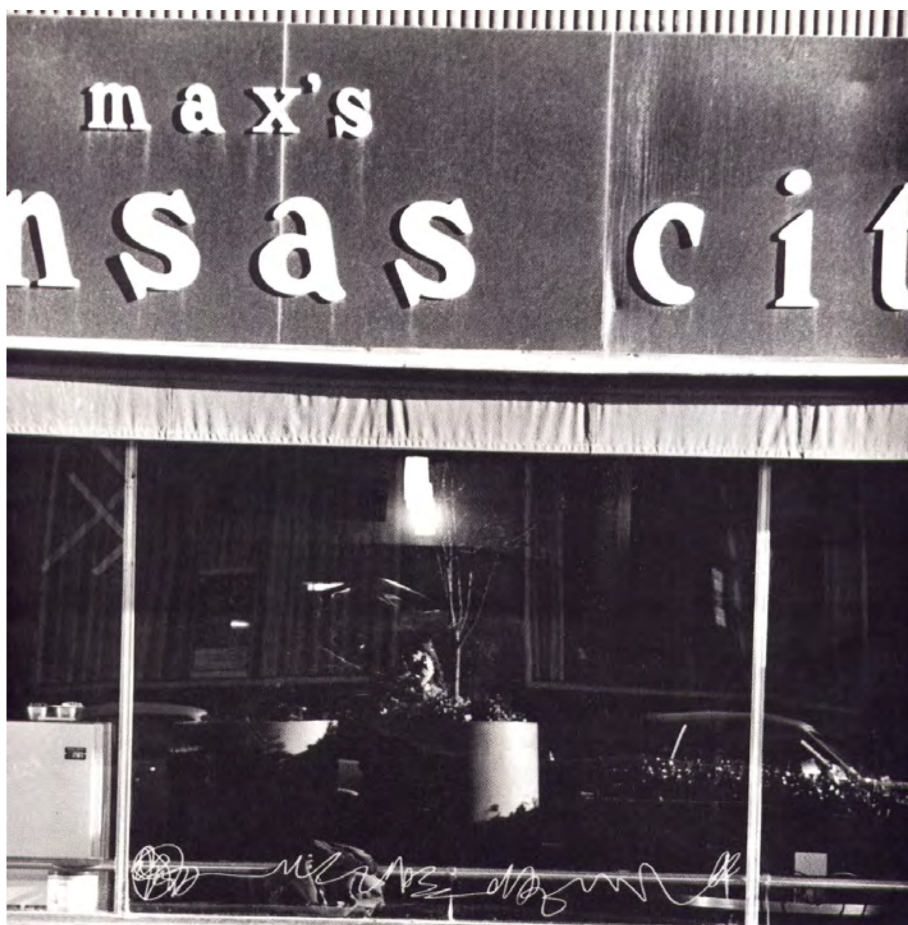

Figure 4

Michael Heizer, *Etched Window* (1973), New York City, New York

Figure 5

Michael Heizer, *North* (1967), Sierra Nevada Mountains, Nevada

Figure 6

Michael Heizer, *Rift 1* (1968), Jean Dry Lake, Nevada

Figure 7

Walter De Maria, *Hardcore* (1969), 16mm film, Black Rock Desert, Nevada

Chapter 2

In this chapter, I will place Heizer's work in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the context of a larger movement or trend toward a questioning of the structures and hierarchies inherent to the institutions of art. Heizer's work from this period runs chronologically concurrent with this larger movement, and I will argue that his work reflects and expounds on many of the movement's foundational themes. Commonly referred to as "Institutional Critique", this movement combined the questions of artists, critics, and curators who took issue with the commonly accepted financial, political, and aesthetic hierarchies that were then (and often remain) inherent to the workings of museums, galleries, and other art institutions. Institutional Critique was not a localized development (like the case of minimalism, New York City, and Max's Kansas City) – rather, its ideological architects were spread out across Europe and North and South America. In his essay "What Was Institutional Critique?" writer Blake Stimson asserts that "Institutional critique…was a child of 1968," defined by its highly contemporary "suspicion of institutions as such, casting itself variously against Jim Crow, the military-industrial complex, patriarchy, the Man, and a host of other perceived and actual hegemons."[20] The initiators of institutional critique were galvanized, in part, by contemporary developments in Western society and culture: the worldwide protests of 1968, transatlantic opposition to the American war in Vietnam, and the burgeoning global New Left. Situationist International, a collective of European Marxist artists and intellectuals, played a pivotal role in developing the questions that propelled institutional critique. The Situationists generated and disseminated art, texts, and propaganda that probed the intersections of artistic, academic, and political institutions in the

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[20] Blake Stimson, "What Was Institutional Critique?," essay, in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 20.

context of everyday life. Their endeavors climaxed with their active engagement in the May 1968 leftist protests in France. This crucially sociocultural approach to critiquing art and society proved influential to a number of politically-oriented European artists, who leveled their gaze on the very galleries and museums that exhibited and supported their work.

Directly inspired by the political events of 1968, Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers created a fictional museum: the Department of Eagles, Museum of Modern Art. This "museum" had neither a permanent physical collection nor a permanent physical location, instead appearing in various pop-up locations between 1968 and 1972. Beginning as an installation in Broodthaers' Brussels home, the fictional museum presented different pieces of media – everything from newspaper clippings to postcards to reproductions of artworks – that had one thread in common: the visual representation of, or reference to, eagles or images of eagles. The objects were exhibited in glass cases, sometimes in galleries, sometimes in storefronts or private homes, often featuring misleading signage and advertising claiming the fictional museum's exhibiting of canonical French painters like David, Ingres, Wiertz, and Courbet. Broodthaers himself wrote that his appropriative project "tries to steal from the official, the real museum, in order to lend its lies more power and credibility… the fictitious museum sheds new light on the mechanisms of art, artistic life, and society."[21] Here Broodthaers uses the setup of a fictional museum to implicitly critique the foundational logic of the museum as such: the meaning of a collection, the art historical connections between different works exhibited, and the physical frame of the art museum itself. Embodied in this early project is the central issue of institutional critique: a questioning of the intangible hierarchies and tangible spaces of the arts institution itself.

[21] Marcel Broodthaers, "Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles," essay, in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 139.

Hans Haacke, a German-born artist, and Daniel Buren, a French artist, are often considered among the primary founders of institutional critique. Their projects worked directly with the physical space of the museum and gallery, altering and questioning visitors' relationship to both the institution and the spatiality of the museum. Haacke's 1970 *MoMA Poll* took the form of two transparent Plexiglass ballot boxes, where visitors to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City could cast votes on a political question concerning Governor Nelson Rockefeller, a then-board member and major donor at MoMA. The next year, for a solo exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, Haacke assembled photographs and legal documents from the public record to expose the fraudulent business dealings of prominent Manhattan real estate investors. Thomas Messer, then director of the Guggenheim, demanded that Haacke withdraw the pieces, perhaps fearing censure from the powerful investors. When Haacke refused, Messer canceled the exhibition and fired its curator, Edward Fry.

While Haacke's approach to institutional critique was explicitly and firmly political, other institutional critique artists, such as Daniel Buren and Michael Asher, were slightly more concerned with the physicality of the museum or gallery space and the relationship between the museum's audience and its architecture. In 1971, Buren hung a sixty-six by thirty-two foot canvas banner in the rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum, bisecting the museum's iconic open central area from top to bottom (fig. 8). Because it obstructed clear viewing of other artists' work and countered a central architectural conceit of the Guggenheim, Buren's banner, which he called *Peinture-Sculpture (Painting-Sculpture)*, was removed before it could be officially displayed. As its title references, the banner could either be seen as a two-dimensional painting on canvas or a three-dimensional sculpture filling in a three-dimensional void, depending on the physical perspective of the audience. In this context, Buren's banner constituted a spatial intervention that

specifically addressed an art institution's architecture and transformed the way its physical space functioned. The simple addition of a hanging piece of canvas significantly altered the structural nature of the Guggenheim itself.

In his 2009 essay "Institutions, Critique, and Institutional Critique," Alexander Alberro describes the consequence of this kind of spatial intervention, arguing that the interventions constitute "the institutional critique strategy of shifting the viewer's perspective, or making viewers see what they had previously taken for granted in a new and different light."[22] It is this defining trait of institutional critique, this perspective-shifting strategy, that is embodied in Heizer's site-specific works from the late 1960s and early 1970s. And though his work was never (and has never been) as explicitly political and socioculturally concerned as that of the institutional critique movement, it is impossible to ignore their shared practices and approaches to questioning the institutions of the art world. His works consisting of depressions in the earth, including *Double Negative* in Nevada and *Dragged Mass Displacement* in Detroit, embody a larger turn toward the critique of the institutions of art, and utilize a physical action to shift an audience's perspective or relationship toward an established institution in much the same way as Alberro's description of the strategies of institutional critique. Here, it is revealing to look at the early 1970s work of influential California artist and CalArts professor Michael Asher. Asher, best known in the twenty-first century for his marathon "Post-Studio" CalArts course as profiled by writer Sarah Thornton,[23] became known in the 1970s for architectural interventions in art museums and galleries across Southern California. His 1970 piece *Installation* at the Pomona College Art Gallery was a spatial intervention in which the artist placed two new walls inside the institution's exhibition space and lowered the space's ceiling to be flush with the top of the

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[22] Alexander Alberro, "Institutions, Critique, and Institutional Critique," essay, in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 11.
[23] Sarah Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009).

museum’s entry doors (fig. 9). Asher additionally removed the entry doors themselves, leaving an unimpeded opening to the outside world. From a purely aesthetic perspective, this decidedly minor intervention had a major impact on the museum itself, transforming a seemingly passive exhibition hall into an imposing space that resembled a blown-up minimalist sculpture. But *Installation*’s impact was most deeply felt on the sociocultural level: Here, Asher’s rather straightforward alterations to the museum’s space serve to alter the museum’s fundamentally private machinations and essence to a form that is explicitly public. The museum is left completely exposed, open to any outside infiltration, and in that moment, ceases to be a cloistered or contrived institution as such. When the architecture of the museum is altered, the museum’s role in relation to both the art-viewing public and its own impartial stance changes fundamentally. Here, Asher recasts a seemingly neutral institutional space of cultural authority as an aesthetic entity with a distinct and independent presence within the broader cultural and social landscape. Simple architectural interventions transform the museum into a public space, critiquing the assumptions of autonomy at the museum’s logical core, even while stripping the museum entirely of those same assumptions. *Installation* invites the art-viewing public to participate more directly in the image-making project of the museum as an institution, effectively voiding both the institution's cultural and spatial structures. Asher created more of these spatial interventions during the 1970s, perhaps most famously at the Claire Copley Gallery in Los Angeles in 1974. For this particular piece, Asher removed the partition wall that separated the gallery's exhibition space from its office area. This removal required a physical demolition that left debris and detritus scattered around the gallery space. Asher then erased all evidence of his intervention, covering up cracks and removing debris that would defeat the illusion of the building being a single, continuous “white cube” space. Without a partition wall, the business

activities of gallery staff were made fully visible – phone calls, private conversations, stored artworks (fig. 10). With this simple adjustment to the physical space of the gallery, the structures of the gallery institution are made public. In an accompanying text, Asher wrote:

> The viewers were confronted with the way they had been traditionally lulled into viewing works of art and, simultaneously, the unfolding of the gallery structure and its operational procedures. Works had been perceived from a safe cultural distance which generally prevented the viewer from questioning the issues involved. Without that questioning, a work of art could remain enclosed in its abstracted aesthetic context, creating a situation where the viewer could mystify its actual and historical meaning. As a commentary, this work laid bare the contradictions inherent within the gallery structure and its constituent elements.[24]

Here Asher pinpoints the central effect of his work at Claire Copley Gallery– a nullification of the gallery structure's claim to cultural autonomy and to institutional power or value. The near-mystical atmosphere the institution strove to convey was rendered void by the simple removal of a partition wall. The work also highlighted the economic and sociocultural materiality of the gallery institution, "confronting" the art-viewing public with the market structures of capital that are intrinsic to the existence of the gallery. Here, the mystical, abstracted aesthetic quality that the gallery strives to embody is revealed to hinge on the material architectural fact of a partition wall.

It is hard to write or even read about Michael Asher's architectural interventions without being reminded of Michael Heizer's work with space and materiality in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Specifically, his 1971 *Dragged Mass Displacement* installation (or performance, or

[24] Michael Asher, "September 21–October 12, 1974, Claire Copley Gallery, Inc., Los Angeles, California," essay, in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 152.

Happening) at the Detroit Institute of Arts (fig. 11). Since the creation of his first earthwork in the Sierra Nevada mountains in 1967, Heizer had received a great deal of press in the global art world, all focusing on his radical negative sculptures and interventions in the Nevada desert. Photographs and drawings of his earthworks had been exhibited in various minimal and land art museum and gallery exhibitions across the globe, and Heizer had even been invited to participate personally in exhibitions in Europe, where he staged active interventions in Munich and Bern. But his 1971 exhibition at the Detroit Institute of Arts was his first solo exhibition at a major American arts institution. Organized by pioneering curator Samuel Wagstaff, the show, entitled "Photographic and Actual Work," consisted of a huge indoor slide projection of Heizer's Munich earthwork (the "photographic" work), alongside the "actual" work, *Dragged Mass Displacement*. To realize *Dragged Mass Displacement*, Heizer dragged a thirty-ton granite monolith across the north lawn of the museum over the course of three days, creating an enormous gash in the lawn and digging up large piles of dirt in the process (fig. 12). Seen as offensive and pointless to critics, institutions, and the public alike, in truth, *Dragged Mass Displacement* represented a powerful probing of both the physical and intangible boundaries and structures of the arts institution or the museum as such. Though a far cry from the clean, precise spatial interventions of Asher's projects at Pomona College and the Claire Copley Gallery, *Dragged Mass Displacement* is a powerful work of institutional critique, and it constitutes a central event in Heizer's larger practice of questioning, confronting, and outright provoking the governing institutions of art.

It should be noted, however, that *Dragged Mass Displacement* was not a work as innately *institutional* as the other institutional critique projects I have discussed. Implicit in many of those projects is a deep-seated reverence for the institution itself: Alberro argues that the works of

Broodthaers, Buren, and Haacke “ultimately championed and advocated for the institution: the critiques culminated in a demand to straighten up the operation of this central site of the public sphere and to realign its actual function with what it is in theory.”[25] Institutional critique was thus a movement embedded deep within the institution, one that imagined different, better ways to structure the institutions of art. Many of the projects retroactively defined as institutional critique were inward-looking in this way, challenging the art institution to become less opaque, mystical, and self-confirming. Asher and Heizer, on the other hand, seem more interested in the spatial and architectural structures of the art institution, and in probing the function of those structures in practice. Their form of institutional critique is not one interested in progressive reform: their interventions instead confront the art-viewing public with the artificial limitations and structures at the beating heart of these institutions. Heizer’s Detroit exhibition caused massive controversy and a scandalized outcry: Detroit’s Arts Commission and the board of trustees of the museum itself were all offended by the dragged boulder and ordered Heizer to remove the work only one month into a contracted six-month installation. The city’s Arts Commision forced Wagstaff to pay to resod the ruined lawn, and after he and Heizer both failed to reclaim the unwieldy monolith, they ordered the stone destroyed with dynamite. Writing in *Artnews*, Guggenheim curator Diane Waldman (ironically involved in the curation of Buren’s banner) described *Dragged Mass Displacement*’s “rude disruption of its immediate surroundings” and its “terrible aggression, [its] abandonment of order for chaos.”[26] The work was a direct confrontation: more in line with Asher’s spatially subversive interventions in Southern California than the comparably “safe” projects of Haacke, Broodthaers, and Buren. In the aforementioned 2012

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[25] Alberro, “ Institutional Critique,” 8.
[26] Diane Waldman, "Holes without History" *Artnews*, May 1971.

essay "Earth Beneath Detroit," Julian Meyers contends that the Detroit boulder was part of Heizer's rejection and sequential highlighting of art world structures. To Meyers,

> the desert… offered relative autonomy from the institutions and markets whose forceful administration of the world of art had now become "opaque," which is also to say, newly visible. And, too, this move "outside" obviated the complex problem of art's public life by pulling free of the troublesome crowds that might object, or misunderstand, or demand that the artist's production speak to (or for) them.[27]

Thus, both Heizer's Nevada earthworks and his urban installation in Detroit serve to simultaneously highlight and pull away from the artificial limitations of the art world: the institution, the market, and the public. As the boulder is dragged across the lawn of the museum, it churns up earth and wrecks the lawn that demarcates the abstracted, mythical institution from the material, tangible public sphere. *Dragged Mass Displacement* makes a spectacle out of an abrasion, a show out of an architectural and physical disruption. It disrupts the calculated impartiality of the art institution in much the same way that Asher's interventions do, utilizing what Alberro terms the "the institutional critique strategy of shifting the viewer's perspective, or making viewers see what they had previously taken for granted in a new and different light."[28] As mentioned earlier, Heizer's blatantly antagonistic act inspired criticism that quickly led to complete institutional censure. This censure was extreme: preemptively removing and destroying (with explosives) an artwork is not the usual or expected reaction to the completion of a commissioned art installation. Heizer's installation reveals what Asher calls the "abstracted aesthetic context" of the art institution, as does the institutional backlash to the installation. Both the physical dragging of the boulder and its arbitrary removal and destruction provide proof of

[27] Meyers, "Earth Beneath Detroit," 132.
[28] Alberro, " Institutional Critique," 11.

the museum's physical and hierarchical undergirding and negate its claim to be systematic and absolute. The arts institution is exposed as an arbitrary, contrived organization of people with its specific ideologies and views on the nature of the relationship between art and society.

The entire spectacle of *Dragged Mass Displacement*'s completion and swift backlash brought the structures of arts institutions into sharp focus, foregrounding the level of say that boards, committees, and public groups had on the exhibition of contemporary art. In his landmark book *The New Avant-Garde: Issues for the Art of the Seventies*, published just a year after the Detroit piece, Grégoire Müller identifies some of the currents of institutional critique running through Heizer's work:

> A work of Michael Heizer's can never be dissociated from its surrounding ground mass. His attitude toward the museum-gallery system is not so much one of theoretical rejection for socio-political reasons (as it is for many contemporary artists), but a question of practical necessity… In terms of space, they actually tend to have difficult relationships with architecture; either they make the interaction impossible by almost disappearing… or they aggressively assert themselves with a complete disdain for architectural space. In Detroit, this aggression was so violently felt that the city finally ordered the destruction of Heizer's 300-ton *Drag*[ged] *Mass Displacement*.[29]

Müller makes good points here, but I (like Meyers) believe he misidentifies the object of Heizer's contempt. Heizer's target is not architecture itself; rather, Heizer co-opts the architecture and spatial layout of the museum as a battleground for his critiques of the art institution itself. He is interested in investigating the material undergirdings of the museum itself: later on in Müller's book, there is a reproduction of a notarized grant deed confirming Heizer's purchase of three

[29] Grégoire Müller, *The New Avant-Garde: Issues for the Art of the Seventies* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1972), 30.

separate plots of land in rural Nevada. The private acquisition of Nevada land plays a major part in the story of Heizer's earthworks: Heizer's 1969 *Double Negative* was completed on land purchased via funds from his gallerist, Virginia Dwan, and the reproduction of the grant deed is presented next to an aerial shot of *Double Negative*. I don't think it is too much of a stretch to say that part of Heizer's relationship to the Nevada desert is an interest in the personal politics of ownership and its relation to autonomy – for Heizer, the grant deed for the land purchased to complete *Double Negative* is part of, or at least irrevocably tied to, the artwork. The land was, of course, purchased by his gallerist; but here, privately owned land both facilitates and represents a level of independence and autonomy from the comparatively feudal New York City art-world systems of galleries, art dealers, and collectors. Private ownership of the very land that constitutes *Double Negative* offers Heizer a safe haven and freedom to make the artwork's rather radical aesthetic arguments and innovations. In the context of private ownership, *Double Negative* is another reflection of the various currents running through institutional critique – the artwork implicitly makes the argument that avant-garde art can be more progressive and radical when separated from the usual market systems of the urban art world. The use of a legal document in an art-world context further reflects one primary institutional critique stratagem, that is, the presentation of legal documents that illustrate the financial undergirdings of an institution or artwork (Here, I think of Asher's *Painting and sculpture from the Museum of Modern Art : catalog of deaccessions, 1929 through 1998* or Haacke's *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*). *Double Negative* is impossible to actualize from within those systems, and its very existence reveals some of the limitations imposed by, and inherent to, art-market structures and hierarchies. To shift the art-viewing public's perspective away from the art world and out into open natural space

– in this context, Heizer's work in the Nevada desert (and in the context of land art at large) can be understood as a potent critique of the commercial art world and the institutional structures that undergird it.

It is difficult to separate any argument for Michael Heizer's work embodying any of the various tendencies of institutional critique without considering his close working relationship with Robert Smithson. As described in the first chapter of this paper, during the late 1960s, Smithson and Heizer engaged in an active give-and-take exchange of learning, creating, and producing, helping one another actualize works and exposing one another to new environments and aesthetics. Of particular significance to this chapter, Smithson is often cited as one of the architects of institutional critique – his own artworks and writings often deal with the relationship between art and its sociocultural context, questioning traditional notions of art and its relationship to physical space. In terms of his writing, Smithson is seen as the theoretical impresario of the land artists, giving their nascent works a firmer conceptual and critical framework. In a discussion between Smithson, Heizer, and early land artist Dennis Oppenheim spanning late 1968 to early 1969 and published in the highly influential (albeit short-lived) *Avalanche* art magazine, the artists discuss their ideas on art's relationship to both the white cube gallery and the natural landscape. Heizer begins the discussion by stating (in a characteristically plain manner) that "The work is not put in a place, it is that place."[30] It is fruitful to reflect on this statement in relation to *Double Negative* – if *Double Negative* is itself the land, then the artwork is impossible to separate from the purchasing and subsequent private ownership of the parcel of land upon which it sits. Here, the physical side-stepping of the mainstream gallery and art market systems is central to the work itself. Smithson goes on to clarify that "we all see the landscape as

[30] Robert Smithson, "Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson," essay, in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University Of California Press, 1996), 242.

coextensive with the gallery. I don't think we're dealing with matter in terms of a back to nature movement. For me the world is a museum."[31] Here Smithson argues for part of the central conceit of the land art movement at large: a redefinition of art's relation to the exhibition space, where empty land in the American West can be taken as seriously in relation to an artwork as to a white cube gallery or a museum exhibition. Smithson's statement is another manifestation of the institutional critique strategy of perspective-shifting that Alberro identifies as central to the movement – when the art-viewing public's perspective on art's place in the exhibition space is shifted to accommodate art in the landscape, the arbitrary conceits and structures at the heart of the institutions of art are both revealed and implicitly critiqued. Further along in the *Avalanche* discussion, Heizer continues this train of thought, saying that "one aspect of earth orientation is that the works circumvent the galleries and the artist has no sense of the commercial or the utilitarian."[32] Of course, Heizer is prone to hyperbole on one hand and contrariness on the other, and he undoubtedly had a great sense of the practical, financial underpinnings of his work in the land (which did not so much circumvent the galleries as employ them differently), but his statement makes evident his awareness of how his works function as an implicit critique of, or rejoinder to, the established gallery-artist relationship. He goes on to argue that "One of the implications of earth art might be to remove completely the commodity-status of a work of art and to allow a return to the idea of art as…more of a religion."[33] Here Heizer explicitly connects his work in the land to the institutions of the art market, arguing that a reorientation of art outside of traditional exhibition spaces may in fact allow the very nature of art's relationship to the market (and thus both the collector and the art-viewing public) to be radically changed, or even totally nullified. Heizer engages in a subtle critique of the established gallery-artist relationship,

[31] Smithson, "Discussions with Heizer," 246.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Smithson, "Discussions with Heizer," 247.

implying a deliberate effort to position earth art as a way to subvert commodification inherent in traditional art markets. In the broader discourse of institutional critique, *Double Negative* thus emerges as a potent commentary on the limitations imposed by prevailing art-market structures and hierarchies. By actualizing his work directly in the land, Heizer challenges the conventional expectations of art in relation to society and culture, redirecting the viewer's gaze away from the spatial and economic confinements of the art world and towards a boundless, open natural space.

In "What Is a Museum? A Dialogue", a conversation between Smithson and Allan Kaprow published in 1967, Smithson makes a number of proposals and assertions that appear to predate and foreshadow artworks and concepts later actualized by Heizer. In the dialogue (later reproduced in 2009's foundational *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*), Smithson and Kaprow discuss both the theoretical and actual function of the museum in relation to a changing society. Early in the 1960s, Kaprow had coined the term "Happening" – a spontaneous, site-specific group performance piece – pioneering and influencing both performance art and installation art in the process. "Happenings" mostly did away with any relation to art-world structures, reframing art as something that could be spontaneous, everyday, and participatory, free of art's institutional or economic systems. In the dialogue, he and Smithson discuss what they see as the obsolescence of the traditional museum, proposing new ways to approach museums, both in terms of exhibiting art and in terms of architecture and spatiality. During the discussion, Kaprow delves into Smithson's concept of a distant monument, one constructed in a location far removed from public scrutiny – "You mentioned building your own monument, up in Alaska, perhaps, or Canada. The more remote it would be the more inaccessible, perhaps the more satisfactory."[34] Smithson's concept is of a kind of anti-monument,

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[34] Allan Kaprow and Robert Smithson, "What Is a Museum? A Dialogue," essay, in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 58.

one existing entirely beyond, and explicitly rejecting, the realm of the autophagic museum and the art-viewing public. Smithson's conceptualization of a remote monument seems bizarrely prescient, predating the inception of Heizer's *City* project by a few years. If we can draw a through-line between Smithson's theoretical conception of a remote, inaccessible monument and *City*'s monumental presence in the incredibly isolated Garden Valley, then *City* can be understood as the actualization of a museum-skeptical institutional critique theory. Situated in the context of a discussion about the obsolescence of museums and traditional art-world hierarchies (a discussion later cited as foundational to the very conception of institutional critique, I might add), *City* becomes a strong statement against the prevailing conception of the institutions of art as neutral entities with autonomous, universal claims to cultural authority. In the context of institutional critique and the conditions of "What Is a Museum? A Dialogue," *City* represents a spatial rejection of the conventional art-viewing public and thus the traditional relationship between art and society, constituting a tangible manifestation of Smithson's theoretical, speculative institutional critique. It is worth mentioning that while Smithson's influence on Heizer's work can be situated within the framework of institutional critique, it can also be positioned as part of the complex interplay between Heizer and his peers in the 1960s New York City art world that I identify and expound upon in my first chapter. Smithson's influence on Heizer cannot be overstated – the currents that can variously be identified as embodying the tenets of minimalism, land art, or institutional critique running through Heizer's work can all be traced to the impact of Smithson's writings, artworks, and his working relationship with Heizer.

In this chapter, I analyzed Heizer's site-specific works, particularly *Double Negative* and *Dragged Mass Displacement*, as manifestations of institutional critique. Even without the overtly

political (or even leftist) overtones present in the work of many of the artists grouped under the institutional critique umbrella, Heizer's interventions in the landscape and in urban environments use institutional critique strategies to implicitly question and challenge the art world's conventional structures. The comparison drawn between Heizer’s work in Detroit and Nevada and Michael Asher's spatial interventions emphasizes Heizer's focus on the physical and architectural aspects of institutions. Heizer's work, while not explicitly aligned with institutional critique’s reformist agenda, shares its strategy of shifting perspectives, and is most keenly felt when related to Smithson’s working relationship with Heizer.

Any clear through-line from Heizer’s work to that of, say, Asher or Buren, is itself difficult to draw from his recorded statements alone – Heizer rarely spoke of specific institutions (or of politics) in as explicit or cutting a manner as the generally reform-minded artists of institutional critique. It is perhaps more accurate to say that the reflections and parallels with institutional critique present in Heizer’s oeuvre are more plainly the result of a sort of convergent evolution, where disparate progressive artists of the late 1960s attempted to move beyond the formalist aesthetic innovations of post-war abstract artists and extend their own postmodern, avant-garde art methodologies to the foundational structures and hierarchies of the art world. Here, the tendency to critique and question the established institutions of art can be seen as an intuitive facet of the natural progression of avant-garde or progressive art in the 1960s and 1970s.

Chapter 2 Figures

Figure 8

Daniel Buren, *Peinture-Sculpture (Painting-Sculpture)* (1971), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City, New York

Figure 9

Michael Asher, *Installation* (1970), Pomona College Art Gallery, Claremont, California

Figure 10

Michael Asher, *Claire S. Copley Gallery, Los Angeles, California, USA, September 21–October 12, 1974* (1974), Los Angeles, California

Figure 11

Michael Heizer, *Dragged Mass Displacement* (1971), Detroit, Michigan

Figure 12

Michael Heizer, *Dragged Mass Displacement* (1971), Detroit, Michigan

Chapter 3

In a 2008 lecture given at Dia Art Foundation as part of their “Artists on Artists” series, Vietnamese American photographer and Bard College professor An-My Lê establishes a common thread between the work of Michael Heizer and the work of photographers included in the 1975 exhibition “New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape.” Lê analyzes her own style in relation to both photographs of Heizer’s work and the work of New Topographics (a phrase used here to describe a larger movement or trend embodied by the foundational 1975 exhibition), drawing parallels between reflections of militarism and the Vietnam War that she sees in both Heizer’s work and her own. For Le, both the immediate and the indirect impacts of war on the landscape are communicated in her and Heizer’s work, work she sees as reflecting the New Topographics’ focus on the interplay of open space and the built environment in the American landscape. She identifies the rhetoric of military power present in Heizer’s work, questioning the artistic ramifications of exerting power over the landscape in this manner. Lê’s analysis of Heizer’s work is both an aesthetic and sociocultural one, linking his earthworks to broader decades-spanning trends in the American landscape art tradition.

In this chapter I will attempt to position Heizer as part of a larger movement of artists in the 1960s and 1970s who sought to update the American landscape art tradition to reflect the radical changes to American scenery that occurred during the prosperous post-war period. Brought together at the era-defining photography exhibition “New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape,” these artists eschewed the Romantic focus on the sublime that traditionally characterized American landscape photography and painting, instead focusing on depictions of man’s impact on the contemporary landscape. Most of the photographers included in “New Topographics” lived and worked in the American West or Midwest and shared both a

common style and a thematic focus. Photographers like Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, and Stephen Shore depicted the Western landscape as they saw it in the mid-1970s: a landscape suffused with suburban real estate developments, manicured lawns, shopping centers, vast parking lots, and gas stations. Their straightforward photos centered the banal – the everyday architecture and landscape encountered by the suburban American, shown at a seemingly frosty remove. These pictures focused on the "built" landscape; a landscape touched and altered by human construction – in stark contrast to traditional American landscape photography's focus on the so-called "natural" landscape.

The tradition of American landscape art is a rich and not purely an aesthetic one; American landscape art has always been suffused with sociocultural themes and fixations. The work of nineteenth- and twentieth-century landscape photographers Carleton Watkins and Ansel Adams presented a stylized, contrived view of the American West: wide vistas of supposedly pristine wilderness, unpopulated and unmarred by human activities. This kind of photography was a direct descendant of the nineteenth-century American landscape painting tradition – the Hudson River School, Frederic Church, Thomas Cole, and Albert Bierstadt. These painters focused on depicting the natural beauty of the American wilderness with carefully stylized light and an atmosphere serving a Romantic vision of the sublime in nature. While Thomas Cole (who is often seen as the first notable American landscape painter) helped to establish and codify this Romantic and mannered style, his work had a distinctly allegorical and sociocultural bent. Cole's paintings *The Course of Empire* and *The Oxbow* (fig. 13) in particular are early examples of depictions of "the man-altered landscape," portraying the impact of human development on the landscape itself. Albert Bierstadt in particular defined the dominant style for art depicting the landscape of the American West – as early as the 1860s, he painted the natural landscapes of the

Rocky Mountains, the Sierra Nevada, and, specifically, Yosemite Valley. Bierstadt and his contemporaries, in contrast with Cole's more culturally allegorical themes, portrayed the relatively recently acquired American West as uncultivated and ripe for settlement and expansion. The most prominent American landscape photographers followed in the footsteps of these later Hudson River School painters, focusing on the sublime beauty of the open spaces of the American West – here, I think of Ansel Adams and Carlton Watkins. But these photographers' focus on the natural beauty of empty Western wilderness was interpreted as serving a different end than that of the Romantic painters of the 19th century – rather, their work sought to emphasize the need to protect and preserve noteworthy open spaces against the intrusion of human development. What tied early American landscape photographers to the painters who preceded them, however, was their authorial remove from the landscape itself: their representations aimed to void the landscape of any human presence. The photographers of New Topographics reacted directly against this tradition, instead centering visual evidence of man's impact on the contemporary Western landscape. New Topographics' closest forebears were prominent American nineteenth-century photographers who were not strictly pigeonholed as landscape photographers: William Henry Jackson and Timothy H. O'Sullivan. O'Sullivan's pioneering Civil War photography depicted the landscape as it was in the state of war: landscapes ravaged by cannon-shot and infantry maneuvers, its natural contours fundamentally altered by the American man's presence on the land. From the 1860s to the 1880s, William Henry Jackson and O'Sullivan (among other photographers) took photographs of the landscape of the American West as part of ambitious United States government efforts to conduct thorough geological surveys of what was then largely unsurveyed land. Their bare, unadorned, and documentary-style photographs appealed to the photographers of New Topographics, who appreciated their

practical, survey-focused approach to the landscape. In the late 1970s, a group of young photographers inspired by New Topographics embarked on an extensive "rephotography" project. Calling themselves the Rephotographic Survey Project, the photographers carefully traced the footsteps of Jackson and O'Sullivan's surveys, painstakingly recreating the exact framing of their topographic pictures. The resulting publication, *Second View: The Rephotographic Survey Project*[35] presents the original survey photographs directly beside the rephotographed renditions, clearly illustrating the changes mans' presence had made over a hundred years (fig. 14). These displays show topographies drastically altered by a century of development – rough mountainsides made smooth and level, waterfalls dammed, lakes diminished and turned into dry playas. These eerie "rephotographs" clearly demonstrate the results of the unspoken ideologies behind nineteenth-century landscape art – Hudson River School paintings and topographic photographs implicitly argue for a Manifest Destiny doctrine in which Americans are positioned as rightful inheritors of the seemingly empty wildernesses of the American West.

Ultimately, nineteenth-century photography approached the landscape fundamentally differently from the work of Ansel Adams or the Hudson River School – photography had a different approach to scale, and because of its lack of association with the fine arts, photography was more related to pragmatic uses, such as land surveying. Photographs taken by Jackson and O'Sullivan depicted human activities set against and within the landscape, in contrast to Adams' style of removing human presence from the landscape. The photographers of New Topographics harkened back to this approach to landscape photography, seeking to integrate its traditionally "topographic" perspective within the still inchoate discipline of fine art photography.

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[35] Mark Klett, JoAnn Verburg, and Paul Berger, *Second View: The Rephotographic Survey Project* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984).

Robert Adams made this connection clear in his pioneering work in the 1960s and 1970s. An English professor turned photographer, Adams gave his early photography books titles that clarified his intended connections to nineteenth-century landscape photography. The title of his breakout 1974 publication, *The New West*[36], clearly stated Adams' intention of updating the tradition of Western landscape art to the then-present day. The title of his 1977 book *Denver: A Photographic Survey of the Metropolitan Area* served a twofold purpose. Titling his photographic series a "photographic survey" recalls an earlier, nineteenth-century, topographical approach to landscape photography, where photography was a tool for land surveying rather than a fine art medium. The book's title also is a moment of self-identification for Adams that positions his work in the context of the 1975 New Topographics show of which he was a part – "photographic survey" alludes to an approach that is more topographic or documentary-style than artistic or aesthetic. In his introduction to *Denver: A Photographic Survey of the Metropolitan Area*, Adams writes

> Denver was, in the early part of the last decade, different in appearance from Los Angeles. In 1962, when I came home after several years in Southern California, I tried to photograph the city and the high altitude brilliance that distinguished it. New buildings had, it is true, begun to change some of the geography, but the light was clean enough to disinfect car agencies and cheap bungalows; smog was so rare, in fact, that I refused to photograph when it was present. Bad light was just not typical.
>
> By the end of the decade it was. A new city had emerged (though one that looked prematurely worn), a city much like other large urban centers across the Southwest. To show it accurately required that I stop sorting things out by the degree to which they were

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[36] Robert Adams, *The New West : Landscapes Along the Colorado Front Range* (Boulder, CO: Colorado Associated University Press, 1974).

> picturesque; if beauty were to be discovered in Denver, it had to be on the basis of a radical faith in inclusion. Shopping centers, junky arroyos, and commercial streets not only had to be more fully acknowledged, but acknowledged amidst the dull, hard gray of pollution. I determined, moreover, to stay clear of the mountains. I distrusted the late Victorians' passion for mountaintop vistas, and decided instead to adopt the perspective of the first settlers, those who saw Colorado from the small rises of the prairie.[37]

Here, Adams is again positioning his work in the context of New Topographics. He describes his photographic project as first rejecting, but later embracing, the aesthetic qualities of the post-war, midcentury changes to the American landscape: air pollution, shopping malls, industrial parks, monolithic suburban real estate developments. For Adams, this focus is not the result of happenstance, but rather the product of a new emphasis on, and underscoring of, the seemingly banal, plain aspects of the contemporary urban landscape. For Adams and the other photographers of New Topographics, the dull, mass-produced developments of suburban and urban sprawl are themselves the protagonists of their landscape pictures. He also declares a suspicion of "the late Victorians' passion for mountaintop vistas," instead deciding "to adopt the perspective of the first settlers."[38] Interestingly, here Adams identifies and rejects the Romantic emphasis on the sublime wilderness embodied by the work of Ansel Adams, Carlton Watkins, and the painters of the Hudson River School. This is not a rejection of landscape photography at large, nor an embrace of purely urban spaces as subject; rather, Adams is positioning the mundane structures of his changing city as central to any consciously contemporary or progressive landscape art practice. Adams goes on to argue that his pictures depict "a western

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[37] Robert Adams, *Denver: A Photographic Survey of the Metropolitan Area* (Denver: Colorado Associated University Press, 1977).
[38] Ibid.

scale that, despite our crowding; persists in long views."[39] For Adams, the intrusion of human industry and development on the natural spaces of the West is a mere "crowding," one that neither neutralizes nor diminishes the "landscape" qualities of his subjects. The New Topographic landscape is a landscape in which nature and industry are inextricably intertwined. This is the key to understanding the photographs of Adams and Shore (less so those of Baltz): they center the human presence and impact on the natural landscape itself, depicting neither pure uninhabited nature space nor completely sterile manufacturing zones (fig. 15).

This interplay between the human and the natural is where An-My Lê connects the art of Michael Heizer and the New Topographics, an art that is "stripped of any artistic frills and reduced to an essentially topographic state,"[40] as described by William Jenkins in his introduction to the "New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape" catalog. It is impossible to talk about the art of Heizer (or nearly any artist working in the land) without talking about photography – Heizer's work in the remote Nevada landscape, and, crucially, his magnum opus *City*, has largely been experienced by the art-viewing public not *in situ*, but rather via photographic reproductions. While Heizer and art historical scholars consistently link *City*'s vast dreamscape to ancient architecture and ceremonial cities, there is a clearer aesthetic connection to be made with the work of the photographers of New Topographics. The unhewn megaliths that have made Heizer famous are conspicuously absent from *City;* instead, *City*'s vast topography unfolds over edifices largely fashioned from burnished concrete. *City*'s minimalist concrete structures and erections more closely resemble the impossibly smooth surfaces, repetitive geometries, and pop-Brutalist architecture of the "New West" as documented by Adams, Shore, and Baltz. *City*'s scale also reinforces these connections: As it is impossible to encompass all or

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[39] Ibid.
[40] William Jenkins, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (Rochester, NY: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1975), 5.

even most of the artwork in a single photographic frame, the art-viewing public has experienced *City* largely through a distinctly topographical form of photograph. The de facto *City* press release "It Was a Mystery in the Desert for 50 Years"[41] uses multiple photographs and drone videography from many different angles to try and communicate the elegant sprawl of the artwork, essentially conducting a topographic land survey of Heizer's sculpture. Photographs taken for the article by Todd Heisler set Heizer's sleek, alternatingly rectilinear and organic forms both against and within the vistas of the bleak, picturesque Garden Valley – here, *City* is positioned as both a natural outgrowth of the desolate desert floor and as an alien blemish on its sublime landscape (fig. 16). *City*'s mechanical contours and geometric structures not only reflect the aesthetic qualities of suburban sprawl and built environment emphasized by New Topographics – *City*'s position in Nevada's natural landscape reflects the framing of Adams, Shore, and Baltz's industrial sites and parking lots within the changing natural landscape of the post-war American West. Works by these photographers highlight the relationship between the built environment and the natural landscape, often placing them in direct conflict or relationship with one another in a manner akin to the framing of Heisler's photographs of *City*. *City* reflects the built environment in the context of the New Topographics' representations of the "New West," where concrete and steel uneasily inhabit the physical and ontological terrain of the historical American West. In his 1968 *Artforum* article "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," Robert Smithson identifies the primary aesthetic drivers behind both the work of the photographers of New Topographics and of Heizer's *City*:

> As "technology" and "industry" began to become an ideology in the New York Art World in the late '50s and early '60s, the private studio notions of "craft" collapsed. The

[41] Kimmelman, "Mystery in the Desert."

> products of industry and technology began to have an appeal to the artist who wanted to work like a "steel welder" or a "laboratory technician." This valuation of the material products of heavy industry, first developed by David Smith and later by Anthony Caro, led to a fetish for steel and aluminum as a medium (painted or unpainted). Molded steel and cast aluminum are machine manufactured, and as a result they bear the stamp of technological ideology. Steel is a hard, tough metal, suggesting the permanence of technological values.[42]

Here, of course, Smithson is describing the aesthetic qualities of proto- or early-minimalists David Smith and Anthony Caro, sculptors who came of age and were educated in a distinctly modernist era. But the process he identifies is one intrinsic to both the practices of the New Topographics and Heizer: a process where an artwork gains sociocultural weight and import when it appropriates non-art mediums and forms that carry their own separate cultural significance or meaning. The artwork then takes on the material authority of the non-art medium. Here, Smithson is alluding to early minimalists, the Finish Fetish, and macho sculptors like Serra and Andre, and his point is clear – the value of their work hinges on the cultural value of the forms and mediums they utilize. For Serra, steel, welding, and industrial production; for McCracken, fiberglass and commercial products; for Flavin, fluorescent lights and modern architecture – these artists' works "bear the stamp of technological ideology"[43] and appropriate the cultural significance of the technologies they reference, "suggesting the permanence of technological values"[44] and lending their work the sociocultural weight afforded to new advances in technology and mass production. But for the photographers of New Topographics, it was their

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[42] Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," essay, in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University Of California Press, 1996), 105-106.
[43] Smithson, "A Sedimentation," 106.
[44] Ibid.

choice of subject, rather than their choice of medium, that lent their photographs sociocultural merit. For New Topographics, their subject matter – exurban sprawl, manufacturing areas, office parks – granted their artwork the cultural authority of post-war development and its discontents. Contrary to the view that New Topographics embodied a somehow detached and removed aesthetic, I would contend that their work honed in on highly specific (if banal and commonplace) industrial and technological changes to the Western landscape. Adams, Shore, and Baltz's work took advantage of the latent cultural capital of "Shopping centers, junky arroyos, and commercial streets,"[45] introducing them to a fine art context as part of an emergent post-war discursive practice. In a statement included in the introduction to the "New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape" catalog, Robert Adams neatly sums up his aesthetics (and that of the other photographers included in the exhibition):

> By Interstate 70: a dog skeleton, a vacuum cleaner, TV dinners, a doll, a pie, rolls of carpet… Later, next to the South Platte River: algae, broken concrete, jet contrails, the smell of crude oil… What I hope to document, though not at the expense of surface detail, is the Form that underlies this apparent chaos.[46]

For Adams, the dullness of the paving of the American West, and, furthermore, its detritus and its banalities are the very embodiment of a broader societal narrative. Focusing on the overlooked remnants of consumer culture and the sprawl of urban development, Adams and his peers transformed the commonplace into a visual vocabulary that spoke to the complexities of the (rapidly changing) relationship between American landscapes and culture. Heizer, on the other hand, utilized the appropriation method of the minimalists outlined in the aforecited Smithson essay, using forms and mediums reflective of the subjects of New Topographics to

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[45] Robert Adams, *Denver: A Photographic Survey of the Metropolitan Area* (Denver: Colorado Associated University Press, 1977).
[46] Adams and Jenkins, New Topographics, 7.

"suggest[] the permanence of technological values"[47] and a rhetoric of fixity, power, and authority. Heizer's *City* identifies and employs the latent rhetoric of power inherent to the impossibly smooth surfaces, repetitive geometries, and concrete expanses documented by the photographers of New Topographics. This kind of expression of physical or structural power is characteristic of much of the work made by Heizer's peers in New York City and at Max's Kansas City restaurant. In her essay "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," art historian Anna C. Chave argues that

> By manufacturing objects with common industrial and commercial materials in a restricted vocabulary of geometric shapes, Judd and other Minimalist artists availed themselves of the cultural authority of the markers of industry and technology… the authority implicit in the identity of the materials and shapes the artists used, as well as in the scale and often the weight of their objects, has been crucial to Minimalism's associative values from the outset.[48]

Much of Heizer's body of work has played off of and utilized these "associative values": the ancient megalith and, in the case of *City*, the faux-architectural repetitions of the post-war development of the American West. Heizer and the minimalists leveraged the cultural authority embedded in their chosen artistic forms and materials to imbue their work with an intentionally crafted sense of power. At the same time, they employed this constructed cultural authority as a protective barrier, allowing them to assert an unalloyed material aesthetic devoid of any stylistic or rhetorical constraints. As aforementioned, Heizer and the minimalists were prone to making blatantly positivist statements about their work, abdicating any sense of sociocultural or aesthetic concerns in favor of a flatly neutralizing emphasis on materiality and industrial processes. The

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[47] Smithson, "A Sedimentation," 106.
[48] Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," Arts, January 1990, 44.

photographers of New Topographics shared with Heizer this pose of a wholly unaffected, style-less art, an art seemingly devoid of any aesthetic framing or authorial intent. The title of the foundational exhibition itself connotes an approach to art that is scientific rather than aesthetic, and the exhibition's catalog expands on this argument. Jenkins outlines an art that is, again, "stripped of any artistic frills and reduced to an essentially topographic state, conveying substantial amounts of visual information but eschewing entirely the aspects of beauty, emotion, and opinion."[49] No hypothetical art this passive, this empirical, could ever actually exist. The work of Heizer and the New Topographics is not devoid of "beauty" or "opinion" because it focuses on mundane concrete, cement, and steel; rather, the work of these kindred spirits is invested in fundamentally updating the romantic American landscape art tradition to reflect the ubiquity of, and the intrusion of, the built environment on and within the natural landscapes of the American West. Art critic Lawrence Alloway describes *City* in his 1976 essay "Site Inspection": "It sounds like an Earthwork, but the materials are cement, steel, and earth, with the earth shoveled up behind the frontal face of cement. In conversation Heizer insisted on the connection of the work to painting, but in fact architectural analogies seem more like it."[50] For Alloway, Heizer's work bears a closer resemblance to post-war architecture than to land art, and this comparison rings true for An-My Lê as well. *City* reflects more the changes wrought on the landscapes of the American West as captured by the New Topographics than any sort of glib land art ethic. Lê's lecture at Dia concludes with her assertion that "The idea of landscape is an incredibly powerful and enduring subject that artists have constantly re-explored and reinvented, because the land is a site for dialogue between the individual, the power structure, and something that's much greater…"[51] For Lê, both Heizer's work and the New Topographics' constitutes an

[49] Jenkins, *New Topographics*, 5.
[50] Lawrence Alloway, "Site Inspection," *Artforum*, 1976.
[51] An-My Lê. "An-My Lê on Michael Heizer." (lecture, Dia Art Foundation, New York, NY, November 10, 2008).

updating of the rich American landscape art tradition to address a post-war era shaped by new technologies and industries. "The New West," as imagined by both Robert Adams and Michael Heizer.

Chapter 3 Figures

Figure 13

Thomas Cole, *The Oxbow* (1836), oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Figure 14

Timothy O'Sullivan, *Green River Buttes* (1872) and Mark Klett and Gordon Bushaw, *Castle Rock, Green River, WY* (1979)

Figure 15

Robert Adams, *Mobile Homes, Jefferson County, Colorado* (1973)

Figure 16

Michael Heizer, *City* (2022), Garden Valley, Nevada

Conclusion

Perhaps the greatest irony of the perception of Michael Heizer as embodying an "outlaw" persona is encapsulated in this very photograph – Heizer in the Oval Office of the White House, standing proudly next to President Barack Obama (fig. 17). Wearing a bolo tie and holding his customary huge cowboy hat, Heizer cracks a wry smile, standing next to Obama, the late Nevada Senator Harry Reid, and LACMA director Michael Govan (former director of the Dia Art Foundation). This unlikely photo documents the White House's celebration of the protection of *City* and Garden Valley. In 2014, Nevada Senator Harry Reid, buoyed by years-long conversations with Heizer, proposed a bill to limit mining and energy exploration over a vast swath of rural Nevada that encompassed *City*. On July 10 of the following year, Obama issued a proclamation protecting 1,100 square miles of land surrounding *City* as the Basin and Range National Monument. Not only did President Obama's proclamation protect *City*, it also protected petroglyphs and rock art nearby, some of which are nearly 4,000 years old. The designation of such a wide swath of land as a "national monument" also served to limit certain development activities, including hypothetical mining, oil extraction, and nuclear energy projects – in 2002, Congress approved a proposal for the planned Yucca Mountain Nuclear Waste Repository, an underground storage facility for the disposal of spent nuclear fuel and high-level radioactive waste. Railroad lines connecting the Nevada Test Site to Yucca Mountain would have crossed Garden Valley and come within the sightline of *City*. So, needless to say, Obama's proclamation had wide-ranging implications, not just for Heizer and *City*, but for a stretch of land nearly the size of Rhode Island. So why, if Heizer is the Fitzcarraldo both he and the press claim he is, is he visiting President Obama in the Oval Office with the then-Senate Minority Leader? The answer is simple: American landscape art, despite its best efforts to maintain a neutrally romantic

aesthetic, has always embodied and upheld decidedly sociopolitical positions and ideologies. The works of the Hudson River School's architect, Thomas Cole, strongly reflected the mores and discontents of his time – highly allegorical compositions and titles explicitly critiqued industrialization and the destruction of the environment, while at the same glorifying an implicitly settler-colonial pastoralism. Frederic Church's widescreen fantasias portrayed the wilds of America as unpopulated and ripe for settlement, and he painted explicitly pro-Union landscapes during the Civil War (1861's *Our Banner In The Sky* simply portrays a landscape's sky as an American flag). Ansel Adams' landscape photographs of America's national parks, commissioned by the United States Department of the Interior, were part of his life-long advocacy for the protection of America's open spaces, for which he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1980. American landscape art has always reflected, influenced, and been harnessed by our country's lifelong image-building project, contributing variously to our national conceptions of the relationships between humans, the natural world, and the built environment. Heizer's appearance at the White House in 2015 appropriately reflects landscape art's pervading influence on national cultural narratives. Landscape art is not, and has never been, the realm of some mythic, hermetic strain of artistic genius. It reflects and absorbs the physical culture of its time, and exists in a continuum with its own historical context. This point is underscored by the photograph at hand – Heizer and Obama are flanked by two Edward Hopper landscapes, hung on the left wall of the Oval Office. Each painting is far from the sublime romantic vision of the Hudson River School – *Burly Cobb's House, South Truro* and *Cobb's Barns, South Truro* (both dated 1930–1933), two Cape Cod landscapes on loan from the Whitney Museum of American Art, depict American vernacular architecture situated within an iconic windswept coastal New England landscape. The inclusion of these paintings in both the Oval Office and the photo of

Obama and Heizer's meeting seems to further underscore the role of landscape art in America's national self-conception and image – both *City* and Hopper's realist work (as far aesthetically as it may seem to be from Heizer's minimalist monolithic sculpture) serve a common end and embody the currents of both implicit and explicit national narratives. The glorification of open space and man's relationship to it is at the beating heart of America's collective consciousness – transcendentalist texts foundational to the American literary tradition like Emerson's *Nature* and Melville's *Moby-Dick* focus on the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world. Landscape art, with the many different facets of American identity it can embody or reflect, has had a profound influence on the visual culture and character of this country – the photo of Heizer and Obama alongside Edward Hopper paintings manages to communicate this fact beautifully. Heizer's appearance in an official photograph taken with the President in the Oval Office is perfectly representative of the close reciprocal relationship between America's cultural identity and its landscape art tradition. This point is itself the overarching purpose of this paper: to associate Heizer's work with the sociocultural bent inherent in the American landscape art tradition. As much of an outsider or outlaw Heizer may seem to be, his work reflects the changing mores and values of his time and embodies various strains of post-war American art – the 1960s New York City minimalists and their discontents, the tendency toward institutional critique, and emergent strands of post-war landscape art and photography. Heizer has largely been studied in the context of land and environmental art – however, in this paper, I emphasize the production of Heizer's work within a dense web of broader collaborations and influence. This collaboration occurred both directly, through cooperative efforts with active collaborators and indirectly, in concert with the broader trends of art movements in the 1960s and 1970s. This paper has delved into historiographic and aesthetic questions of larger contextual influence on

Heizer's art, positioning his work both in the context of close collaborators and disparate, discrete art movements. Heizer is no "Fitzcarraldo" – he is a highly contemporary, savvy, and shrewd conceptual artist with an acute sense of the art-historical context of his time.

Over the course of the writing of this paper, I continually came to realize that my research and arguments barely scratched the surface of the relationship between Heizer's artwork and broader sociocultural trends of the 1960s and 1970s. For example, it is difficult to situate Heizer's work in the context of the New Topographics and the "man-altered landscape" without considering *City*'s proximity to the Nevada Test Site. A crucial difference between the nature of the built environment as seen by the New Topographics and as seen by Heizer lies in the differences between the nature of the development of different parts of the post-war American West. Baltz, Adams, and Shore all took photos of the "man-altered landscapes" of California, Colorado, Arizona, Oregon, and Washington, states whose populations in the 1960s dwarfed that of Nevada. Though Nevada has had its own population increase since, with Las Vegas often cited as one of the fastest-growing cities in America, during the post-war period, Nevada was home to a different kind of man-made intervention: extensive nuclear testing at the Nevada Test Site, a 1,360-square-mile patch of desert established in 1951. In his 2013 essay "Work–Site–World: Rethinking Michael Heizer," art historian Glenn Harcourt writes that

> No longer is the desert the natural preserve celebrated so brilliantly by writers like Edward Abbey in *Desert Solitaire*. Rather, it is a species of technological or military-industrial wasteland, exemplified by the Nevada Test Site, where the U.S. Department of Energy conducted aboveground atomic tests from 1951 to 1962. This identification establishes not a "source" for early land projects, but rather an alternative

> system of signification to which the work of artists like Tinguely, Ruscha, and others can be related discursively…[52]

Though scholars have already written about the relationship between land art and the atomic age, there is further research and writing to be done on the resonance of Heizer's work and *City* in the context of the grave changes wrought on the landscape of Nevada by the Nevada Test Site and its associated developments. The resemblance between *City* and the uranium mills whose sites still pockmark the American West is unmistakable, and there is no doubt that Heizer is aware of the significance of his work in the context of the nuclear age (fig. 18). He has referenced the relation between his work and atomic developments across decades, saying in 1984 that "Part of my art is based on an awareness that we live in a nuclear era. We're probably living at the end of civilization."[53] Thirty years later, in 2016, Heizer elaborated on this theme:

> My good friend Richard Serra is building out of military-grade steel… That stuff will all get melted down. Why do I think that? Incans, Olmecs, Aztecs—their finest works of art were all pillaged, razed, broken apart, and their gold was melted down. When they come out here to fuck my 'City' sculpture up, they'll realize it takes more energy to wreck it than it's worth.[54]

Since the completion of *City* and its subsequent opening in 2022, further scholarship is needed to investigate its relationship to the nuclear landscape of Nevada and the broader nuclear presence in the deserts of the American West. Heizer's explicit acknowledgments of existing in a "nuclear era" add a poignant layer to the opening of *City*, hopefully prompting scholars to investigate the resonances between the monumental sculpture and America's nuclear-industrial complex. American landscape art, I argue, has always been a silent accomplice to our national narrative,

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[52]Glenn Harcourt, "Work–Site–World: Rethinking Michael Heizer," *X-TRA*, 2013.
[53] Michael Heizer, *Sculpture in Reverse*, ed. Julia Brown (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 16.
[54]Dana Goodyear, "A Monument to Outlast Humanity," *The New Yorker*, August 22, 2016.

shaping and reflecting the issues of its time. This paper positions Heizer not just as a contemporary artist but as a keen observer of the 1960s and 1970s and his own art historical period as a whole.

Conclusion Figures

Figure 17

Michael Govan, Michael Heizer, President Obama, Nevada Senator Harry Reid, and Nevada Congresswoman Dina Titus (2015), The White House, Washington, District of Columbia.

Figure 18

Ambrosia Lake Uranium Tailings Pile (1992), near Grants, New Mexico

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