Process in the 1977-1994 Earth Art of Nancy Holt, Meg Webster, and Mia Westerlund Roosen

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Introduction

Figure 1. Installation View of Meg Webster's Hollow, Nassau County Museum of Art, 1985. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

To enter Meg Webster's *Hollow* (1985), you must walk down a ninety-foot path dug into the ground, gradually descending, leading you deeper into the earth (Figure 1). At the end of the path is a single opening in an otherwise impermeable packed earth wall. From the outside, you have no sense of what it contains. After the descent into the work you suddenly encounter a wild space, filled with blooming plants climbing up the tall, tapered walls, surrounding you with life. Within *Hollow*, you are removed from the outside world. Instead, your world becomes a microcosm of growth, a little utopia.

Webster uses the material of earth as a signifier of change and of slow, ongoing natural processes in her sculptures. Her plants display growth and over time the earthen walls start to

degrade and decompose. She places the viewer directly in the center of these networks of change. The spaces, defined by their simple form and few materials, hold the viewer within these organic processes. In the late 1970s through the mid-1990s, two other artists, Nancy Holt and Mia Westerlund Roosen, also worked around these ideas through the medium of earth.

In this thesis, I examine works by these three artists, Nancy Holt (1938-2014), Meg Webster (b. 1944), and Mia Westerlund Roosen (b. 1942), made during this period (see appendix for further biographical information). These three artists were associated with a conceptual art movement that emerged in the 1960s in America known as Minimalism for its pared-down and austere aesthetics. They also all went on to incorporate soil and earth in their practices, making large outdoor sculptures both within and made of the landscape. All three of these artists were working in New York around the same time and within the same circles, yet they have rarely been studied together. Also, the scholarship on these artists is uneven – Nancy Holt is the only artist of the three with a monograph, *Nancy Holt: Sightlines,* published for a 2011 exhibition. My thesis focuses on placing them into conversation with each other by examining the throughlines in their works made between 1977 and 1994.

I am interested in the shared themes in the works of these artists, specifically, their focus on organic processes. Holt and Webster's works from the late 1970s through the mid-1980s created enclosures, allowing the viewer to physically enter into a space that is grounded within the landscape. Westerlund Roosen used a more metaphorical approach in 1994, with excavations that suggested the sense of an interior but did not allow the viewer inside. These works all differed from the land art of the moment, employing a particular sensitivity to the constant change of the natural world.

In the 1960s, various artists popularized the medium earth in sculpture. This practice, often referred to as land art, earth art, or earthworks, emerged around the same time as Minimalism. Both movements were mostly centered in New York City, so many of these artists worked and socialized in overlapping circles. Fueled by a skepticism of the commodification of the art object, these land artists worked in the "expanded field." This term, used by critic and theorist Rosalind E. Krauss in a pivotal 1979 essay, describes the radical scope of sculptural practice in postwar American art, situating Minimalism and earth art within a framework of architecture and landscape.[1] These artists worked outside of the white cube and often made monumental, process-based works with earth, which sculptor Michael Heizer defines as "'the material with the most potential because it is the original source material.'"[2] Their sculptures primarily critiqued the art institution, like Walter De Maria's 1977 *New York Earth Room* (Fig. 2), a gallery space in Manhattan filled with 250 cubic yards of earth, two feet deep. Many other early earthworks were found in the vast, seemingly untouched American West, most famously, Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) (Fig. 3) in the Great Salt Lake in Utah and Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969) in the Moapa Valley in Nevada. These interventions were often megalithic and difficult to fathom unless seen from an aerial view.

Though these early earthworks were incredibly varied in intention and execution, art historical surveys rarely included any women artists. Making art with earth or soil seemed to be limited to an exclusively boys club. The term earthwork originated in an eponymous gallery show in 1968 at Dwan Gallery in New York. Virginia Dwan, the owner of Dwan Gallery, has been called the "Jet Age Medici" for her role in patronizing the Minimalists and bankrolling

[1] Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (1979): 31–44, https://doi.org/10.2307/778224.
[2] Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art.*, Oxford History of Art (Oxford University Press, 1999), 203.

many of the early land artists.[3] Though Dwan herself was a woman and a powerhouse at that, there were no women artists in the show. Leading earthworks scholar, Suzaan Boettger wrote on these discrepancies in her book from 2002, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties*. She asserted that since the women working in land art began in the wake of the 1968 show, their work was secondary. She wrote briefly about Nancy Holt, Agnes Denes, Mary Miss, and Alice Aycock, and their individual contributions to the greater practice of land art, but noted that their work was still considered tangential. She explained this gender disparity by defining these early earthworks as "macho," meaning they required a certain strength and aggression that was socialized, if not encouraged, primarily in men.[4] Nancy Holt spoke to this issue in recalling arguments and displays of masculine aggression at Max's Kansas City, an artist hotspot bar in Manhattan (frequented by her and her husband Robert Smithson along with other artists like Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Richard Serra, and Michael Heizer, to name a few). She attributed the gender imbalance in this scene to these altercations, explaining that women often felt excluded, if not uncomfortable, in these environments.[5] This exclusion is especially interesting, as there is an engrained perception of nature as a feminine being, considering terms like "mother earth," and that many of the most prominent figures in the fields surrounding land art, such as in the environmental movement, were female.[6]

Overlay (1995), a study of contemporary and prehistoric land art, by critic Lucy R. Lippard raises these connections between gender and the landscape through ancient matriarchal traditions and rituals.[7] She identifies a certain nostalgia in contemporary art for a more mystical

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[3] "Virginia Dwan, a Jet Age Medici, Gets Her Due - The New York Times," accessed April 21, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/18/arts/design/virginia-dwan-a-jet-age-medici-gets-her-due.html.
[4] Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks : Art and the Landscape of the Sixties.* (University of California Press, 2002), 147.
[5] Boettger, 2002, 48.
[6] I think of Rachel Carson who is often credited with sparking the environmental movement in the U.S. with her 1962 book *Silent Spring* and of Virginia Dwan.
[7] Lucy R. Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*, 2. ed (New York, NY: New Press, 1995).

art object, imbued with spiritual and social significance rather than something made expressly for the art market. Lippard refused a chronological survey. Instead, she collaged these works, layering them and pointing to the similarities. I draw upon Lippard's focus on temporality and the practice of collaborating with nature through this thesis, though I leave behind her largely essentialist comparisons between the female body and the earth.

In the late 1990s, there was a push towards surveys and literature focused on earthworks. To create a framework for my understanding of the moment when Holt, Webster, and Westerlund Roosen worked with earth, I consulted many of these texts – though these three artists were rarely included. In establishing the terminology for this thesis, Gilles A. Tiberghien's *Land Art* (1995) was integral in defining what land art actually is or how it should be classified, and he raises important points about its origins – namely, its connection to Minimalism and conceptual art in the United States.[8] Malcolm Andrews' *Landscape in Western Art* (1999), specifically the final chapter, examined the tradition of interpreting and depicting the landscape through an artistic lens.[9] Andrews opened up the idea of the abstractions that occur when a landscape work is presented on a canvas or in a gallery as opposed to outdoors. Also, John Beardsley's *Earthworks and Beyond* (1998) is a keystone publication where he cited ideas such as Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Henry David Thoreau's villainization of agriculture through the context of contemporary land art. In this book, Beardsley includes Webster's *Glen* (1988) as well as Holt's *30 Below* (1979) and *Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings* (1977-78).[10] These works are mentioned briefly and at separate points within the larger survey, so I will bring these works together and explore their similarities in depth.

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[8] Tiberghien, Gilles A. *Land Art.* Princeton Architectural Press, 1995.
[9] Andrews, Malcolm. *Landscape and Western Art.* Oxford History of Art. Oxford University Press, 1999.
[10] Beardsley, John. *Earthworks and Beyond.* 3rd ed. Abbeville Modern Art Movements. Abbeville Press, 1998.

More recently, there has been a sizable push towards centering women in land art scholarship, especially with the intent of equalizing the art historical canon and shedding light on women who were previously excluded. Just as I was finding my way to this topic in late September of 2023, a show opened at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, Texas called *Groundswell: Women of Land Art*. This show included works by Holt and Webster, but only briefly mentioned Westerlund Roosen in the catalog. In looking at these three artists, I initially wanted to work with only women and to argue for a gender-based approach to these artworks. However, as my research has unfolded I feel more that "The work women were doing was not a 'female' or feminine version of a Smithson or Heizer; it was something entirely unique and radical in its own right," to quote the curator of *Groundswell.*[11] Thus, I will examine their works using methods that are not entirely dependent on gender.

In the first chapter, I explore two of Nancy Holt's early sculptures, *Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings* (1977-78) in Bellingham, Washington (Fig. 4) and *30 Below* (1979) in Lake Placid, New York (Fig. 5). In these two works, Holt references human histories and the particular conditions of each site, such as local materials and weather. She explores both more prolonged processes like celestial patterns as well as shorter systems of time like a human life.

In the second chapter, I delve into Meg Webster's earthen enclosures, primarily *Hollow* (1985) (Fig. 1) and *Glen* (1988) (Fig. 6). Boh were packed earth circular enclosures that were filled with living plants, existing on the edge of garden and sculpture. Webster's works are made with a meticulous touch, in a slow and ritualistic process of building up.[12] This slowness is reflected in the growth of the plants and in the gradual erosion and decomposition of the earthen walls that make up the structure, urging the viewer to consider a sense of slowing down.

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[11] Leigh A. Arnold et al., *Groundswell: Women of Land Art* (New York: DelMonico Books, 2023), 23.
[12] Judy Collischan, Carol Becker-Davis, and Hillwood Art Gallery, eds., *Kindred Spirits: Nancy Brett, Shalvah Segal, Meg Webster* (Brookville, NY: Hillwood Art Gallery, 1987).

The third chapter examines how Mia Westerlund Roosen also evoked a slow transition in the four outdoor sculptures in her 1994 Storm King show. *Bethlehem Slouch* (1993), *Crib* (1992), *Adam's Fault* (1993-94), and *Legion* (1992) are stone sculptures, mostly made to resemble organic forms (Figs. 7-10). These works are placed into deep excavations in the landscape, a unique strategy to all three artists. Each work oscillates between humorous and grim themes, between the evident and the implied, and between the natural and artificial. I will explore Westerlund Roosen's tendency toward uncertainty through her use of playfully perplexing titles and forms. These works rely on the sense that the viewer cannot see the whole picture, raising the question of what lurks undetected below the surface.

All three of these artists expose processes and cycles of time that are often deemed invisible or too large to comprehend. Through their use of references to vegetal and human life cycles, Holt, Webster, and Westerlund Roosen employed the passage of time as a part of their artmaking processes between 1977 and 1994.

Chapter 1
Seeing Cycles Through Nancy Holt's 1977-79 Outdoor Sculpture

> *What interests me in doing public projects is that people will come–and each person brings their own context with them. They bring to the work whatever they already know. And the work is right there, in their midst. And my work has always involved them, in one way or another…They become part of the works, they're incorporated in the works.*[13]
> Nancy Holt, *Archives of American Art Oral History*, 1993

Nearly two decades after her first large-scale outdoor sculpture, Nancy Holt looked back on her commitment to uniting the viewer with her work. In 1993 Holt left us with the question: What does it mean to connect with a sculpture? She facilitates interactions with her works that bring the viewer to the site through a sensitivity to materiality and local histories. Her sculptures make sense of cycles of time spanning from the astronomical to the human lifetime. In a 2010 interview, she explained that she was "putting the universe in the art. In my Land art…I am putting 'centers of the universe' wherever I go, making my work uniquely site-specific."[14] Through an examination of two of Holt's earliest outdoor sculptures, I explore her tendency to use site-specificity and local material to reveal processes and patterns. Holt established this centering within the large-scale networks of the natural and extraterrestrial world and the human-scale collaborative networks involved in her artmaking. She explores strategies that make these networks evident to the viewer through her sculptures. *Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings* (1978) (Fig. 4) and *30 Below* (1979) (Fig. 5) foreground Holt's interest in the function of her sculpture, both in the creative process and in how "nature change[s] the works" into "a time that [goes] beyond–kind of the time of our lifetime," as she recalled in the earlier 1993 interview.[15]

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[13] Oral history interview with Nancy Holt, 1993 Aug. 3. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
[14] Williams, Alena J, Nancy Holt, and Pamela M Lee. *Nancy Holt: Sightlines.* University of California Press, 2011, 227.
[15] Oral history interview with Nancy Holt 1993.

Holt's sculptures act as tools in this sense, bringing the viewer's attention to cycles that are prolonged and immutable. Her interest in time was fundamentally centered in drawing a connection between vast and prolonged processes and the human being. She focused primarily on embodied ways of seeing, creating large-scale sculptures with specific holes and openings to direct the viewer's perspective. She explains this fascination with attention in the 2010 interview: "You are so absorbed in whatever it is you're looking at, that you cease to exist, and the thing itself is present totally. Then you *are* the thing."[16] This is how she merges the viewer with the work, how the human becomes part of the sculpture.

While Holt worked around and within the early earthwork social circles, she cultivated her own practice and focused on a more human scale. Scholars have often mentioned her in the early generation of earthworks artists in the 1960s and 70s for her film collaborations with Smithson. Also, her first large-scale outdoor sculpture, *Sun Tunnels* (1976) – by far her most well-known work – is often considered one of the classic earth works. Situated in the Great Basin Desert in Utah, *Sun Tunnels* is isolated and inaccessible, similar to many of the other early earthworks. Holt strays from this dramatic seclusion in her later sculptures, adopting an awareness for the human component of her art. When asked about the difference between her works and the earlier earthworks she says: "It's gratifying that public art evolves out of the community, and makes art a part of people's everyday life."[17] Her unique focus on the human being shows her interest in bringing systems of change and process to a more perceivable scale. In her works, she centers the viewer and brings her abstract ideas to life.

Holt's sculptures expose unpredictable and grand processes, like geological and meteorological changes, creating a visible trace to spark a further sense of curiosity for the

[16] Williams, Holt, and Lee 2011, 233.
[17] Williams, Holt, and Lee 2011, 228.

viewer. She claims that "when I say my work is an exteriorization of my own inner reality, I mean I am giving back to people through art what they already have in them."[18] She draws on an assumed inherent human connection to the living world and its complex networks, claiming: "I feel that the need to look at the sky–at the moon and stars–is very basic, and it is inside all of us."[19] She is interested in both the micro- and macro-scale processes of the world, from the sun's daily orbit to human life cycles to the underlying atomic entropy that makes up matter.[20] She works around a belief of a universal connection found within every human and every other scientific truth, using her artworks to facilitate interactions that bring these connections to light.

Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings, commissioned by the Art Acquisitions Committee at Western Washington University in 1977, references the historic and dilapidated locale of Bellingham, Washington.[21] The work is ultimately more of a monument to Bellingham's history than simply an aesthetic addition to the scenery of the University campus. Holt spent four months in Bellingham, finishing the work in 1978. After its completion, she reminisced on her time in and around the site:

> I like Bellingham. It's a seaport in northern Washington, about 20 miles from the Canadian border. The town has a few nineteenth-century brick buildings with arched windows, some old timber wharfs, lots of broken and barnacled pilings, a decaying wooden train trestle, a smelly paper mill, and a winding coastline road.[22]

Though she claimed to have an affinity for the town, she did not make it sound especially appealing. Few would opt to visit based on her description which focuses on the town's most derelict and weathered sights (and smells). However, this fascination with ruination and the un-aesthetic is a large element in Holt's work. Of all the processes that she considers in her work,

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[18] Janet Saad-Cook et al., "Touching the Sky: Artworks Using Natural Phenomena, Earth, Sky and Connections to Astronomy," *Leonardo* 21, no. 2 (1988), 128.
[19] Saad-Cook et al. 1988.
[20] Holt's 1973 film, *Going Around in Circles*, further explores this inevitable chaos even within a controlled system.
[21] Western Washington University also has commissioned works by Meg Webster and Mia Westerlund Roosen on their campus.
[22] Williams, Holt, and Lee 2011, 92.

change is a cornerstone idea. She makes the viewer aware of the passage of time and reminds the individual of the processes that surround them, cycles of life and death, geologic change, and ever-evolving communities.

Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings exemplifies many of the themes that Holt considered and showcased in her work. In fact, she referred to *Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings* as "a work that brought quite a few things together for me."[23] She alluded to some of the largest ideas seen in her work up to this point – both long periods like processes of decay but also shorter cycles like the orbit of the sun. She also focused on what she calls durational time, the need to interact with the work to fully understand or experience it, and the feeling that every person gets from certain phenomena such as being enclosed within a thick stone wall or feeling small within a vast open field or space.

Holt also stressed the importance of collaboration with other creators, who she considered artists in their own right, while constructing *Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings*. Curator and art historian Alena J. Williams writes that Holt "was one of the first artists to imply her 'self-extension in the making of earthworks by acknowledging that 'the artist's work came into being by directing, even becoming, the labor of others.'"[24] Holt worked closely with Al Poynter, a local stonemason, and his assistants, who she names in her writing and interviews: Dennis Siroky, Gregg Tillman, and Rick Westby.[25] While reflecting on Poynter's involvement in the creative process, in 1992, Holt recalled that "when we had the opening for *Rock Rings*, it was his night, and a lot of attention went his way…he said it was as important to him as his wedding day and he was going to bring his grandchildren there when they grew up."[26] She continued to

[23] Williams, Holt, and Lee 2011, 92.
[24] Williams, Holt, and Lee 2011, 31.
[25] Williams, Holt, and Lee 2011, 31.
[26] Oral history interview with Nancy Holt, 1992 July 6. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

emphasize the importance of their friendship in this interview, expanding the parameters of collaboration beyond the artmaking process and into ongoing interpersonal relationships. Not only did Holt rely on their knowledge to create her outdoor sculptures, she also placed a great value on the time and skill of the collaborating artisans.

For the thick walls, Holt used 200-million-year-old "Brown Mountain Stone" schist from a nearby site in Canada, selected in collaboration with Canadian stonemason Date Vanderwerff after searching five or six quarries.[27] She quotes Al Poynter's belief that "once the mason has selected them, all 'rocks' become 'stones.'"[28] This idea of selecting a rock, the process of transforming it into a stone, seems like an intimate, even magical or alchemical, process. Her choice to work with Poynter, who viewed the stone itself as something to be meticulously selected, showcases both her care for the vision of the project as well as for the site's geologic history. With *Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings*, Holt used materials that were deeply connected to Bellingham to highlight distinct characteristics of the region, furthering her focus on site.

Holt not only shared the role as artist with the people who helped to execute the project, but she also relinquished her agency once the work was open to the public – giving the work to the space and to the viewer. She recalled being surprised by *Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings*, describing how "as the weather and the light varied, [she] saw the work in new ways," especially with the color change of the rocks during rain or fog.[29] This openness to interpretation and change is key in *Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings* and throughout Holt's oeuvre. So many of the work's elements are determined by site; particularly perspective and the surrounding landscape, even its weather conditions. In addition to some formal surprises, Holt remembered that she "had trouble photographing the completed work without site visitors, because 'someone was always *in*

[27] Williams, Holt, and Lee 2011, 31.
[28] Williams, Holt, and Lee 2011, 64.
[29] Williams, Holt, and Lee 2011, 98.

it.' She realized that 'as soon as I finished it, it ceased to be mine.'"[30] This viewer-centeredness is integral to her works as she noted that they are "built to human proportion–the scale is neither megalithic nor constricting." *Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings* reflects both the viewer's "orientation in space," to use Holt's words, and the conditions of Bellingham. The form of the enclosure accommodates the viewer while the stones change over time due to Bellingham's climate.

The stones themselves are metamorphic, having formed without melting deep within the earth, resulting in a high and irregular schistosity. Holt and Poynter worked with this peculiarity, laying the stones in relief with the crags and gaps appearing unpolished and jagged.[31] This choice in masonry made each stone appear more raw and closer to its original state, seeming as though it had just been pulled from the crust of the earth. Further, Holt anticipated some of the meteorological changes that would impact the material, especially the bleeding of the iron oxide into the spaces between the stones during frequent rainstorms and damp weather. Her sensitivity to change situates the work within its precise site at a specific moment in time without jeopardizing the longevity of the work. Holt not only accounts for change but plans, even hopes, for unpredictability.[32]

Holt worked closely with systems of climate and weather tailored specifically to the site in considering the lifetime of her sculpture. Her particular interest in the Pacific Northwest, Bellingham especially, lay in what she described as "the ancient mountain rocks, the hazy green hills, the huge fir trees, the heavy, wet weather, the rugged seacoast."[33] This ruggedness is reflected in the textural surfaces of the stones, and the heavy, wet weather blends the walls together. In the late 1970s, Holt worked with Western Washington University geologist, George

[30] Williams, Holt, and Lee 2011, 64.
[31] Williams, Holt, and Lee 2011, 64.
[32] Oral history interview with Nancy Holt 1992.
[33] Williams, Holt, and Lee 2011, 92.

Mustoe, to determine how the stones would react when exposed to the elements. In the 2010s, Mustoe conducted another analysis of the stones in *Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings* and discovered that in removing the schist from the earth, it began to gradually decompose due to the oxidation of iron pyrite.[34] On the surface, the oxidation process would make the schist turn a reddish color. While Holt was aware, even reliant upon, this process of oxidation, she did not know of the ultimate decomposition of the stones. By coincidence, the medium chosen for *Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings* exemplifies two long-term natural processes: First, the formation of the schist within the depths of the earth and the ensuing decomposition of chemical reactions upon its exposure to surface conditions. On this, WWU professor Barbara Miller writes that "Encoded within [the stone's] chemical make-up is a profound sense of entropy, whereby the work will rapidly decompose. The circularity of Holt's work is in sync with an irreversible and rapid sense of universal disorder, in which randomness increases."[35] Holt worked in collaboration with Al Poynter, but also worked with geological processes and naturally generative (or, in this case, deconstructive) cycles of chemical change.

Holt also evoked local human histories in addition to the geologies and meteorological qualities of Bellingham. *Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings'* archways and windows were calculated and aligned with the North Star in a reference to Bellingham's nautical history and the practice of navigating using astronomy.[36] When the viewer enters into the two concentric circles, they are encompassed by walls that stand ten feet tall and are two feet thick. The viewer is surrounded but not trapped, as the four arched entryways provide an obvious path for exit. Along with the door-like structures, there are eight smaller circular windows that resemble the port-holes of a

[34] Miller, Barbara. "Doubling Down: Nancy Holt's Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings." Holt/Smithson Foundation, June 2019. https://holtsmithsonfoundation.org/doubling-down-nancy-holts-stone-enclosure-rock-rings.
[35] Miller, 2019.
[36] Williams, Holt, and Lee 2011, 96.

ship. Beyond the town's nautical history, Holt also referenced the nineteenth-century buildings with arched windows and the dilapidated stone architecture of Bellingham by using jagged stonework and arched and circular forms.[37] These windows, all aligned with the cardinal and intercardinal directions, act as frames to the outside. Holt recalled that she "felt this huge, heavy, many ton work two feet thick – those walls, are just to have those holes."[38] She created this entire architectural space, inspired by local human histories, primarily for the purpose of providing ways for the viewer to see.

Holt began working with these constructed perspectives in her earliest sculptures. In 1971, she started a series of works that function more like telescopes than artworks, calling them *Locators* (Fig. 11). The *Locators* are mostly uniform works made of two pieces of steel pipe, one acting as a vertical support for the other at eye-level. Holt oriented the work based on a specific view, encouraging the viewer to look through the top pipe and see only what is inside the circle (Fig. 12). The work is more of a tool that facilitates a particular viewpoint than a sculpture. Further, the title, *Locators*, indicates that the work situates, or locates, the viewer in a specific place. *Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings* is a clear expansion on this idea, yet now she included the viewer's entire body rather than just their eyes. While the *Locators* were embodied in that the viewer needed to approach the work and adjust their physical position to see through, *Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings* requires a much more in-depth interaction. With the creation of two circular spaces, the larger of the two measuring forty feet and the innermost twenty feet in diameter, Holt encourages the viewer to circumambulate, to walk within the walls of the work. This interaction emphasizes durational time and makes the viewer conscious of their place within

[37] Williams, Holt, and Lee 2011.
[38] Oral history interview with Nancy Holt 1992.

the work, becoming both aware of the exteriority of the surrounding landscape through the windows and the interiority of one's own embodied experience.[39]

By working with and forming a community throughout her creative process and by focusing the work itself on the community of its site, Holt exposed her concern with the people who will interact with the work. She centered other people in her sculpture, taking a step back as the artist and acknowledging that, even from early in the process, the work was never entirely hers. This humility – or at the very least, tendency against self-centering – shows that Holt worked with a great awareness of the networks that make up the physical and social landscape. She worked not as the creator of these natural processes, but within them. As a facilitator, she played a role in directing the creation of her sculptures and in how they will impact the viewer while leaving the specific interpretation to the conditions of the site.

With *Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings*, Holt used site-specificity to encourage awareness of one's orientation in space. *30 Below* also is a tool for seeing through. She used local stonework in both sculptures to emphasize the importance of place. With *Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings*, Holt drew parallels to Bellingham's nautical history, and with *30 Below*, she created a dialogue between the work and the neighboring historic cemetery. Further, she incorporated the most absolute instance of human becoming one with the landscape by choosing a site directly across from a cemetery. She also utilized similar imagery and sensory evocation to remind the viewer both of the people who used to make up the community of Lake Placid as well as of their own ultimate fate.

Holt's *30 Below*, created for the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York, stands out dramatically from the other commissions for the event. The National Fine Arts Committee

[39] Holt often references this term 'durational time', an idea by philosopher Henri Bergson that is also called 'lived time' or the individual subjective experience of the passage of time.

selected Nancy Holt alongside Siah Armajani, Richard Fleischner, Lloyd Hamrol, Doug Hollis, Robert Irwin, Mary Miss, and Elyn Zimmerman to create outdoor, or environmental, sculpture in and around the village of Lake Placid.[40] While the works all varied in medium, location, and execution, there was a general thematic consistency. Across the Lake Placid area, critic Christian Hubert notes that "These works all occupy the limit between the landscape as a natural fact and as a picture, as penetrable and inaccessible."[41] For the most part, the artists commissioned to create environmental sculpture held up a mirror to the American public's perception of human relationship with the landscape by utilizing unobstructive mediums, such as various types of fencing, to veil (to reference Miss' title, *Veiled Landscape*) the natural world. The works all attempted to incorporate themselves into the surrounding context. Elyn Zimmerman's *Untitled* (1980), for example, was a series of nineteen staggered segmented steel cyclone fences framing two boulders in a field. Richard Fleischner's *Fence and Covered Fence* (1979) was made up of two wooden slatted fences meeting at a ninety-degree angle, one of which (as indicated by the title) was covered. Mary Miss' *Veiled Landscape* (1979) (Fig. 13) was a viewing platform with a tall wire-mesh fence on the side facing down the hill. The piece continued down the hill with a line of irregular posts, then wooden fencing further down, and finally a lattice-work structure. With these works, many of the artists, especially Miss, posed questions about the historic involvement of the landscape in art, using these screens to evoke the dissonance between the physical landscape and the tradition of landscape painting.[42] The fences used by Miss, Zimmerman, and Fleischener all reminded the viewer of property, and the importance of

[40] Though permitted to select their own sites, the artists faced pushback from both the locals and the Olympic Committee, later referring to this year's games as the Olympic Art Wars.
[41] Howlett, John. "Art at the Olympics: A Survey of the National Fine Arts Program, 1980 Winter Olympics, Lake Placid, New York." New York: National Fine Arts Committee, Andrew MacNair, 1980, 6.
[42] These questions are especially relevant to the site - as Upstate New York is thought to be the origin of American landscape painting as well as the first site of tourism in the country.

protection and security. The use of a fence clearly communicated that there is, or should be, a divide between the viewer and the natural environment.

Nancy Holt's work differs dramatically from these other commissions, as she drew in specific local sites and histories. While the other artists obscured the landscape, Holt created a series of direct and unobstructed sightlines. Her *30 Below*, like her *Locators* and *Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings*, creates a series of frames for the viewer that highlight vistas in the surrounding landscape. She, like the aforementioned artists, intervened in the landscape, but she constructed a solid brick thirty-foot tall cylinder that resembles an architectural form more than a segment of a fence or border. Holt took a vastly different approach with *30 Below* by reminding the viewer of the causes of our ideals through the evocation of industrial or agricultural histories and mortality. While the other environmental sculptors made similar attempts to subvert the pictorial tradition, Holt's work drew upon specific local histories.

Holt placed *30 Below* across the street from the North Elba Cemetery (Fig. 14), a small local graveyard, reflecting her ideas about the importance of site-specificity. Using proximity to the cemetery, where generations of Lake Placid's public are buried, Holt directly called upon the town's personal histories. Further, the work is made of bricks that were fired in ovens in Lake Placid as an allusion to the brick industries of New York State. The site chosen for *30 Below* is on Old Military Road, a route primarily used by locals as a shortcut as it runs along the perimeter of the village.[43] Seen most frequently from a moving car, passers-by briefly encounter an "open-ended tower" that stands mostly on its own in a grassy field, though now the work shares its field with a community garden.[44] Similar to *Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings* in that the work itself is an enclosure, Holt created a structure that blends into the historic context of the

[43] Hamill, Sarah. "30 Below," Holt/Smithson Foundation, September 2020.
[44] Hamill, 2020.

landscape while simultaneously physically standing out of it. Without knowing anything about the work, one may think that it is the last standing smokestack or chimney of some industrial building, or perhaps an out-of-use silo. Scholars like Sarah Hamill have argued that Holt's architectural form references the industrial and agricultural histories of upstate New York, relying on the viewer's prior knowledge of the town, but the icon of a silo or smokestack proliferates across rural America.[45] Rather, I would suggest that Holt's enclosure engages in a visual and physical conversation with the specific local history that lies across the street in the cemetery.

30 Below highlights the cemetery as a site of ultimate human inclusion in the landscape, almost going as far as to reference the idea of being buried below ground in the title. The work itself resembles a headstone, with two oval-topped openings that mirror the shape of the headstones across the street, as well as with its overwhelming vertical presence, standing, as indicated by the title, thirty feet tall.[46] Not only does Holt anchor the viewer in the site, again orienting the work with the North Star and the cardinal directions, but also in the context of the communities of Lake Placid and in a moment of human life.[47] Her fascination with systems and cycles presents itself again, now focused on the individual human life and the constant change in communities, and the spaces that are designated to hold these histories, in this instance, the cemetery.

Holt first became interested in gravesites in the American West. Specifically, she recalled being struck by the fences constructed around graves and how "[t]hey reflect how people thought about space out West; their last desire was to delineate a little plot of their own because there was

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[45] Hamill, 2020.
[46] Larson, Kay. "The Expulsion from the Garden: Environmental Sculpture at the Winter Olympics." *Artforum* 18, no. 8 (April 1980).
[47] There is now a community garden right next to the work, further highlighting her ideas of the human reliance on the Earth in life and in death.

so much vastness."[48] She began to photograph gravesites in Nevada and California in the late 1960s on her trips in the American West with Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer, later compiling a series of sixty color photographs titled *Western Graveyards* (1968) (Fig. 15). The series focuses on individual dilapidated gravesites and the fences erected to define the plot around where the casket is buried. This tendency to stake a claim on a site of land, even post-mortem, acts as a testament to the importance of site-specificity. As in Holt's outdoor sculptures, these graves indicate their precise locations, showing where their land begins and where it ends (Fig. 16). Both this photo series and her sculptures attempt to make sense out of the vastness of place by saying here is my space, and here I am in it. Through both works, the permanence of a gravesite carries similar connotations regardless of locale. In the most literal sense, we all inevitably become one with our landscape whether we live in the city, in the mountains, or the desert. As indicated in her photographs and in *30 Below*, everyone eventually ends up underground, confined to everlasting site-specificity. Holt highlights this truth by anchoring the viewer within the location of the sculpture, opening up to the passage of clouds or to the North Star overhead and to the soil underfoot.

30 Below is an overwhelming enclosure, placing the viewer in a space that amplifies one's awareness of their physical presence. By removing most external sensorially distracting elements, the viewer now becomes conscious of themself and their impact on the space, perhaps hearing their breath or feeling their physical presence taking up the limited space. Holt forefronts the viewer's phenomenological experience of existing within the "architectural skin" of the work.[49] When one enters the internal space of *30 Below*, they are met by a heightened awareness of the interior and the exterior, of their smallness inside the enclosure. Even though there is no

[48] Williams, Holt, and Lee 2011, 222.
[49] Hamill, 2020.

vast expanse outside of the work, as in the *Western Graveyards* series, the sensory experience of being enveloped within a structure and being grounded in a specific place remains. She built the soil ramps that appear on both sides of the structure to allow the viewer to climb up and look through the long windows that would be otherwise unreachable, as their lowest point is about seven feet above the ground. Holt did not choose to have the windows at eye-level on the ground, but she opted to stagger them with the archway and the higher set of windows so as to not compromise the sense of interiority that is created within the enclosure. Due to this, the work feels like a shelter, and any noise is stifled on the inside creating a somewhat claustrophobic environment. Hamill describes the effect as "an enforced intimacy or interiority, the feeling of being in one's own body. The brick walls encircle the body as if an enclosure fitted out to its proportions… It is a shell scaled to its occupant."[50] Additionally, the inclusion of soil ramps creates the sensation of entering into the earth when one passes through the archways, as they stand above the viewer's head. There is a slight step down inside the structure as well, and while it is only a few inches lower than the surrounding ground level, it feels like a much more dramatic drop. Arguably, the work places the viewer underground and in an enclosed environment, perhaps echoing the gravesites across the street.

Holt's choice to incorporate earth, both as the thing that allows the viewer to access a viewpoint that will (theoretically) merge them with the work and also as the thing that seems to support the structure, creates a sense of interconnectedness between the sculpture and its surroundings. She did not create staircases or platforms made of brick or cement. She chose to use soil and to make inclines. This merging of the organic integrates the work into the field and implies, as does the title, that the work could perhaps continue for an invisible thirty feet below the surface. Regardless of how the viewer chooses to interact with the work, there is an

[50] Hamill, 2020.

inevitable sensory experience that accompanies the proximity to the earthen mound. Whether one feels as though they are entering into a cave (or a grave) as they seemingly sink below the surface of the earth, or climb atop the ramp to access a view through the window or frame, the viewer's experience and actions are mediated by the earth. This relationship enforces the notion that perhaps humans are not so inseparable from the landscape after all. On the exterior, if one chooses to climb up on the earth ramps, they can peer through the window out onto the forests that surround the field.[51] Within all of the marvelous scenery of the Adirondacks, the individual trees that are seen through Holt's windows are often overlooked in favor of the more dramatic views. Similar to the effect of the enclosure, she removes much of the context or distraction through the window. She provides the viewer with an alternative viewpoint or perspective, highlighting what is often just a part of the scenery of one's commute and is driven past. This specific focus, in conjunction with the cemetery across the street, works around ideas of the individual element within the whole. The cemetery is composed of single headstones but is most frequently seen as a field of graves. The same can be said of the forest.

In both *30 Below* and *Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings*, Holt brings the viewer's attention to each specific site. To do this, she used local materials to incorporate her work into the site and to evoke geologic and social histories. By creating sculptures that are meant to be seen through and entered, she made these connections through collaboration and an affinity for the unpredictability of each site. Holt used both the visual experience as well as the physical connection to material to draw the viewer into Bellingham's long-term meteorological conditions and to Lake Placid's cemetery. Both works highlight grand and immutable cycles of time that exist far beyond the viewer's visit, but Holt's facilitation makes these processes comprehensible and clear.

[51] These ramps seem to have eroded and compacted and now fall much shorter than their intended height, making the window much more difficult to reach.

In January of 2024, I visited *30 Below* in Lake Placid. It was somehow during the first major snowstorm of the season, and our car slipped and slid down picturesque, pine tree-lined, side streets toward the edge of town. As we trudged through a foot of snow, piling down with no indication of letting up, the field was completely silent (Fig. 17). Only the occasional brave commuter disrupted the peace, inching cautiously down Old Military Road. Inside the enclosed space, which was in relatively good condition save for one small graffiti rabbit (Fig. 18), the snow swirled around in stark contrast to the vivid red brick. Little mounds accumulated along the edges of the brick and on the bottoms of the windows, indicating how long it had been showing. One could imagine Holt planned for this type of weather in 1979, snow that makes the whole world seem to stop. Her work, resilient and durable, lasted far beyond the 1980 Olympics, even beyond her own lifetime, as she planned. In the future, the 1980 Olympics will assume less and less relevance, despite attempts of the town to retain its tourist appeal. The specifics of the games will be lost to time, especially something that is considered tangential like the National Fine Arts Committee's attempt to project a national cultural and artistic identity through progressive sculpture. In the newly renovated museum in the Lake Placid Olympic Center, there is no record of the art program, and the local library, though they have a huge Olympic archive, did not have the survey published alongside the opening of the commissions. However, as these records dissolve, Nancy Holt's *30 Below* stands strong like the headstones across the street.

Chapter 2
Notions of Enclosure in Meg Webster's 1980s Earthen Spaces

"I want you to love more. I want you to care more…It's about caring, it's about caring for the structure of nature."[52]
Meg Webster, *I Want You to Care More,* 2016

In an interview from 2016, Meg Webster uses a language of love and care to encourage a connection to the organic world. With this seemingly simple call to action, she raises a series of technical questions; How can one care for something as vague and vast as the structure of nature? What does it mean to care? In this chapter, I will propose that for Webster, care is about growth, specifically, slow growth. She centers change that takes place gradually, using plant life and earth as signifiers of these processes. Her works employ a focus on a single material, a simple form, and a sense of security. With this, she highlights an individual element, builds it up with deliberate precision, and exposes its change over time, both through generative and degenerative processes. This focus on the slight change within the material makes its physical quality and health more apparent, almost as evidence. In this chapter, I examine two of Webster's outdoor earthen enclosures, *Hollow* (1985) (Fig. 1) and *Glen* (1988) (Fig. 6), and her use of prolonged process and generative systems of time. To establish a context and a throughline in her oeuvre, I study these enclosures alongside some of her other works made of earth and other organic materials for the indoor gallery space.

Webster's sculptural works utilize quintessentially Minimalist forms like the cylinder, the dome, and the cone. These forms are integral to the orientation of the viewer both in a temporal moment as well as in a cultural context. She cites artists like Richard Serra as well as Donald

[52] *Meg Webster · I Want You to Care More*, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgZhmsiG1X4.

Judd as formal inspiration. In fact, Judd hosted her first solo show at his space in New York in 1983 after seeing her works during her MFA at Yale. She also worked as an assistant for Michael Heizer that same year, which she believes is the reason many of her works became so large and, to use her terminology, ambitious.[53] However, Webster differentiates herself from the Minimalist tradition by using organic materials like earth, sand, hay, and sometimes salt. Webster herself acknowledges that her works are "fairly concrete…derivations of Judd and Serra" made "with natural material" rather than metals or plywood to "make it more physically present to the body."[54] While using the visual vocabulary of Minimalism, a movement based on the phenomenological experience of the viewer, she moves more toward a sensitivity to the sensory aspects of organic matter. Through the proximity to a precisely sculpted mass of soil, the work evokes a relationship between the viewer and the earth itself. In a gallery space, this often raises questions for the viewer, as dirt has historically been kept separate from the sterile display of art. While Webster was not the first to place soil within the gallery space, her approach uniquely enveloped the viewer within the material. Her attunement to the natural change of the soil over time was also distinct from earlier separatist and purist indoor earth sculpture. Walter De Maria's 1977 *New York Earth Room* (first executed in 1968), for example, uses the medium of soil but is maintained so as to prevent any growth (Fig. 2). His earlier use of soil subverts the conventions of the gallery space, but he maintains a certain level of control and authority over the medium, preventing any organic change over time.

Webster first departed from De Maria's practice when she began creating her earthen enclosures in the indoor gallery space in 1984. These early works were large enclosures made of

[53] Webster, Meg, and Caitlin Murray. Meg Webster Two Walls 1984/2022, 2022.
[54] Reiss, Julie. "Meg Webster with Julie Reiss." *The Brooklyn Rail*, April 2022. https://brooklynrail.org/2022/04/art/Meg-Webster-with-Julie-Reiss

mud or packed earth. The sculptures created a large space and a sense of serenity in isolation, a strategy that would continue into her outdoor works later in the 1980s. Webster showed an early iteration of what would become a repeated motif in 1984 at the Brattleboro Museum & Art Center in Vermont. The work, titled *Earthen Circle,* was an enclosed circular wall, standing six feet tall, constructed of local mud, with one opening for the viewer to enter and exit.[55] That same year, Webster had her first solo show at Donald Judd's New York exhibition space, entitled *Two Walls*. There were two works in the show, one of which was a clear variant of the circular enclosure, made of hay rather than earth. The hay enclosure, titled *Soft Broch* (1984/2022) (Fig. 19) embodies one of Webster's repeated forms, a slightly tapered enclosure made of organic material that provides an isolated space for the viewer. The singular opening simplifies the experience of interacting with the work, as does the reduced form and shape, so the viewer can focus primarily on the material. The hay, as well as the packed earth, is intended to muffle sounds and prevent airflow, removing the viewer from the outside context. This sense of security, or peace within an organic structure, becomes the baseline for Webster's enclosures. Also, the title, given by Judd, is a reference to ancient Scottish spaces of refuge.[56] Webster later goes on to title many of these enclosures with similar connotations to safety and respite, namely *Hollow* and *Glen.* Webster cites her show at Judd's 101 Spring Street as the catalyst that led her to create *Hollow,* her first outdoor enclosure, the following year.

Webster's forms, both in the gallery and outdoors, almost entirely surround the viewer, separating them from the external world. *Hollow* (1985), expands on her earlier enclosures in the gallery, creating a space for respite within the context of the landscape. In *Glen* (1988), another, formally similar outdoor sculpture, Webster elaborates on her ideas from *Hollow* with a more

[55] Robin Karson, "The Good Earth," *Landscape Architecture* 74, no. 2 (1984), 19.
[56] Murray, 2022.

intentional inclusion of plant life. The essence of these works is in the changing material rather than in the calculated and controlled display of the plants. She asserts that "plants [made] the space…but I am not really interested in composing plants the way a landscape architect would. The plants express enterprise and caring. They connect people to the earth and to growth."[57] While some of her outdoor works were planted, I would suggest that they were not necessarily gardens. While a gardener or a landscape architect arranges plants for the viewer's enjoyment, Webster allows the plants to act and grow on their own with minimal intervention. The focus on the material in these enclosures exposes the viewer to the enterprise, or interrelated systems, that exist independently of human control. Webster asserts that these plant systems demonstrate care, but I would go on to add that the plants transition and change through the seasons, shifts that take time but are feasibly visible to a dedicated viewer. She uses these plants as indicators of process, of the enterprise, as she calls it, at work. Webster seems to beckon the viewer into the enclosure and to use visible signifiers to point to the gradual processes that are taking place, though barely visible in a moment.

Hollow, installed on the grounds of the Nassau County Museum of Fine Art on Long Island, NY, provides a quiet and isolated space for the viewer. The work is excavated into the earth, with the enclosed space mostly underground and entirely surrounded by earthen walls. The work is a walled-in, keyhole-shaped excavation.[58] The enclosure is accessible only from a narrow path that descends into the earth, measuring the same length as the circumference of the circle, ninety feet. By creating a narrow path that only allows space for the viewer to enter in a single file, Webster points the viewer directly to the work and into the earth, leaving no room for distraction. The experience of first entering into a long path that slowly descends into the earth is

[57] Beardsley 1998, 183.
[58] Phyllis Braff, "ART; SCULPTURE INSPIRED BY THE SITE," *The New York Times*, May 12, 1985, sec. New York. https://www.nytimes.com/1985/05/12/nyregion/art-sculpture-inspired-by-the-site.html

an unfamiliar sensation. This entryway, comparable to a procession or some type of ritual, bottlenecks the audience, only allowing one or two people to enter (or exit) at a time. At the end of this excavated path, one enters the enclosure, a small, amphitheater-shaped space, with the walls rising around the viewer. The journey ends with a space of respite. *Hollow*, as referenced by its title, is a grotto or a shelter, separated from the outside world. The term hollow can reference anything from the interior of a fallen log to a cave to a clearing in a forest, spaces for rest. With her outdoor earth sculptures, she creates a space that is removed from its surrounding context. *Hollow* could be in a grassy field or next to a parking lot and it would have the same peaceful effect of an oasis or a sanctuary inside of its wall.

Webster creates this safe sensation through a series of deliberately slow processes. The rammed earth walls were packed by hand, in a time-consuming artistic feat reminiscent of a ritual. The gradual growth of the plants inside the enclosure and the ensuing slow erosion of the work also mirror this pace. In her earlier works for the gallery space, Webster evokes this slowness in the installation process. Her installation directions instruct the handler to walk on each level of soil, "packing the soil upwards in layers" towards its final form.[59] These instructions for *Mother Mound* (1990) (Fig. 20) appear as a common thread in her mound or dome-like sculptures. Webster's instructions use precise language, with meticulous attention to detail, but she also allows room for error. In the instructions, she reassures the art handler that it is okay if there is some imperfection – "some holes and bumps are alright" – and directs the reader towards the easiest ways to approach the work.[60] Rather than sculpting out of a mass of soil, she takes the time to build the work from the ground upward. Webster explains that "Men often bring things in, set them down and reconstruct them in a heavy way; whereas with a

[59] Panza Collection Certificate of Authenticity/Installation Directions for *Mother Mound.*
[60] Webster *Mother Mound* Certificate of Authenticity.

woman…there's a sort of building up, like in knitting, baking – a patting things into shape. Women have a tendency to build up in a meticulous way as opposed to a laying out of material."[61] Webster considers this almost primordial technique in her process as a reflection of gender. Rather than utilizing contemporary technology like machinery, she opts for a direct human interaction with the material. She compares her process to knitting and baking, two skills that are most conventionally assumed to be woman's work. Additionally, as indicated by the title, this mound resembles a pregnant belly through its steepness. She does not incorporate any artificial binding agent or framework, instead, she relies on the meticulous building up of the mound, almost evocative of the drawn-out process of growing a child in the womb. By anticipating aging and cracking in the soil, she also draws upon the processes that she allows to exist outside of her control. The building up of the mound, almost in a painstakingly ritualistic manner, holds an equal importance to its eventual breaking down.

Webster prioritizes a slowness in her artmaking, from the beginning to its end. This emphasis on a drawn-out and ongoing process, a focused and dedicated endeavor, mimics the rate of cycles of plant growth and deterioration in her works. She incorporates live organic material in some of her indoor works to bring forward ideas of these ever-changing processes. Webster's *Moss Bed* series (Fig. 21), also created for the gallery space, incorporates the element of living moss on a mound-like soil construction. Mosses and lichens are notoriously slow-growing plants.[62] Found along the forest floor, on ancient boulders, and on decomposing logs, moss does indicate its growth as obviously as other vegetation. Unlike her outdoor enclosures filled with plants that bloom and change seasonally, these moss beds exist on a much

[61] Judy Collischan, Carol Becker-Davis, and Hillwood Art Gallery, eds., *Kindred Spirits: Nancy Brett, Shalvah Segal, Meg Webster* (Brookville, NY: Hillwood Art Gallery, 1987).
[62] For further reading on moss, see Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses*. Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Pr, 2003.

slower timeline. Like her mounds, her moss beds are placed directly on the floor of the gallery, almost merging with the architecture. As indicated by the title, these works are in the shape of a mattress, seemingly covered by a moss comforter. The works seem to call out to the viewer, inviting them to lie down and rest. This epitomizes her cultivation of a safe and comfortable space for the viewer – the slowest a person can be other than in death is in sleep. By placing the moss in a gallery, Webster further exposes the generative process of growth. While her mounds crack over time, the beds are watered and maintained, almost appearing as though they had naturally grown in this formation. Along with the lushness of the moss, the familiar form of the mattress invites the viewer to interact with the material. Similar to with *Glen* and *Hollow*, Webster creates a metaphorical space of respite for the viewer.

Both *Hollow* and *Glen* are circular enclosures, creating an earthen embrace around the viewer. Here, the element of connection appears in the very interaction between the work and the viewer. Webster explains that the work becomes not only physically present to the body but it surrounds the viewer and becomes nearly their whole physical environment.[63] When the viewer is inside of Webster's enclosures, the world becomes the material, one becomes immersed in the soil. By inviting the viewer into a serene space with healthy plants and blooming flowers, conventionally beautiful aspects of the so-called natural world, she creates a little utopia, inviting the viewer to consider how the world could be. Her works are most importantly about the slow process of organic matter, with a slowness indicating a certain focus, even an attention and a sense of care.

In a 2022 exhibition talk at the Judd Foundation, Webster recalled the tension between the meticulously calculated and built structure of *Hollow's* hand-packed walls and how it

[63] Jeffrey Kastner and Brian Wallis, eds., *Land and Environmental Art*, Abridged, rev.updated (London ; New York, NY: Phaidon Press, 2010), 34.

eventually eroded after a year despite her efforts. The work was rebuilt, then was allowed to deteriorate a second time and to succumb to the elements, with Webster eventually releasing her control over the works.[64] On the inside of the sculpture, she planted a garden that was in bloom at the time that the work was shown. The wall was made by hand, and the interior tapered walls were planted as a secondary addition to prevent erosion.[65] Webster allows nature to run its course in her works, taking no drastic or inorganic precautions to ensure their longevity. Especially with her outdoor sculpture, her intervention is temporary, one that adds to the living ecology of the site. Unlike Nancy Holt's sculptures which are built to withstand years beyond her lifetime, ideally into obsolescence, Webster's interventions are intended to disintegrate.[66] Webster and Holt are both interested in the larger system of time that propels these works towards their end. Holt's enclosures prompt the viewer to step into an apparatus that makes them aware of the constant ongoing changes around them, like the celestial passage of time or weather. Webster's enclosures are similar, surrounding the viewer with the material of the natural world and showing proof of the slow process of change over time like the blooming of seasonal plants and the decay of the unsupported earth.

Instead of reinforcing the works with a metal or cement skeleton, like Holt and Westerlund Roosen, Webster employs systems that are already present in the non-human world like the root networks of the flowers. This addition, a fortunate but unpredicted element, adds another layer of life to the work, incorporating an additional point of contact between the viewer and the material. For many, it is easier to feel a sense of connection to something visible like a plant than to something such as a microbe living in the soil.

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[64] Webster, Exhibition Talk, Judd Foundation, 2022.
[65] Exhibition Talk, 2022.
[66] Oral history interview with Nancy Holt, 1993 Aug. 3. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Webster built upon this inclusion of plants in her next outdoor enclosure, *Glen* (1988), now foregrounding the plant life in the structure. Like *Hollow*, *Glen* is a ten to twelve-foot tall, amphitheater-shaped, above-ground enclosure. *Glen* was first created for the exhibition *Sculpture Inside Outside* at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, MN in 1988. The work, as indicated by the exhibition title, is a sculpture that creates an interior in the outdoors. On the inside, the work resembles a tiered garden, leaving only a small circle for the viewer to stand in and look up and around. There is only one entry point, a steel-reinforced cutout that, like *Hollow*, is just barely large enough to allow a human through. The primary difference between the two is that *Hollow* exists in an excavation of the earth while *Glen* seems to climb upward, even appearing as a delicate staircase when seen from the interior. Further, the planted element of *Hollow* was a last-minute solution to the issue of erosion, which inspired *Glen* to be an intentionally tiered space full of plant life. This construction shows how, as described in the catalog for a 1987 show titled *Kindred Spirits*, Webster is "interested in what the sculptural object is, what garden is, what landscape is – and the lines among them."[67]

Like a garden, most of the interior space of *Glen* is dedicated to its planted elements. However, unlike a garden or a landscape, the enclosing and rising beds place the plants directly in front of the viewer, almost on the same physical level. In the center of the enclosure, there is a circle no more than five feet in diameter allotted for the viewer, with the tiered beds fenced off. As with *Hollow's* processional path, Webster corrals the viewer into a particular spot, the work's ideal viewing point. Both enclosures are also insular, in that there is no external indication of what lies inside. In *Glen*, the nine tiered beds are evenly spaced, though their edges are slightly rugged in a deviation from Webster's minimalist tendencies. Each bed is also planted meticulously, with each plant an equal distance from its neighbor. Like with her gallery works,

[67] Collischan, Becker-Davis, and Hillwood Art Gallery, *Kindred Spirits*. 1987.

the mounds, and beds, *Glen* was in nearly perfect condition at first, with all elements calculated and neatly packed, but there was an underlying anticipation of growth and change. When inside *Glen*, the viewer is surrounded by this growth, confronted with these generative processes differently than in a garden or a landscape. Webster's works evolve by nature of the material; the soil erodes, the buds fall off the branches, and the wax melts. This inevitability reminds the viewer of the networks and systems that support (and are supported by) the materials that Webster places in front of them. She emphasizes this rawness, creating a form out of a material that otherwise would eventually succumb to gravity and crumble. These organic materials always overcome any human attempts at order, especially when they are built outside like *Hollow* and *Glen*. *Stick Spiral* (1986) (Fig. 22), like the beds and mounds, is intended to change over the duration of its exhibition. The work has been remade and shown in galleries in Peekskill, NY, at the Guggenheim Museum, and most recently, in 2024 at the Dia Foundation in Beacon, NY. The work, as indicated by the title, is a spiral, a few feet tall, made out of interwoven sticks. The spiral itself is large enough to allow the viewer to enter the space and to walk along the small, constricted spiral toward the center. The sticks are cut fresh for each installation, and they often carry remnants of life like blossoms and buds into the gallery. Throughout the duration of the show, the buds drop off of the sticks as they are allowed to slowly decompose. This process of deterioration becomes evident to the viewer over a relatively long amount of time, as Webster encourages the slow and ongoing observation of these organic changes.

Webster is especially concerned with the mutable qualities of the material and the visual signifiers of change over time. Earthwork scholar John Beardsley generalizes, writing that "[p]rovoked by a growing fear of ecological crisis, she is determined to reconnect us with our surroundings, to make us see good earth, clean water, and healthy plants as essential to our lives.

Her planted pieces – such as *Glen*… 'are about caring for nature,' she explains."[68] I would assert that Webster highlights these systems more to provide evidence to the viewer of the slow process of change, creating care through awareness. This gradual evolution, like the budding and blooming of a plant in early spring, becomes visible over time through indicators of physical change. Webster centers these natural processes, urging the viewer to take the time to consider the singular moment that they are seeing within a larger ongoing transition. This consideration shows the viewer not only the liveness plants but their constant state of change. Webster creates a moment of awareness, placing the viewer in a relationship with these plants and their orientation in time. To achieve this subtle reconnection to nature, she often utilizes the gallery space and works within the confines of the market. However, her outdoor earth sculptures of the late 1980s adopted a different approach. Rather than placing the material in front of the viewer in these works, she placed the viewer within the material and within the interconnected networks of change in her enclosures.

Webster continually updates her works to fit into present-day ecological conversations, showing her ongoing commitment to both creating a connection and revealing the function of material (especially earth) to the viewer. This awareness and focus exemplifies Webster's fundamental goal in her work, to give the viewer a reason to care more and to pinpoint exactly what the viewer should care about. In 2016, Webster recreated another outdoor garden-like earth sculpture, building from the visual and material vocabulary of *Hollow* and *Glen. Concave Room for Bees* (Fig. 23), on display at the Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City, NY from May 2016 to March 2017, incorporated a whole new layer of exposed networks. First, with *Hollow* in 1985, Webster initially focused on only the soil. After years of trial and error, this experiment led to *Glen* in 1988, with a more intentional inclusion of plant life. At the end of the exhibition, the

[68] Beardsley 1998, 183.

soil from *Concave Room for Bees* was raked across the sculpture park, spreading the newly fertilized topsoil across the previously depleted park.[69] In 2016, Webster updated her materials, incorporating a concern for the population of pollinator insects in the climate crisis. The save-the-bees sentiment proliferated through the internet in the mid-2010s, popularizing the merging of natural aesthetic beauty and an awareness of the importance of pollinator insects.[70] *Concave Room for Bees*, as indicated by the title, is a more sprawling enclosure, much wider and more open than *Hollow* or *Glen*. This sculpture's walls are gently sloped upwards, much less steep and gentler. The space in the middle is larger as well, allowing for a more open viewing experience. The walls are not as tall as the earlier enclosures, hinting towards an end to the separation between the interior and exterior, and the inclusion of bees implies a pollination or communication between the work and the surrounding landscape. Like with the process of building up her sculptures, layer by layer, she builds upon her ideas while adapting them to a more contemporary moment.

Hollow and *Glen*, along with many of her sculptures made for the gallery space, are made through a slow and ritualistic process of layering. Subsequently, due to their exposure to outdoor conditions, they mirror this slowness in their inevitable breaking down as they succumb to the natural processes that Webster highlights. This focus on a generative or transformative ethos is also supported by her emphasis on the quality of the material. When enclosed in a space made of natural or organic matter, Webster shows the viewer an idealistic view of a little utopia, not quite garden, and not quite landscape. Her enclosures create a sense of safety and security, prompting the viewer to connect with the material through a moment of focus.

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[69] "Concave Room for Bees - Socrates Sculpture Park," Socrates Sculpture Park, accessed April 1, 2024, https://socratessculpturepark.org/exhibition/concave-room-for-bees/.

[70] I think of the online subcultures at the time, characterized by art historical figures like Van Gogh, the minimalist grid, Polaroid cameras, and a sensitivity toward ecology, specifically, bees.

Chapter 3
In Transition: Mia Westerlund Roosen's 1994 Storm King Show

On a gray afternoon in April, I followed Mia Westerlund Roosen around her studio in Buskirk, New York. As she prepared a sculpture for an upcoming installation, she explained various epoxies and pastes to me as she picked them up as though she was an alchemist or a chemist, detailing the specifics of each almost as if they were magic potions and salves. Her studio, located on a hundred acres of a former dairy farm (that still had cows living in it when she first bought it in the 1980s), is full of works from throughout her career, chronicling her breadth of media and variety of form. There are works in lead and concrete, in encaustic, bronze, and in resin-coated fabrics, frozen and solidified with a technique that she invented. Some resin and fabric works spill and spiral through the air and across the floor, other concrete and lead works stand tall, piercing the air with angular protrusions. No two pieces look exactly alike, and the surface of each work is noticeably textured and imperfect. Westerlund Roosen expresses her interest in these peculiarities and the abstracted biomorphic forms that appear throughout her oeuvre. As we wove through the studio, pausing occasionally to apply another coat of epoxy to the base of the sculpture in process, her sense of humor became increasingly clear to me. Along with her interest in quirks, vague allusions to gender, and jokester qualities, she disclosed her interest in balance, in equalizing weights in her large, heavy sculptures. Her work is full of life and she explained that she finds amusement in making people feel something emotionally with something that doesn't look like anything, to use her words.[71] A sensitivity to balance is an awareness of how to work with and between boundaries, to walk the line between two poles. In this chapter, I explore how Westerlund Roosen's sculptures move across these boundaries, placed

[71] Personal correspondence with the artist.

in a moment of transition between the visible and the hidden, the humorous and the grim, the ironic and the sincere.

In her 1994 survey show, *Mia Westerlund Roosen: Sculpture and Drawings*, at Storm King Art Center, Westerlund Roosen broke the surface of the earth, opening a dialogue between the visible landscape and what lies below. She placed four sculptural works *Bethlehem Slouch* (1993), *Crib* (1992), *Adam's Fault* (1993-94), and *Legion* (1992) outdoors on the Storm King property (Figs. 7-10). These sculptures were not only part of the landscape, but were within excavated holes in the earth. Moving and transitioning between spheres that are usually separate, the works explore boundaries. They operate around a tension, existing in the space that is created between moments. Using these four works from the Storm King show, I explore Westerlund Roosen's use of the depth of the earth.

Her sculptures, oriented as though they are in the middle of a transformation, provoke the viewer with questions of what can be seen and what is hidden. All four of the outdoor sculptures in the Storm King show are made of stone; three of concrete and one, *Bethlehem Slouch*, of cast pink granite. Westerlund Roosen uses this stone to sculpt forms that appear almost organic, as though they had been created by natural forces. In *Crib* and *Adam's Fault,* Westerlund Roosen creates forms that look almost like rocks or boulders. This falsification of organic material provokes a feeling of uncanniness and unease in these works. Her construction of seemingly organic forms with a material like concrete shows her focus on the tension between the natural and the industrial, the man-made and the fantastical. This tension is displayed throughout these four sculptures, as they create an active relationship between the works and their surroundings. Though there is an unsettling air about Westerlund Roosen's sculptures, she also employs a sense of wit, almost a playfulness, through the exaggerated forms and mysterious titles. The works

capture the viewer's attention, drawing them to approach and peer down into the excavations…to use their imagination and to make sense of these works.

While Nancy Holt and Meg Webster create architectural spaces for the viewer to enter, Mia Westerlund Roosen creates a space that only allows the viewer to look. She creates a boundary and relies on analogy and metaphor rather than the physical experience of being within a work. By excavating the earth, Westerlund Roosen implied a connection rather than explicitly merging the viewer on the surface with the interior of the earth. She explores the barrier between above and underground, the inside and the outside, and the permeability of these realms. Westerlund Roosen's concrete forms exist in cross-sections of the earth, somewhere between visible and invisible. The excavations imply both an archeological uncovering or extraction as well as a burial or planting. She placed the sculptures in between, in a moment of transition or transformation, with the implied movement creating a tension and an uncertainty. Some of the pieces, *Crib* especially, appear too large for the pit and seem like they are about to ooze or burst out of their constrained space. All of these works also appear frozen in a moment, as though the world keeps moving around them but they remain still. Westerlund Roosen employs a sense of mystery, hinting towards something hidden or unknown to "marry object-making, the large gesture and the earth itself," as she states as her goal in the show.[72]

Though her works are formally abstracted, in 1996, she claimed that "pure abstraction does not seem appropriate to our time" and that "there are things that need to be said, or maybe not so much said as referred to."[73] Throughout her body of work, she deals with issues such as gender, primarily through "subliminal and not-so-subliminal efforts to express male-female

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[72] William Zimmer, "ART; Restless Metaphors Breaching the Land and Consciousness," *The New York Times*, August 21, 1994, sec. New York. https://www.nytimes.com/1994/08/21/nyregion/art-restless-metaphors-breaching-the-land-and-consciousness.html

[73] Beverly Russell, "In the Studio: Mia Westerlund Roosen," *Sculpture* 15, no. 9 (November 1, 1996), 8.

conjunctions," described by journalist Beverly Russell in the same 1996 studio visit.[74] In her 1994 Storm King show, however, these themes become more general, leaning towards analogy and narratives about visibility and hope. Her works become more evidently artificial, clearly resembling organic and natural forms in the materials of industry and urban landscapes.

At the time of the 1994 show, Westerlund Roosen already had a work in Storm King's collection, *Muro Series X* (1979), an austere rectangular sculpture, reminiscent of the Minimalist style (Fig. 24). Westerlund Roosen created *Muro Series X* for the show *Mia Westerlund and Douglas Abdell: Sculpture and Drawings* in 1980, and it is still on view in the outdoor collection. Like Meg Webster, scholars often consider Mia Westerlund Roosen's works to be feminine variations on the Minimalist tradition. Westerlund Roosen's work, *Muro Series X* (1979), a large mostly flat, rectangular sculpture made of two steel panels held together and supported by concrete, is formally similar to Minimalist works but includes evidence of the artist's hand in gestural texture and clear finger marks in the concrete. Westerlund Roosen herself notes that "I felt perfectly free to take one of [the Minimalists'] hard-edged steel plates and fuzz up all the edges in my own feminine way to see what would happen."[75] She further departs from the austerity of the moment in the late 1970s, with many of her works before the *Muro Series* possessing a slightly flawed texture on their metal surfaces. *Flank* (1976), for example, has a copper face that is intended to patina and change over time while installed outdoors.[76] Also, many of her early lead works, such as *Ovoid Bulk* (1980) and *Undulina* (1980), bear signs of the artist's hand on their surfaces with irregular lines and textures. Despite her interest in imbuing a sense of quirk or life in her works, she also utilizes the Minimalist tendency toward repetition,

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[74] Russell 1996.
[75] "Storm King : SK Artwork : Muro Series X [1979.1]," accessed October 9, 2023, https://collections.stormking.org/Detail/objects/340.
[76] This work is installed on the campus of Western Washington University (like Holt's *Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings* and later, Webster's *Lifted Conical Depression* (1990, installed in 2005)).

especially seen in *Olympia* (1990), *Domestic Disturbance II* (1993), and *American Beauties* (1990), to name a few. All of these sculptures, shown within the gallery space during the Storm King show, rely upon symmetry, repetition, and uniformity (Figs. 25-27). Though each repeated element deviates slightly from the last, indicating that they were made by (wo)man rather than machine, the larger gesture of repetition is maintained. This carries to the outdoor works, though the differences in form appeared more dramatic, as though they were formed by a natural force rather than by (wo)man.

The handcrafted feel of Westerlund Roosen's outdoor sculptures calls attention to the falsification of nature and the drama and theatricality of her works. These works placed in the landscape especially push the boundary between the natural and the artificial. Her manipulation of concrete, a material that is derived from stone but has more synthetic connotations, into seemingly natural shapes like boulders possesses a sense of inadequate imitation, almost mockery. It's as if she were to use cardboard to construct a realistic tree, it doesn't seem quite right. These works also all possess a dynamic sense of motion and change, either coming from or returning into their excavations as if the earth had split open to reveal these forms. Westerlund Roosen's "deceptively direct" titles encompass a scope of themes from the biblical and historical to the vaguely human and personified.[77] *Bethlehem Slouch* (1993), is an allusion to a poem by W. B. Yeats about the end of the world. *Adam's Fault* (1993-94) may be a subversion of the story in Genesis, where the original sin of man is essentially Eve's fault.

With *Adam's Fault* (Fig. 9), Westerlund Roosen further explores this idea of organic and the artificial as well as the visible and the invisible. The work is an eighty-foot gash, described by art historian Patricia C. Phillips as a "deep fault in Storm King's sculpted landscape" in the

[77] Patricia C. Phillips, "Signs of Imperfection," in *Mia Westerlund Roosen: Sculpture and Drawings, Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, New York, May 14-October 31, 1994*, 1994, 12.

catalog for the show.[78] Inside this trench, measuring five feet wide and four feet deep, are five irregularly spaced concrete, boulder-like spheres, seemingly emerging from the walls of the excavation. These rocks, so to speak, are made of concrete, supported by a mesh and metal structure (Fig. 28). Westerlund Roosen creates a formally organic allusion to a stone by using concrete, a derivative of the material that undergoes enough processing to remove it from any affiliation with its original form. This implied processedness or artificiality indicates to the viewer that the forms are not simply stones, but instead are indicators or signifiers of some organic form. The concrete spheres emerge from the earth but are not fully exposed.[79] It almost appears as though the stones have been embedded in the site for centuries and have just been discovered and unearthed. With this work, Westerlund Roosen implants the sculpture in the landscape to create an illusion, tearing open the earth but using ambiguous forms, moving between clarity and mystery. Through her abstracted forms, she reminds the viewer of organic and naturally occurring phenomena like fault lines and the discovery of geologic artifacts. She also stages an intervention, a mock extraction, or archeological dig. Her choice to work with the raw walls of the excavation forefronts the merging of the natural, the exposed stratification of the soil, and the artificial, boulder-like forms.

All of the excavations in the 1994 show are reinforced with a steel rectangular liner, save for *Adam's Fault*. The excavated gash of *Adam's Fault* leaves the walls of the hole exposed and unsupported. This exposure allows for a sense of informality, almost as though Westerlund Roosen simply dug and revealed the concrete spheres already in the earth. Phillips also explains that "[t]he interior walls … remain as remarkable, if brutal, evidence of an incision. The deeply hewn walls offer sectional readings of geological time– of layers of rock and soil of deepening

[78] Phillips 1994, 18.
[79] In an archival photo, the arrangement of the rocks differs from the final installation which does not alternate the stones, showing how though they appear heavy, before they were covered in concrete they were mutable

hue and contrasting density."[80] Westerlund Roosen leaves the excavation open, alluding to a more primary, or at least a less polished, subject. Rather than ensuring the integrity of the pit, Westerlund Roosen's only visible intervention is with the five concrete spheres. These spheres appear as though they are embedded directly in the earth, an illusion that would not be possible with the inclusion of a steel reinforcement. *Adam's Fault* has a more natural quality and is the most visually similar to an event with no human intervention. Even the title, with the use of the word fault, points toward a naturally occurring geologic fracture. A fault line is a site of uncertainty, but it is also a site of transition and change. Tectonic plates shift over a broad scale of time, sometimes through a sudden slip or a fracture prolonged over eons. Regardless of the temporal scale, proximity to a fault line is tumultuous, always living in anticipation of an earthquake. This sense of tension, of the building up and slow geologic development or transition, culminates in *Adam's Fault*. Suddenly, the invisible processes and changes that determine the very ground we live on become evident.

The language in the title, *Adam's Fault*, implies either a blame or an ownership over the work or the incision. While the emotional connotation differs between the two implications, the assumption is that a figure, an Adam, acted in some way to damage the landscape. The work's rough and imprecise forms, both with the spheres and the excavation itself, indicate that perhaps Adam should have nothing to do with this incision in the first place. These flaws indicate that, within the greater manicured landscape of Storm King, Adam's intervention does not improve the conditions of the earth. In fact, the sense of blame in the title along with the crudeness of the excavation allude to the work as a representation of an environmental detriment. Westerlund Roosen seems to criticize a general trend of extraction with this title. She even may be implying

[80] Phillips 1994, 18.

that rather than Eve, as canonized in the Book of Genesis, the original sin of man was Adam's fault instead.

Adam's Fault suggests an uncertainty and a lack of control, exposing both the unpredictability of the earth and the human tendency toward intervention. The work seems to display an event, a splitting of the earth, and an almost cautionary or threatening site. *Bethlehem Slouch* (Fig. 7) also teeters on the edge of uncertainty, telling a more fantastical tale. With *Adam's Fault*, Westerlund Roosen unveils the interior of the earth to the viewer but with *Bethlehem Slouch*, she obstructs it under a series of veil-like slabs. The eleven cast granite slabs, all stacked on top of each other in a sort of wave, seem to be propelled by an invisible force from within the earth. The slabs become increasingly raised in the center the closer they are to the excavation, as though they are a piece of fabric being lifted from the center of one edge. The title itself is likely a reference to the 1919 poem, "The Second Coming," by W. B. Yeats. The final sentence of the poem reads:

> The darkness drops again; but now I know
> That twenty centuries of stony sleep
> Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
> And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
> Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born.[81]

In a way, this poem alludes to themes of change and transition, and the tension that comes with these moments, in Westerlund Roosen's outdoor sculptures for the Storm King show. Yeats, in the wake of World War I, wrote in reaction to the trauma of war and a widespread sense of hopelessness. Westerlund Roosen visualizes these themes, especially the sense that a Second Coming is on the horizon, by alluding to a hidden component or network behind each sculpture. *Bethlehem Slouch* leaves much to the viewer's imagination. There is little indication of what is moving the slabs, other than that it is sizable, even biblical, and that it is either emerging from or

[81] William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming." 1919, Poetry Foundation accessed April 28, 2024, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43290/the-second-coming.

returning to some invisible underground landscape. To return to Yeats, whatever lies beneath Roosen's slabs seems to be slouching towards Bethlehem, making the journey towards its emergence into the human world, for better or worse. While the second coming in Christianity is believed to be an awesome event, a salvation for believers, it is also synonymous with the end of the world. This idea, in conjunction with Yeats' description of a rough beast slouching through the landscape, evokes a bit of a frightening image. As with *Adam's Fault*, Westerlund Roosen uses what is visible and what remains covered to create a narrative of precarity and a feeling of unpredictable change or transition. Even the connotations of the word slouching indicate some type of suspicious, frightening, or inconspicuous being, alluding to Yeats' idea of a rough beast slouching either into or out of the earth.

The word slouching has an undeniably pessimistic implication. In a 2015 article in the Paris Review on the general increase of cultural references to Yeats' "The Second Coming," journalist Nick Tabor notes that a "casual reader might wonder why the nations of the world have such terrible posture" and that the beast in Yeats' poem "slouches in steady, dedicated progress toward a goal."[82] Westerlund Roosen, partaking in this grim criticism of modernity towards the end of the world, also visualizes this slouching tendency. Westerlund Roosen's *Bethlehem Slouch* looks like it could represent the scales on the back of Yeats' "rough beast" or a metaphorical depiction of the beast slithering underground, with the raised bits of the slab indicating the disruption. This deliberate veil between the implied beast and what the viewer can actually see sparks a feeling of angst. By recognizing that there is a figure underneath the slabs, one that is large enough to cause the ripple or disruption, the viewer feels the need to know more. Suddenly,

[82] Nick Tabor, "No Slouch," *The Paris Review* (blog), April 7, 2015.https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/04/07/no-slouch/

they become aware of the potentially vast amount that is hidden. Westerlund Roosen uses this lack of visibility to reveal what is overlooked and what lurks below the surface.

Shown in the indoor museum space in the 1994 Storm King show, Westerlund Roosen's *Domestic Disturbance II* (Fig. 26) employed a similar technique with a veiled or covered figure that evokes a sense of mystery and unease. The work, situated directly on the gallery floor, seems like a carpet at first glance, measuring five by seven feet and lying nearly flat. The work is a somewhat optically elusive form, as it is made of alternating black and white stripes with an almost human-sized bulge in the middle. The work, within the context of the title, implies some sort of disturbance on the basis of gender, indicated by the term domestic. The implication is grim, with the result of the disturbance leaving an almost human form covered up under the carpet, so to speak. The ambiguity of the bulge, or raised section, echoes the saying "sweep something under the rug" to cover it up or hide it away. The material, concrete, also implies a heaviness to the work, both literally and in subject.[83]

Crib (Fig. 8) encompasses both the beginning of a human life, referenced through the title, and the end of it. The concrete form appears as an exaggerated coffin or tomb, either rising out of the earth or returning to it. Formally, *Crib* is a large, bulbous form either emerging from or descending into its excavated nest. The shape of the sculptural form resembles a coffin, both in a formal sense and as it appears to be buried within a grave-like hole in the ground. *Crib* also closely resembles the internal sculptures of Magdalena Abakanowicz's *Sarcophagi in Glass Houses* (1989) which were also installed on the Storm King property in 1994 (Fig. 29). Both of these works present variations of a familiar symbol, a casket or sarcophagus at larger-than-life proportions. Both Abakanowicz and Westerlund Roosen's forms are mostly unmarked, the

[83] During a studio visit, Westerlund Roosen laughed as she described the work as hiding bodies under the carpet, demonstrating her own practice of irony between humor and dark themes.

former with just the joints and nails between black painted planks of warped wood. While Abakanowicz's sarcophagi are encased in greenhouse-like glass structures and are protected from the elements, Westerlund Roosen's form lies unsuspecting beneath surface level, protected only by the earth around it. Rising only a few feet above the ground, *Crib* appears as though it is larger than it first seems. Almost bulging out of the steel-lined excavation, *Crib* is a sort of tumor or growth in the landscape. Westerlund Roosen also chose to place the sculpture near a small grove of trees, perhaps drawing on their implied yet invisible root systems. As with *Adam's Fault*, she seems to uncover only one part of the entire structure, rendering only the top of the form visible from the surface.

As with *Crib*, *Legion* (Fig. 10) emerges from its pit, stretching above the surface and indefinitely extending into the ground. *Legion* is a group of concrete slabs, seemingly folded in on themselves, sloping diagonally in the earth. The fourteen slabs are packed into the space, relying both on each other and the structure of the hole for support. The title, a legion, implies a militaristic or an ancient presence. A legion is a horde or a large group, indicated by the crowdedness of the slabs in the too-small enclosure. On one end, the forms rise up out of the ground, indicating to the viewer that there is something below, perhaps the slabs extend further down. The stone forms create a ramp between the visible surface world and the implied world underground, bridging the two spaces. Westerlund Roosen leaves much to the imagination, though. There are no answers to the questions such as what these slabs are for, and who put them there. Perhaps, similar to *Bethlehem Slouch*, the slabs obstruct something larger, only leaving vague implications of the whole picture.

In all of these sculptures, Westerlund Roosen used the earth to obstruct her forms, alluding to both imagined and implied networks that are invisible to the viewer. Her sculptures

traverse the surface and the inside of the earth, joining the realms in abstract transformations and moments. While Holt's sculptures made processes clear to the viewer, Westerlund Roosen's works obstructed these transformations, creating complex and fantastical worlds. Holt and Westerlund Roosen both referenced human conditions, such as historic industries and religions, to bring the viewer into the larger context of these works. Webster relied more upon the natural world with her outdoor sculptures, utilizing organic processes to generate a sensitivity to the passage of time. In a way, Westerlund Roosen's works drew together the processes of the natural world and the human body to indicate change. She split open the earth, referencing tectonic movement while making the viewer aware of their scale and orientation to these phenomena.

Conclusion

To sculpt with the medium of earth is to interact with the world at large, to assert oneself into the organic realm. By exploring the similarities and peculiarities of these three artists' works, I examined a unique method of making art. The collaboration between these artists and largely abstract systems like time and evolution make evident the claim that the only constant is change.

Throughout the process of writing this thesis, I became increasingly aware of the complexity of influence in an artist's process. Rather than reducing the inspiration behind a work to a specific moment or theme, it became necessary to consider the work within a macro-level schema (perhaps explaining my gravitation towards terms like "systems" or "networks"). To further understand the moment when Holt, Webster, and Westerlund Roosen created their earth sculptures, I surveyed a series of photographs from the prior decade, the 1970s. During this time, in 1970, as a response to the growing environmental movement in the United States, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was formed. In 1971, the EPA hired freelance photographers to participate in a photo documentary project that focused on the environmental crisis as well on daily life in America in the 1970s. The project, called DOCUMERICA (lasting from 1972-77), was intended to "pictorially document the environmental movement in America during this decade," as defined by director Gifford D. Hampshire.[84] This project especially piqued my interest for its intersecting concerns of the environmental, the social, and the aesthetic.

[84] "DOCUMERICA | National Archives.". https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2009/spring/documerica.html.

In exploring these archives, I branched out from art made with the medium of earth, and instead focused on the scenes and visuals that defined the beginning of the environmental movement. With this, I adopted a somewhat more abstract lens to my central concern of how we interact with the earth. I chose to explore the overlap between the real world events at this moment and the goings-ons of the art world in a small collection of images that I submitted to the Experimental Humanities department. Drawing on Lucy Lippard's methodology in *Overlay*, a devotion to America, and a deep love for looking at pictures on the internet, I compared images from the DOCUMERICA archive to Artforum covers from the 1960s through the 1990s, to return to my broader period of study in this thesis. There are over 15,000 digitized photographs from DOCUMERICA that are publically accessible in the U.S. National Archives (on their Flickr account, strangely), chronicling events like the 1973 Oil Embargo and providing general visual evidence of issues of water, air, and noise pollution – most of which are incredibly beautiful and moving.

In looking through hundreds (if not thousands) of archival photographs and a handful of Artforum covers, I began to see some striking similarities. Through parallels in composition, color, and theme, each page spread presents an archival photograph opposite an Artforum cover. Some comparisons draw an ironic parallel between the presumably high- and low-class American lifestyles at the time. This, in conversation with the highly curated front pages of an art newspaper, shows the constant communication (and often, lack thereof) between the art world and the real world, so to speak.. Many of the visual inclinations (especially seen in color palates and compositional quirks) of the photographers were akin to the works of "high art" presented in the magazine, provoking the question of who influences whom. That is, of course, not to discount photography or to accuse Artforum of being out of touch, but instead to draw together

particular tendencies and sensitivities that seemed to be universally shared during these decades. Though I did not write about the environmental movement and its milestones throughout the 1960s-1990s, I considered these broad cultural perspectives on the organic world throughout my research. Through this series, I was especially interested in establishing a context for the artists that I studied, as they all are American and were certainly aware of the environmental movement, working around themes of ecological conservation and destruction in their sculptures.

Webster has been the most directly affiliated with the environmental movement, but I see moments in Holt and Westerlund Roosen's work that indicate a connection to the rising consciousness of environmental issues.[85] In 2018, Webster created *Growing Under Solar Panels* (Fig. 30) at Storm King Art Center. The work, described as a living sculpture, was a series of low-lying raised beds, each planted with native plants and herbs. A series of four solar panels powered a watering system that is attached to nearby ponds. In a way, she created an entire ecosystem, breaking down the elements that make up what she calls the "structure of nature."[86]

This work was much more of a conventional garden than Webster's earlier planted sculptures from the 1980s. However, as she first expanded her works to include plant life, then later incorporated pollinator insects in her 2016 *Concave Room for Bees*, she opened up her simplified networks to further fit into contemporary concerns. Included in a show called *Indicators, Artists on Climate Change*, her more recent work at Storm King now urges the viewer to care more about not only the material, but about the general ongoing processes and systems of change.

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[85] Nancy Holt, for example, worked on environmental restoration projects like *Sky Mound* (1984-), a sculpted park proposed on a former landfill in New Jersey.
[86] *Meg Webster · I Want You to Care More*, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgZhmsiG1X4.

While Webster's *Growing Under Solar Panels* was taken down after the exhibition, it could have been destined to either deteriorate or to flourish and become untamable. The same can be said of Westerlund Roosen's outdoor works. She stressed the constant need for maintenance and upkeep of works located outdoors when I visited her studio and saw some of her earth sculptures like *Kink* (1994) and *Sturgeon* (1994).[87] Holt's works, however, are imbued with a different fate. *Sun Tunnels* (1976), for example, mostly withstands the harsh climate of the Utah Desert, as it is made of concrete. In 2019, the Dia Art Foundation began a major conservation effort to fix some of the cracks and to remove some graffiti on the work. For the most part, though, this work still maintains Holt's hopeful longevity. The conservators left the traces of bullets fired into the tunnels by visitors, under the pretense that Holt knew about the streaks and "said something to the effect of, once you put a work out in an area like this where various people visit, how it's interacted with is part of what it become: she saw these bullet marks as being part of its evolution," as associate curator at Dia, Kelly Kivland, stated in 2019.[88]

This sensitivity to human occupation, adaptation, and alteration of public works is seen in an image from DOCUMERICA from 1973, the same year that Holt began working on *Sun Tunnels*. In the image (Fig. 31), two children sit inside of a cement structure that looks almost identical to Holt's *Sun Tunnels*. To me, this visual parallel brings home the idea that earth sculptures which were built outdoors, such as the ones examined throughout this thesis, are bound to be interacted with and altered to fit the needs of the individual or of the environment as a whole. This malleability and constant adaptation is reflected in the process of these works, and of the larger, slow and ongoing process of change of all things.

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[87] Personal correspondence with the artist.
[88] Kenney, Nancy. "Nancy Holt's Desert Sun Tunnels Will Be Cleaned and Repaired—but the Bullet Marks Are Staying." The Art Newspaper, April 25, 2019. https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2019/04/25/nancy-holts-desert-sun-tunnels-will-be-cleaned-and-repairedbut-the-bullet-marks-are-staying

Appendix

Nancy Holt was born in Worcester, MA, on April 5, 1938. She spent most of her childhood in New Jersey, constantly referencing and returning to both states throughout her works. She graduated from Tufts in 1960 with a BS in Biology. She never formally studied art but there is a certain analytical and scientific way of thinking in her works, likely a result of her scientific studies. In 1960 she moved to New York City. She married Robert Smithson in 1963. Her early conceptual works were shown in *Language III* at the Dwan Gallery in 1967, around when she was involved with Smithson's circle (LeWitt, Andre, Hesse, Heizer, et cetera). In 1973 Smithson died in a private plane crash while scouting out the site for an upcoming work in Texas. Holt was supposed to be on the plane with him but stayed home to work on her own art, later ruminating that her own work saved her life. She began scouting out sites for *Sun Tunnels*, her first large-scale sculpture and most well-known work, the following year. She then began working with the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1974, later creating many of her large-scale outdoor works. In 1995, she moved to Galisteo, NM. She passed away at the age of 75 in 2014 in New Mexico.[89] Her work is currently represented by Sprüth Magers and Parafin and her estate (along with Smithson's) is largely managed by the Holt/Smithson Foundation in New Mexico.[90]

Meg Webster was born in 1944 in San Francisco, CA. The only artist of the three with a formal higher-level art education, she received her BFA from Old Dominion University in Virginia in 1976 and her MFA from Yale in Connecticut in 1984. Webster worked as Michael Heizer's assistant that same year.[91] Her first exhibition took place at the Donald Judd Foundation, also in 1983, after Judd saw some of her earth pieces from her time at Yale. She recalled the

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[89] Kennedy, Randy. "Nancy Holt, Outdoor Artist, Dies at 75 - The New York Times," February 12, 2014. https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/12/arts/design/nancy-holt-outdoor-artist-dies-at-75.html.
[90] Williams, Holt, and Lee 2011.
[91] Heizer, Michael. "Transcript of Dragged Mass Geometric Acknowledgements." *Whitney Museum of American Art*, 1985.

process of moving into organic materials, beginning in her time at Yale, as a slow and natural process, she started with sand, then began incorporating grass and soil into her oeuvre. She currently lives and works in New York and just opened a large, long-term exhibition of her work at Dia Beacon.[92] She is represented by Paula Cooper Gallery in New York.

Mia Westerlund Roosen was born in New York City in 1942 and spent time in New York, Cuba, and Canada growing up.[93] Throughout her youth, she attended art classes at the Art Students League of New York, though she often recalls considering dance as a career option rather than the visual arts.[94] She never studied art at a university level.[95] She got married in 1962 and had children, recalling that it was the thing to do at the time.[96] During this period, she began showing in Toronto, mostly process-based sculptures made of fabric coated with resin.[97] After her marriage ended in 1975, she moved to New York City.[98] Westerlund Roosen first showed at the Sable-Castelli Gallery in Toronto, then the Willard Gallery in New York, then notably as one of the only women on Leo Castelli's roster in New York from 1976-88.[99] She is represented by the Betty Cuningham Gallery and lives and works between New York City and Buskirk, NY.[100]

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[92] "Meg Webster Biography – Meg Webster on Artnet," accessed November 13, 2023, https://www.artnet.com/artists/meg-webster/biography.
[93] She also spent time in Hastings, in Westchester.
[94] Vivien Raynor, "ART; Large Sculptures of Pale Presence," *The New York Times*, September 3, 1989, sec. New York. https://www.nytimes.com/1989/09/03/nyregion/art-large-sculptures-of-pale-presence.html
[95] In personal correspondence, she recalls when a shocked interviewer kept returning to the question "are you sure you didn't study art?"
[96] Personal correspondence.
[97] Raynor 1989.
[98] Russell, 1996.
[99] Lilly Wei, "Beauties and Beasts: A Conversation with Mia Westerlund Roosen," Sculpture, September 1, 2014, https://sculpturemagazine.art/beauties-and-beasts-a-conversation-with-mia-westerlund-roosen/.
[100] "2017," Anonymous Was A Woman, accessed November 12, 2023, https://www.anonymouswasawoman.org/2017.

Figures

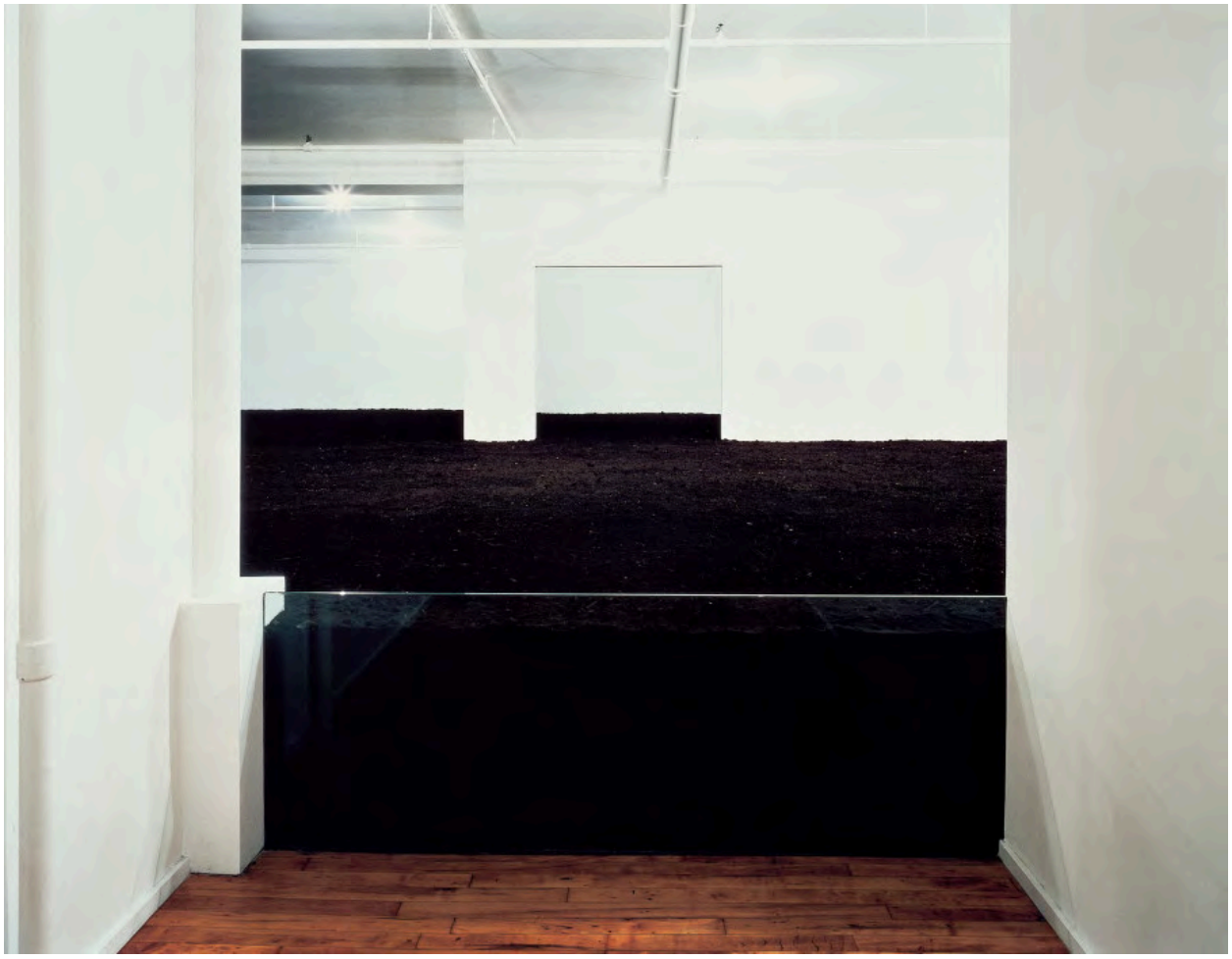

Figure 2. Walter De Maria, *The New York Earth Room*, 1977, earth, peat and bark, Collection of Dia Art Foundation, Photo: John Cliett. © Estate of Walter De Maria.

Figure 3. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, Great Salt Lake, Utah, mud, precipitated salt crystals, rocks, water, 1,500 ft. long and 15 ft. wide. Collection of Dia Art Foundation. Photograph: Gianfranco Gorgoni. © Holt/Smithson Foundation and Dia Art Foundation / Licensed by Artists Rights Society, New York

Figure 4. Nancy Holt, *Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings*, 1977-78, Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington, Brown Mountain stone schist from British Columbia. © Holt/Smithson Foundation / Licensed by Artists Rights Society, New York

Figure 5. Nancy Holt, *30 Below*, 1979, 10,000 molded red bricks, grass, earth, Lake Placid, NY. Overall dimensions: height: 30 ft. diameter: 9 ft. 4 in.© Holt/Smithson Foundation / Licensed by Artists Rights Society, New York

Figure 6. Meg Webster, *Glen*; overview, 1988, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, Image and original data provided by ART on FILE

Figure 7. Mia Westerlund Roosen, *Bethlehem Slouch*, 1993, Cast pink granite and steel, 2x10x20 feet. Via artist's website.

Figure 8. Mia Westerlund Roosen, *Crib*, 1992, Earth, Concrete, Pigment and Steel, 49 x 48 x 120 inches. Via artist's website.

Figure 9. Mia Westerlund Roosen, *Adam's Fault*, 1993-94, earth and concrete, 60 x 48 x 960 inches. Via artist's website.

Figure 10. Mia Westerlund Roosen, *Legion*, 1992, earth, concrete, pigment and steel 34 x 48 x 120 inches. Via artist's website.

Figure 11. Nancy Holt, *Locator (Cracked Window),* 1971, Artist's Greenwich Village Studio, Steel pipe, Height: 42 in. (106.7 cm); Length: 12in. (30.5 cm); Diameter: 1 1/2 in. (3.8 cm)

Figure 12. Nancy Holt, *Locator with Spotlight and Sunlight* (1972), Installation view: *Nancy Holt: Locating Perception*, Sprüth Magers, Los Angeles, 2022, Steel pipe, spotlight, vinyl and window. Overall dimensions variable (site responsive), Photograph: Robert Wedemeyer, Courtesy Holt/Smithson Foundation and Sprüth Magers.

Figure 13. Mary Miss, *Veiled Landscape*, 1979, XIII Winter Olympics, Lake Placid, New York. Via artist's website.

Figure 14. Google Maps Image, Nov 2023, View of North Elba Cemetery from County Hwy 35 directly across from *30 Below*, Lake Placid, NY.

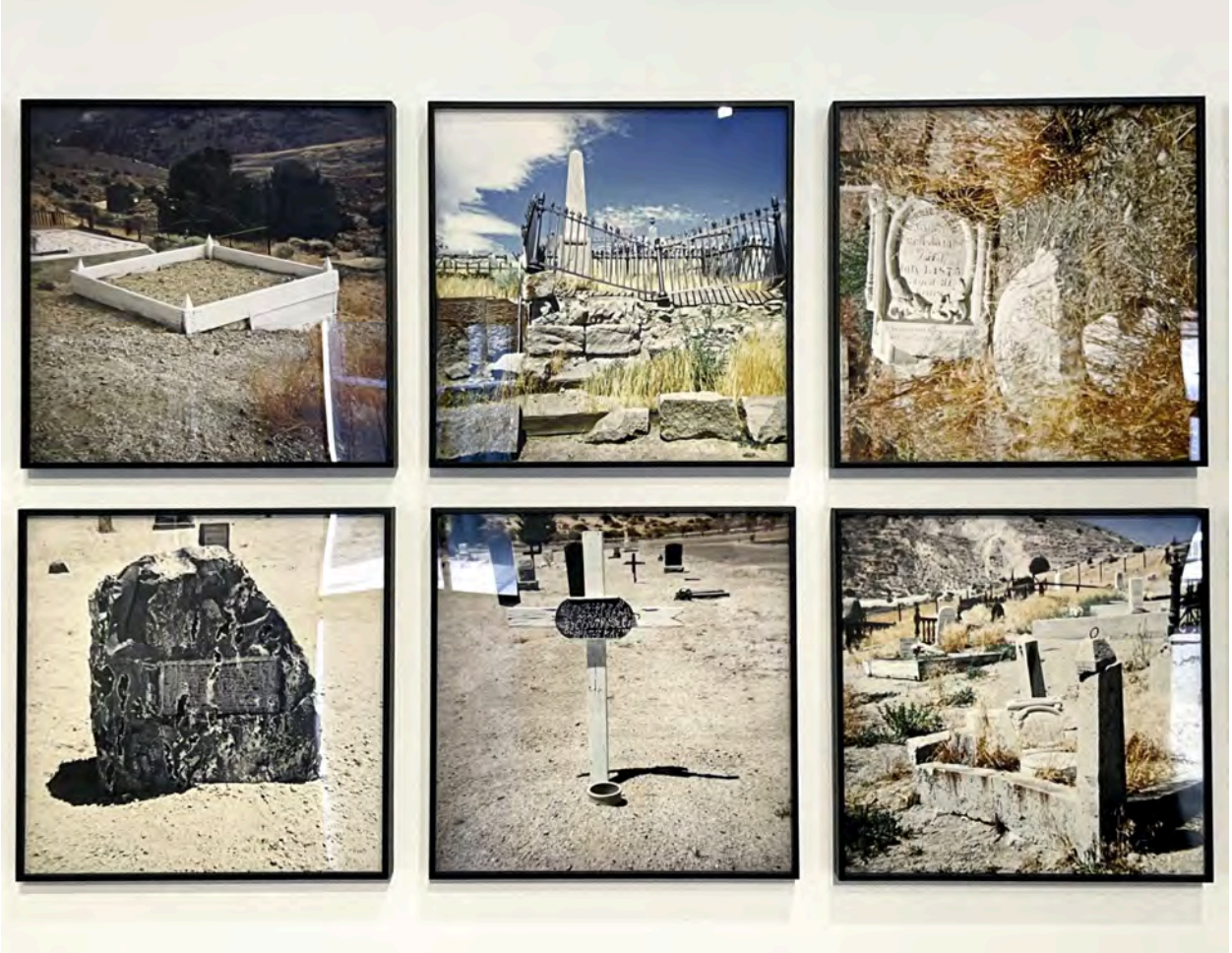

Figure 15. Nancy Holt, Selection from *Western Graveyards*, 1968, series originally 126 transparencies. Via Renée Reizman/Hyperallergic.

Figure 16. Nancy Holt, Selection from *Western Graveyards*, 1968, photograph. Via Sprüth Magers.

Figure 17. *30 Below* in January 2024. Photo: Catherine Curry.

Figure 18. Graffiti inside of *30 Below*, January 2024. Photo: Catherine Curry.

Figure 19. Meg Webster *Soft Broch* 1984/2022, installation view, 2022 at Judd Foundation, NY.

Figure 20. Meg Webster, *Mother Mound*, 1990, Soil, 121.9 x 274.3 cm. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. Panza Collection.

Figure 21. Meg Webster, *Moss Bed, Queen*, 1986/2005, peat moss, earth, plastic tarp. Via Walker Art Center.

Figure 22. Meg Webster, *Stick Spiral*, 1986, branches. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York Panza Collection, Gift, 1992.

Figure 23. Meg Webster, *Concave Room for Bees*, 2016-2017, Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, NY.

Figure 24. Mia Westerlund Roosen, *Muro Series X*, 1979, pigmented concrete and steel, 10 ft. 1 in. x 10 ft. 2 in. x 48 1/2 in. Photo by Jerry L. Thompson.

Figure 25. Mia Westerlund Roosen, *Olympia*, 1988, plaster, pulp and encaustic, 34 x 192 x 96 inches. Via artist's website.

Figure 26. Mia Westerlund Roosen, *Domestic Disturbances*, 1992, cast pigmented concrete, 1 x 5 x 7 inches. Via artist's website.

Figure 27. Mia Westerlund Roosen, *American Beauties*, 1990, concrete and encaustic, 24 x 24 x 266 inches. Via artist's website.

Figure 28. Mia Westerlund Roosen, *Adam's Fault, 1993-94 (installation view, 1994)*. Via Storm King Art Center Archives.

Figure 29. Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Sarcophagi in Glass Houses, 1989 (installation view)*. Photograph by Jerry L. Thompson, Storm King Art Center Archives.

Figure 30. Meg Webster, *Growing Under Solar Panels*, 2018, Storm King Art Center, solar panels with raised growing beds, pond, and planting of nectar plants for bees. 13 x 18 x 40 feet. Courtesy the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

Fig 31. Catherine Curry, spread from epub submitted to Experimental Humanities, 2024.

Fig 32. Catherine Curry, spread from epub submitted to Experimental Humanities, 2024.

Fig 33. Catherine Curry, spread from epub submitted to Experimental Humanities, 2024.

Fig 34. Catherine Curry, spread from epub submitted to Experimental Humanities, 2024.

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