DISORIENTATION IN MILLENIAL AMERICA:

MICHAEL ARAD'S *REFLECTING ABSENCE* AND THE ART OF MICHAEL HEIZER

by

CLAIRE E. DEMPSTER

(Under the Direction of Isabelle Loring Wallace)

ABSTRACT

The central feature of *Reflecting Absence*, the national September 11th memorial designed by Michal Arad, is two inverted fountains that recess in the footprints of the fallen Twin Towers. Abstract and simplistic, the memorial clearly recalls the precedent setting design of Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial and yet, there is a closer source that is disregarded by current scholarship, that of Michael Heizer's *North, East, South, West,* 1967/2002, itself four inverted and severe geometrical shapes. Michael Heizer is an earthworks artist most famous for his large-scale sculptures in the deserts of Nevada and his oeuvre is marked by themes of absence, permanence, orientation and monumentality. This thesis purposes to take seriously both the formal and conceptual connections between Heizer's work and *Reflecting Absence* to elucidate how the memorial functions as a site of national reorientation in the aftermath of the disorienting, even apocalyptic events of September 11th, 2001.

INDEX WORDS: Memorial, Monument, Michael Heizer, Land Art, September 11th

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DEDICATION

To my parents.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2011, after an extensive design competition and anguished building process, *Reflecting Absence* [fig. 1-4], the national memorial for September 11th, opened to the public.[1] Chosen in 2004 and designed by architects Michael Arad and Peter Walker, *Reflecting Absence* is a memorial whose central feature is two recessed square fountains.[2] Arad submitted the design for *Reflecting Absence* alone and after it was selected for the final round, the memorial jury insisted on adding Peter Walker, a renowned landscape architect, to the team to help soften the severity of Arad's initial vision. The design evolved over time, much to the chagrin of chief architect Arad, becoming less immersive and more traditional than his original concept. *Reflecting Absence* follows the conventions of contemporary memorial design, but the pools was more directly inspired

[1] *Reflecting Absence* is part of a large complex that includes the 9/11 Museum and the Freedom Tower; however, it also stands alone as a discrete memorial to the deceased of the World Trade Center attacks. Because a comprehensive examination of the complex is beyond the scope of this paper, I restrict my remarks to the two reflecting pools that I consider in conjunction with the art of Michael Heizer.

[2] Of course, the average visitor to *Reflecting Absence* will have no knowledge of the visual reference to Heizer. However, the relationship between the architects and Heizer is more complex. Michael Arad is a famously divisive figure and the aggressive defense of his vision has been well documented in the press. His original design included ramps to enter the fountains and lacked the plaza of trees, Walkers main contribution. Again, Arad was protective, even conniving in the pursuit of his vision and there was clear tension between the two men. Even the relevance or admission of Heizer's influence is up for dispute between the architects. On the website for Walker's architectural firm PWP Landscape Architecture, a description of the fountains makes direct reference to Heizer: "Using a language like Michael Heizer's *North, East, South, West*, the voids render absence visible." While Walker is unwilling to refute the visual similarities, Arad categorically denies them. In an interview for *Landscape Architecture Magazine* given by Walker in 2011, he spoke directly to the similarities between *NESW* and *Reflecting Absence* saying "Michael [Arad] always says that he'd never seen the Heizers up at Beacon. And I know that's not true. Couldn't be true, not true. But he's steadfast in that". Arad's proposal for *Reflecting Absence* was submitted to the committee in 2003 so it is possible that Arad made the short train trip to Dia: Beacon. His rejection and Walker's confession seems to have set the prevailing critical consideration of *Reflecting Absence* in relation to Heizer; the visual similarities are undeniable, but largely unimportant. For more about Walker and his contributions to the memorial see Christopher Hawthorne, "The Voids: An Interview with Peter Walker," *Landscape Architecture Magazine*, September 2011, 118. For more about the public persona of Michael Arad see Joe Hagan, "The Breaking of Michael Arad" *New York Magazine* May 22, 2006, 20-27.

by a work of contemporary art: Michael Heizer's *North, East, South, West*, 2002 [fig. 7-8], a version of which is permanently installed at Dia: Beacon. Consisting of four geometrically-shaped "voids" inset in the gallery's floor, *North, East, South, West* is a vertiginous sight, and for anyone who has stood beside it, peering into its depths, its influence on the 9/11 memorial is obvious. For what is the memorial if not a pair of vast, geometric "voids," over which water rushes toward a darkened, dizzying abyss? Mentioned in passing by critics and scholars, this connection has been acknowledged, but no attempt has been made to assess its significance, or to think beyond a set of obvious formal debts. What makes this a striking oversight is the fact that both grapple with issues of absence, permanence, death, commemoration, and monumentality and are, as an earlier iteration of *NESW* reveals, very much in dialogue with notions of apocalypse in an American context, whether anticipated or painfully recalled.

CHAPTER II

Reflecting Absence and *North, East, South, West*

I begin with a more thorough description of the memorial and its purported source. Located in lower Manhattan at the former site of the World Trade Center, *Reflecting Absence* is a memorial that commemorates the loss of the twin towers as much as its remembers the towers as such. Every element of the memorial's location and Arad's design emphasizes the absence of the former structures. First and foremost, the loss is immediately established by the adjacent presence of the Freedom Tower [fig. 5]. At 1776 feet, the tower is the most concrete evidence of the loss of the Twin Towers and its shadow spills across the memorial plaza. The truncated base and tapered form—which reinforces a sense of the building's stability—work to resist the vulnerability of the structural form of skyscrapers exposed by the attack on its predecessors. By contrast, the memorial works to highlight the lost towers not by new form, but by absent mass. Visitors enter a large plaza of grey granite lined with trees; it is a space that has been cleared and set aside. Two massive pools or voids recess in the exact position of the fallen towers, as if to permanently mark in steel and stone, their foundations. It is impossible to escape a comparison to the dark, rectangular form of a grave, a connotation reinforced by a second smaller, inset square at the center of each pool. The edge of each pool is lined with a bronze rim where the names of the deceased are inscribed: victims of the North Tower, Flight 11, and the 1993 bombing surround the North Pool and victims of the South Tower, Flight 175, bystanders, first responders, Flights 93 and 77 and

Pentagon victims surround the South Pool. The names are not engraved [fig. 3], but are punctured in the thick bronze that outline of the letters of each name, just as the voids outline the former foundations of the towers. The idea of absence is also key to Heizer's work, which so often turns on the removal or displacement of mass.

Heizer's *North, East, South, West*—in its second iteration and the one that surely inspired Arad—was erected or perhaps more accurately, excavated at Dia: Beacon in 2002. A massive sculpture of four deep depressions, it takes up an entire room of the former Nestle factory and spans a total of 125 feet. The square void, *North* [fig. 8], at the left end of the room is an exact, if smaller version of the voids in *Reflecting Absence*. It is best described as a double voided cube, with a second smaller cube that punctures the bottom of the larger, deepening, but also narrowing the voided space. The other three depressions are also inverted and geometric in shape: in order from left to right *South*, which takes the shape of a cone, *West*, which takes the form of a triangle prism and *East*, which takes the form of a cylinder. All are lined with steel plates and sink 20 feet into the cement floor, their bottoms obscured by depth and shadow. The work is not defined by constructed form, but by the lack of matter; the steel plates are outlines of extracted mass, like the holes left behind after an archeological excavation.[3] Depending on the light, the grey concrete floor and the steel lining slip between deep grey and rust-red, and in their melancholic palette they recall the slate grey stone that dominates the plaza around *Reflecting Absence*. The edges of the shapes or "pits" are sharp and the hard steel lip of each blends seamlessly with the concrete floor. The sharpness of the edge and the

[3] It should be noted that there is a second series of *NESW* (1981) that is a more traditional sculpture of geometrical forms. The four shapes—a cube, cone, wedge and frustum—are made of burnished stainless sheet steel. It is as if they are the mass removed from the Dia: Beacon version. They are housed in the portico of the Citigroup Center in Los Angeles, locating Heizer's work in the context of fiscal power.

shadowed bottoms evoke the feeling of standing at the edge of a cliff. They are frightening spaces, with unknowable shadowed depths and are sharp, hard, and entirely inorganic, even as Heizer's title refers to compass points that are used to navigate land. In contrast, the harshness of *Reflecting Absence*'s voids is somewhat softened by the natural element of thundering falling water. But as with *NESW*, the voids are disconcerting in their size and bottomlessness; moreover, both are mediations on loss as architectonically informed considerations of absented space.

Despite these and other visual similarities, Heizer's influence on the 9/11 memorial is often passed over in favor of another debt: namely, the one *Reflecting Absence* owes to memorial design practices of the last 40 years. Most obviously, *Reflecting Absence* recalls Maya Lin's landmark Vietnam Veterans Memorial [fig. 9], erected to great controversy in 1982. Breaking from the established language of traditional memorials that often feature representational and aggrandizing images of the deceased as in the Lincoln Memorial [fig. 10], Lin's design is austere and stark, comprised of simple, geometric shapes, severe lines, and dark, reflective stone. Lin's memorial is often described as a cut in the National Mall, and *Reflecting Absence* similarly intervenes in the cityscape and marking the site with two inverted, building-shaped scars. In addition, both memorials are purposefully devoid of representational imagery, with the deceased represented only by their names.[4] A controversial strategy in 1982, the elimination of figurative elements ultimately proved an elegant solution for acknowledging deceased soldiers while resisting glorification of a deeply unpopular War.

[4] Lin, after declining requests by the public to design the 9/11 Memorial, sat on the selection committee and was reportedly a supporter of Arad's design. For an insider's account of the competition see James E. Young's "The Memorial Process: A Juror's Report from Ground Zero," in *Contentious City: The Politics of Recovery in New York City,* ed. John Mollenkopf, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005): 154.

Indeed, nonrepresentational design has become the preferred method for contemporary memorials and is typically used when a memorial grapples with challenging or ambiguous histories as evident by the numerous European Holocaust memorials and the Oklahoma City National Memorial [fig. 11]. In this respect, *Reflecting Absence* follows contemporary trends. It is therefore unsurprising that *Reflecting Absences* was selected from a pool of eight final designs, vetted by a panel that included Lin and renowned memorial scholar and nonrepresentational proponent James E. Young.[5] Writing extensively on the issues of Holocaust memorialization, Young favors designs like Peter Esieman's Memorial to the Murder Jews of Europe [fig. 12] whose immersive monument places the burden of remembrance on the viewer. Lin championed Arad and Walker's design, writing a persuasive letter to her colleagues when it appeared to be losing support.[6]

Despite Lin's support and its adherence to established post-Lin memorial tropes, Arad's *Reflecting Absence* was not chosen without controversy; many people, especially the 9/11 families, felt it did not adequately represent the human cost of that day and lacked sufficiently explicit references to the deceased.[7] For the victims' families, who were particularly displeased with the initial plan for the random arrangement of names,[8]

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[5] James E. Young is the leading scholar on Holocaust memorials of the late 20th and early 21st century. He writes prolifically on the problematic of Holocaust Memorials, especially within Germany, to represent respectfully an event that the nation memorializing was complicit. Similar issues are at play in the Vietnam Memorial. For more see James E. Young's key text "Germany's Holocaust Memorial Problem—and Mine" in *At Memory's Edge: After Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 184-223.

[6] For a comprehensive review of all aspects of the rebuilding of Ground Zero including the memorial see Lynne B. Sagalyn, *Power at Ground Zero: Politics, Money and the Remaking of Lower Manhattan,* (London: Oxford University Press, 2016), 242-243.

[7] Marita Struken, "The Aesthetics of Absence: Rebuilding Ground Zero" *American Ethnologist* 31, no. 3 (Aug. 2004): 322.

[8] The placement of the names of the deceased was an ongoing issue during the entire design phase. Eventually Arad proposed a solution that came to be known as "meaningful adjacencies". Family members

Reflecting Absence did not commemorate their loved ones, but was instead focused on the fallen towers. The memorial's reception by art and cultural critics was variously disapproving, insisting that the design was too severe and downright boring by turns. The most consistent criticism among both critics and families was that the scale and certain literal aspects of the design constituted a remembrance of the lost towers themselves, as architectural monuments, which in turn overshadowed the deaths of the victims. As the leading architectural critic for *The New York Times*, Michael Kimmelman diligently chronicled the memorial process and was highly skeptical of the memorial design; his final review of the site in 2014 retained his early ambivalence. He disparaged it for being "given over to overly literal symbolism: fountains the size of the towers' footprints; America's tallest tower, with a fortified base; a museum underground with a pavilion that resembles a collapsed building."[9] For Kimmelman, too, the memorial highlights the buildings, not the deceased.[10] Similarly, architectural critic Philip Noble claimed, the memorial becomes "architecture remembering architecture."[11]

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could request that their loved one's name be listed next to a friend or colleague thus grouping the deceased together, often by floor or business. Sagalyn, "*Power at Ground Zero"* 352-353.

[9] I rely heavily the criticism of Kimmelman because he wrote consistently about the memorial from the time of its initial selection to its opening. His longtime status as one of New York City's leading art critics also situate him directly in the discourse around the memorial as it related to his own community. Michael Kimmelman "Find Space for the Living at A Memorial" *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), May 28th, 2014.

[10] Similarly, scholar Harriet Senie considers the falling waters in the footprints of the towers too closely approximate the events of the day. For Senie, the voids along with the museum are a "symbolic visual and aural re-enactment that is felt viscerally. This echo of the continually disappearing towers is reinforced by the descent into the museum as if into a tomb, where the experience of reenactment is also dominant." What else could one think when observing the water as it rushes under the names and over the ledge, but of those great crumbling buildings, of those who were trapped inside and of those who leapt? The second voids at the center of the pools spare some sense of the final crash into the ground. The effect of the memorial as reenactment is also compounded by the nature of the 9/11 Museum, whose entrance is directly between the twin voids. Senie and critic Adam Gopnik agree that the museum serves not only to educate the visitor, but acts as a memory trigger that attempts to recreate the emotions of the tragic day through various manipulations of sound and displays. Spencer Finch's *Trying to Remember the Color of the Sky on That September Morning* at the museum entrance endeavors, as the title plainly states, to recall specific memories of the day and is not a call to remember those who died, but an attempt to get to the viewer's personal experience. For more on the museum see Adam Gopnik, "Stones and Bones: Visiting the 9/11

Reflecting Absence has met with approval by the general public. There have been 23 million visitors since its opening in 2011, suggesting that an element of the memorial is working to appease the public, whose relationship to the event puts lost architecture at its center.[12] Public approval of the memorial can be attributed to the secondary role of *Reflecting Absence* as a public monument. Because of the complexity of 9/11, *Reflecting Absence* is tasked with signifying an event with two consequences: the physical loss of the deceased *and* the symbolically devastating loss of the towers. Even before the attack, the Twin Towers were structures that represented aspects of American democracy essential to its global authority—capitalism and fiscal power—a dominance exposed as vulnerable when the towers collapsed. Ultimately, any memorial to 9/11 had to contend with and correct the symbolic loss for the public, in addition to being a place for grief. The unsettling elements of the memorial are not that it commemorates the architecture, but rather how the memorial grapples with monumentality as it works to rectify the symbolic nature of both the event and the Twin Towers, and it is ultimately through Heizer's influence that we can begin to unpack the underlining implications of the voids.

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memorial and museum" *The New Yorker,* July 7, 2014, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/07/07/stones-and-bones. and Harriet F. Senie, "Commemorating 9/11: From the Tribute in Light to Reflecting Absence" in *Memorials to Shattered Myths: Vietnam to 9/11*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 122-168.

[11] Philip Noble, the architectural critic claims that the one thing *Reflecting Absence* immortalizes was the existence of the Towers. Although *Sixteen Acres* was published before the memorial was constructed, Noble is highly critical of the entire design. For more see Phillip Nobel, *Sixteen Acres: Architecture and the Outrageous Struggle for the Future of Ground Zero*, (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2005), 255.

[12] For visitor data see *http://2015.911memorial.org*.

CHPATER III

The Twin Towers as Symbol

At the time of their completion in 1973, the Twin Towers [fig. 6], designed by architect Minoru Yamasaki, were the two tallest buildings in the world, far surpassing the height at which Rem Koolhaus insists that structure becomes a monument.[13] The monolithic skyscrapers joined the ranks of their more ornate, midtown neighbors, becoming as iconic to the skyline of New York as the Empire State and Chrysler Buildings. They rose above downtown Manhattan and the Statue of Liberty like a towering gateway to the city, symbols of a modern New York. The simplicity of their design, which lacked a façade, flattened their physical presence on the city skyline, making them ideally suited for images. [14] Reproduced endlessly in photographs and postcards and featured prominently in the movies and television shows, the towers became symbolic of New York City in the last three decades of the 20th century.[15] Additionally, their location at the center of New York City's financial district served to

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[13] While Koolhaus' canonical *Delirious New York* is somewhat dated, he was writing concurrently with the construction of the Twin Towers and his manifesto serves as a primary source as to the opinions of skyscrapers in 1970s New York City. See Rem Koolhaus, "The Double Life of Utopia: The Skyscraper," in *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 81.

[14] In the months following the attacks, French theorist Jean Baudrillard wrote a series of brief essays that theorized the cause and effect of the attacks. Dealing primarily with the symbolic nature of the event, Baudrillard considered the power of the Towers as image. Of the doubling of the towers, Baudrillard insists that "the fact that there are two of them signifies an end to the original reference" and puts "a halt to verticality," ending the 20th-century competition for the tallest building. As perfect clones of each other, their duplication seemed evidence of an eradicated desire for an improved form. Additionally, he outlines the methodology of terrorism in the globalized world that works to resists western capitalism. For more see Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Requiem for the Twin Towers*, (London: Verso, 2002), 30-31.

[15] The Twin Towers featured prominently in movies and television about New York City. For example, the first shot in the original opening credits of *Law and Order: SVU* is a slow pan of the towers and in movies from *Manhattan* (1979) to *Independence Day* (1996) the towers help establish the New York City setting.

underscore and locate their symbolism squarely in the realm of fiscal power. The Twin Towers became the central symbol of global capitalism and, by their presence in New York City, situated the United States as the cultural heart of western global order.

Like the buildings, which were arguably designed *as image*, the attacks were designed to be witnessed by millions via the television and reinforced the towers' long held status as the key symbolic architecture for the system of global capitalism. As Baudrillard declared in "Requiem for the Twin Towers:

> Let us be clear about this: the two towers are both a physical, architectural object and a symbolic object (symbolic of financial power and global economic liberalism). The architectural object was destroyed, but it was the symbolic object which was targeted and which it was intended to demolish.[16]

As Baudrillard explains, the collapse of the Towers was an event designed to challenge the previously held assumption of the United States as the cultural and financial global power. Additionally, the attacks as symbolic event were made more powerful by their real-time coverage that allowed millions across the globe to simultaneously witness the second plane crash and, just an hour later, the Towers' collapse. Thus, any memorial to 9/11 would have to grapple with death, the symbolism of the target, and the highly public nature of the event. Memorials have the basic goal of commemoration, but, as I will argue, in the case of the 9/11 memorial, remembrance is complicated *by Reflecting Absence's* public function and the global significance of the events of 9/11.

There were almost instant calls for the rebuilding of the World Trade Center and the inclusion of a memorial. As the Memorial Competition brief testifies, any September 11th memorial should seek to rectify and stabilize the losses, both symbolic and physical,

[16] Baudrillard, *Requiem for the Twin Towers*, 47-48.

of 9/11.[17] The Memorial Competition guidelines, issued by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation President Kevin Rample, called for the design to "remember all those who were lost, but celebrate the values that endure, drawing inspiration from its setting in the cradle of American democracy."[18] To that end while the commemoration of the deceased was an essential element to any proposed design, competitors were also tasked with making a monument and with representing the values (enduring democracy, freedom, power) symbolically attacked by the collapse of the towers.

Building on Baudrillard's theory of the symbolic nature of the towers, scholar David Simpson worries about the implications of immediate memorialization. Simpson sees this desire for rebuilding as integrally tied to the "state of metaphysical and political health" of the nation.[19] What came out of that frightening, disorienting moment, when the known world collapsed with the towers, was an urgent need to set things back in place, to reinstate the symbolism to assure safety and impenetrability. When describing the feelings of patriotism underlining the calls for memorialization, Simpson insists that the memorial design was to move beyond "rehabilitation" towards a "strident call for triumphalism, for an economic and patriotic display of national and local energy that can pass muster as embodying the spirit of America."[20] Although Simpson says the need for memorialization neglects the implications of 9/11, this desire also acknowledges the symbolic nature of the event as laid out by Baudrillard; the memorial and the Freedom Tower act like patches, covering over and reinstating their presence in the cityscape as if

[17] In a series of short letters that preceded the rules for the competition, various dignitaries including Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Governor George Pataki outlined their desires for the memorial. Almost all refer to the symbolic nature of the buildings in addition to the deceased. *World Trade Center Site: Memorial Competition Guidelines* (New York: Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, 2003), np.
[18] *World Trade Center Site,* np.
[19] David Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration,* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 56.
[20] Simpson, *9/11,* 61.

to reestablish their symbolism. While *Reflecting Absence* is certainly a memorial, it also takes on themes that are historically ascribed to monuments, specifically, a reassertion of the power of the state via a visual language associated with national identity. And, as a closer investigation of Heizer's desert sculptures will shortly reveal, the artist whose design served to inspire the 9/11 memorial was also keen to establish a monumental artistic style that was related specifically to nationality.

CHAPTER IV

Mythologies of the American West

By the early 1970s, swept up in the paranoia of the nuclear era Heizer rejected the New York City art scene and retreated permanently to the Nevada desert.[21] For Heizer, the threat of the post-nuclear age was two-fold. He certainly felt the implications of Vietnam and the atomic bomb as a physical threat, but he was also consumed with the idea that the New York City art scene was disintegrating. Heizer withdrew to the desert to make monuments that would withstand the fallout of both.

> I was determined to be a contributor to the development of American art, not simply continue European art…I thought I'd actually try and contribute to creating an American identity. I thought this description was as important as any subject matter.[22]

As these comments reveal, Heizer's identity and artistic practice are grounded in his nationality, an identity he felt was at risk in the Cold War era. Under the shadow of potential nuclear war, Heizer fled to the desert in the early 1970s to work on *City,* beginning construction on his magnum opus, designed to outlast humanity.[23] But what he attempted to survive was not just the literal end of the world, but also, more modestly, American culture. Originally an abstract painter who used geometric forms and a slate

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[21] "We live in a schizophrenic period. We're living in a world that's technological and primordial simultaneously. I guess the idea is to make art that reflects this premise. My original impetus for getting out of the city and working with these basic materials had to do with the idea of the insecurity of society, the frailty of its systems, the dependence upon interdependence." Heizer's conversation with Julie Brown is the most extensive interview with the artist to date. Michael Heizer, "Interview with Julia Brown." *Sculpture in Reverse,* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1984), 13.

[22] Ibid*,* 11.

[23] Yates McKeee's essay insists that violence is a pervading theme in Heizer's desert works. For more see "Land Art in Parallax: Media, Violence, Political Ecology," *Nobody's Property: Art, Land, Space, 2000-2010,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 50.

gray color palette, Heizer became disillusioned with the influence of European Modernism on American artistic practice. To combat the influence, Heizer retreated west to the desert, a landscape untouched by European influences, a place from which he could create what he understood to be truly American art.[24] In using the landscape of the West and pre-historic sources as inspiration, his monumental sculptures were an attempt to find a new visual language that was quintessentially American. By trying to craft an artistic style that he saw as American, Heizer created monuments that re-grounded his version of American identity in ideas and landscapes that paradoxically predate the nation's founding. He ultimately crafted the style that got repeated some 40 odd years later in *Reflecting Absence*, at the very monument that sought to reestablish the position of the United States after a similar moment of national uncertainty.

Though 9/11 and the memorial return us to New York City, a city that Heizer left behind, there are nevertheless parallels between the moment of Heizer's flight from the city and the moment of his return in the borrowed forms of Arad's *Reflecting Absence*. After all, *Reflecting Absence* emerged at a time when 9/11 had exposed the vulnerability of the country, igniting a desperate need to rediscover old strength in familiar declarations of America's uniqueness. In a famous interview for a 1984 exhibition at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles—a dialogue that remains the most comprehensive source of the artist's intentions—Heizer revealed a similar preoccupation with insisting on American individualism, and the works themselves are constructed in a location and style that labor to position them as uniquely American.

[24] This is a highly problematic understanding of the desert as a pure and empty space given thousands of years of occupation by indigenous peoples. Heizer cites the temples of the Maya, and the pyramids of Egypt as his sources, complicating his understanding of what it is to be "American". Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 110.

The most identifiably American aspect of Heizer's earthworks is their setting in the deserts of the southwest. Idealizations about the desert often position it as pure and somehow beyond or apart from the influence of culture; but, it is also a location that is deeply entwined with American mythologies. Italian scholar Germano Celant, one of Heizer's greatest advocates, describes the artist's retreat to the American west in the late sixties as a means of breaking "free of New York, the "last" European city, to retrace pre-urban cultural experience that had come to maturation in the endless expanses of the American West."[25] In the West, Heizer, claims Celant, sought to do two things: first, to shed the European mentality of modern artistic practice and second, to deliberately collide with an archaic and contemporary aesthetic in the "pure" landscape of desert. Heizer saw the desert as a place untouched by European influences and with a long history of pre-modern art connected to the land; hence, it was a location where he could consciously contribute to the formation of a distinctly American artistic style.[26] Paradoxically, in shedding his identity as a New York artist, the city most associated with American Art, Heizer hoped to find in his desert retreat a more authentic version of America that was deeply rooted in the land, labor, and a pioneering spirit.

Just as the Twin Towers and 9/11 are seen as paramount to the national narrative, the West and the desert have similarly contributed to foundational American mythologies. As Jean Baudrillard declared in his well-known book of 1986, *America,* the American west is a "geological epic," cinematic in scope, a pure and wild landscape that pits the awesome forces of nature and man against one another.[27] Manifest Destiny, the

[25] For more see Cleant, *Michael Heizer,* (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 1997), XVII-XIX.
[26] Heizer, *Sculpture in reverse,* 11.
[27] The desert is also a landscape that is considered both primitive and futuristic, primordial and post-apocalyptic. In many ways, Heizer's desert works like *City* oscillate between similar tensions. For more

ideological justification for the westward expansion in the 1800s, lead to stories of the rugged American settler, the cowboy and the noble outlaw persevering against the harsh landscape of the desert. West is also the direction one heads to escape the repressive forces of civilization. As Lucy Lippard points out in her book *Undermining*, the original "Ground Zero" was the first test site for the nuclear bomb, out west in Socorro, New Mexico.[28] The West occupies a monumental position in the American national narrative and acts as a directional force – as a site of orientation by which American remembers and rights itself.

Heizer insists that his site-specific work "had nothing to do with landscape or the romanticism of the west" and claims that he chose the desert for its abundant material.[29] Yet, such claims are undermined, in both literal and conceptual ways, by the experience of Heizer's desert works. For example, *Double Negative,* 1969 [fig. 13-17] which is permanently installed in the middle of the Nevada desert, forces the viewer to perform a type of pilgrimage, to negotiate the landscape (and perhaps the country) to see the piece.[30] And, once there, the work, which can be succinctly described as a horizontal cut in the mesa, requires that one submerge oneself within the landscape. Thus, while Heizer claims to separate his work from romantic notions of the American West, it seems unlikely that a viewer ever could. A visitor to *Double Negative* is forced to seek the work in the desert as if an oasis therein, and in the process, performs the quintessentially

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about the desert and its cultural symbolism in contemporary America see Jean Baudrillard, *America*, (London: Verso, 1988), 73.

[28] Paradoxically, the location of Heizer's retreat is not far from the nuclear test site. Heizer is essentially making is work in the shadow of the birth place of his apocalyptic fear of nuclear war. Lucy Lippard, *Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West*, (New York: The New Press, 2014), 125.

[29] Heizer, *Sculpture in Reverse,* 38.

[30] For more on Heizer's relationship to the desert see Geramo Celant's preeminent text *Michael Heizer*, xxiv-xxv. and for religious scholar Mark Taylor's pilgrimage see "Rend(er)ing" in *Double Negative*, (New York: Rizzoli International Publications Inc., 1991), 12-22.

American adventure of exploring the desert, like the cowboys of early Hollywood and the pioneers who marched west. The effect of having to physically traverse the landscape, both by car and on foot, grounds the work in its desert setting. Locating his monuments in the desert, Heizer associates his work with a highly particular landscape, at once natural and cultural (indigenous building, rock art, monumentality etc.), which cannot be divorced from ideas about what the desert means in an American context.[31]

Located on Mormon Mesa [fig. 14], a flat desert plain that overlooks the small town of Overton, Nevada just 80 miles north of Las Vegas, *Double Negative* begins, perhaps inevitably, with a journey. In Mark Taylor's catalogue essay for *Double Negative* and his short piece "Letters from the Desert," he spends a great deal of time describing the feeling of leaving civilization behind and entering the desert, suggesting, whether wittingly or not, that this journey is, in fact, a component of the work and one that relates to Heizer's defection from New York City in the 1970s.[32] For many, including religion scholar Taylor, a visit to *Double Negative* is a type of pilgrimage, a metaphor Heizer would surely encourage, as the primary emotion Heizer says he attempts to elicit is one of awe: "It is interesting to build a sculpture that attempts to create an atmosphere of

[31] Beyond the location of Heizer's work, it's worth noting the size and scale of works by Heizer including *Double Negative*, as well as other earthwork artists like Robert Smithson and Walter de Maria, all required the kind of space that only vast expanses of empty land could provide. Europe offered a more modest canvas compared to the sweeping expanse of America, and nowhere is a sense of expansive space better symbolized than in the West, in the great swaths of empty desert in Nevada, New Mexico and Utah. And, while Heizer does not think his art is engaged in discussions of the landscape, let alone a distinctly American terrain. I would argue that the power of his work is heavily reliant on pervading cultural mythologies about the American West. For a history of Earthworks see John Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary Art in the Landscape,* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 41.

[32] As the helicopter slowly lifted off the ground and headed down the Strip, hotels and casinos sank beneath us…Deeper into the desert, hills became mountains erupting like petrified waves of some prehistoric sea." Taylor, "Rend(er)ing," 12.

awe…Immense, architecturally-sized sculpture creates both the object and the atmosphere. Awe is a state of mind equivalent to a religious experience."[33]

Rosalind Krauss insists that *Double Negative* is a phenomenological experience because the viewer physically enters the work. But her account of the piece neglects the journey required to view it. Once atop the Mormon mesa, one drives straight across towards the Virgin Mountains and the eastern side. The work is difficult to locate because of the flush edges of the cuts, which force the viewer to carefully skirt the edge of the mesa. The effect of this search on the viewer is a distinct awareness of place. The Virgin Mountains rise to the east, in stark contrast with the flat plain of the mesa expanding westward, where dust is kicked high by hot winds. The viewer must turn at the far eastern edge of the mesa and inch along the cliff until the dark mass of *Double Negative* [fig. 13] emerges below the rim.

Carved and blasted into the edge of the mesa are two deep cuts oriented almost perfectly on the north to south axis. The cuts mirror each other across a shallow, wide canyon and are 1,500 feet long from end to end.[34] Indeed, Heizer compares the length of the *Double Negative* to the height of the Empire State Building, as it is as long as the skyscraper is tall.[35] The skyscraper is often considered an American invention and became an early symbol for modern America and New York City. Through the comparison to the Empire State Building, Heizer aligned himself specifically with an American building tradition. As with *NESW*, Heizer plays with monumental space on the horizontal, a sharp contrast to the verticality of the skyscraper. Thirty feet wide and fifty feet deep each, the cuts can be entered from opposite ends by steep, earthen ramps.

[33] Heizer, *Sculpture in Reverse,* 35.
[34] Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond,* 16.
[35] Heizer, *Sculpture in Reverse, 12.*

Riddled with fallen boulders and loose sand that shifts and gives under foot, tiny avalanches are sent cascading into the deep shadows at the bottom of the cut. As with slot canyons or the streets of New York City made dark by towering buildings on either side, the voids of *NESW* sink so deeply into the ground that they always partially in shadow; on a hot day, the temperature drops comfortably in their depths.

Krauss will locate the phenomenological experience of viewing *Double Negative* at the center of the cut when a viewer can fully imagine the work as a continuous whole.[36] But like *NESW*, *Double Negative* resists optical mastery because of its size, and thus, a total understanding of the work is only achievable from an aerial view. Like *Reflecting Absence* and even *NESW*, *Double Negative* inspires a sense of awe in relation to scale. Giles Tiberghien opaquely insists that the massive size of Heizer's work obliterates an understanding of scale and location in relation to landscape by restricting the viewer's view of the horizon.[37] *Double Negative* requires the viewer to submerge herself in the work and when entered, the sheer cliffs of *Negative,* prevent the viewer from seeing the horizon. This effect is partially achieved by the size of his works like *Double Negative*, *City* and even *North East South West*. They are awe-inspiring because the sheer size of them is indicative of the immense labor it took to achieve their final form. Similarly, the desert as landscape deals in an inhuman scale and the names of famous landmarks—the Grand Canyon, Monument Valley, Valley of the Gods—reflect a

[36] Krauss' reading of *Double Negative* imagines a viewer, standing at the edge of one cut looking at the other half across the small canyon that separates each side, and it is only at that moment that one is able to recognize the work in its entirety. She goes further: "the *Double Negative* suggests an alternative to the picture we have of how we know ourselves. It causes us to meditate on a knowledge of ourselves that is formed by looking outward toward the responses of others as they look back at us. It is a metaphor for the self as it is known through its appearance to the other." She sees this act of self-recognition as the condition of postmodern sculpture. For more see Rosalind Krauss "The *Double Negative*: a new syntax for sculpture," in *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1977): 280.
[37] For more about Heizer's manipulation of size and scale see Gilles Tiberghien, *Land Art*., (London, UK: Art Data, 1995): 77-78.

sense of awe at the immensity and inhospitable nature of the landscape. *Double Negative* is rendered more impressive by Heizer's ability to assert himself into this seemingly inhuman context by carving up horizontal form that rivals the vertical monumentality of the surrounding landscape. But, instead of monuments that find their awe-inspiring power in their timeless presence that testifies to a wondrous past – something to which *City* arguably aspires – Heizer's work finds it power in monumental absence. Here is the great paradox of Heizer's work: for while they are built to last, works like *Double Negative* and *North, East, South, West* are emblems of loss, whose meaning is hitched to the physical sensations engineered by the viewing experience.

Similarly, when viewing *Reflecting Absence* or walking the streets of New York City, scale is determined not by the horizon, but by the adjacent buildings and the sky. More profound, however, is the fact that the voids of *Reflecting Absence* are scaled in comparison to their vertical predecessors. Their size immediately makes it clear that they are referents to the original size of the fallen towers, highlighting the inhuman scale of the buildings. The Twin Towers, as Baudrillard points out, "collapsed vertically" as if "drained of their strength" and Arad's design for *Reflecting Absence* inverts their former verticality. Following the directional logic of *NESW* and most of Heizer's work, *Reflecting Absence* spreads out horizontally, grounding the voids in the cityscape and resisting the soaring verticality to the skyscraper.

Nothing about the waterfalls and grey stone of *Reflecting Absence* suggests the heat and dust of the southwest. But, there are other notable connections between the memorial and Heizer's work, including the fact that *Reflecting Absence* and Heizer's earthworks attempt to stabilize and preserve a specific national identity. Heizer, through

his desert earthworks, is invested in establishing an artistic practice and visuals that are integrally tied to a landscape that is specifically and paradoxically American. Likewise, *Reflecting Absence* is tasked within reinforcing ideals—democracy, freedom, power—understood to be integral to America's founding principles and national identity. The appropriation of *NESW* is not arbitrary, or merely formal, but is instead an entirely apt choice for a memorial meant to recall an event that sought to challenge the founding assumptions and contemporary expression of American identity.

CHAPTER V

Monumentality

If *Reflecting Absence* is a memorial that functions as a monument, one could say that Heizer's earthworks are monuments that function as memorials for losses that have not yet occurred. In the work of Michael Heizer, pre-modern monumentality consciously reemerges in his deliberate attempt at permanence. Born the son of a renowned archeologist and professor, Richard Heizer, Michael Heizer spent his childhood traveling to excavation sites of Chitzen Itza, Mexico and the western United States with his father.[38] There is no question that Heizer's exposure to the architecture of the ancient world was deeply influential on both the aesthetics and the logic of his own monumental works. While he certainly takes the ancient world as inspiration, he was most impressed with the concept of the monumental as it engages with notions of permanence, commemoration, and loss.[39] From *Double Negative* to the sweeping scope of *City* [fig. 18] and implied permanence of the steel lining in *North, East, South, West*, Heizer's most evocative works are always monumental in scale and ambition, pointing, in Heizer's words, "to the future" even as they recall the past. [40]

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[38] Michael Heizer's personal history is rarely separated from his work. This is partially due to his own declarations about his sources. Heizer frequently connects the monumental structures of *City* to experiences on his father's excavations of ancient monuments. For more see Dana Goodyear, "The Earth Mover" *The New Yorker,* August 29, 2016, 64.

[39] Famously reclusive up until recently, Heizer, unlike his contemporary Robert Smithson, has never written about his own work. To that end, this interview that explores his relationship to ancient monuments and American monuments, is an essential resource for understanding his early intentions for his earthworks. Heizer, *Sculpture in Reverse* 36-37.

[40]Ibid, 34.

The underlining logic of the memorial is not so different from that of the monument, and they are frequently entangled with one another. Some scholars insist that separating memorial and monument is unproductive and that monuments are better thought of as a subset in the large practice of creating spaces for collective memory.[41] Memorials, though engaged in the monumental, take as a primary goal the representation of grief and collective loss. Memorials generally commemorate a person or persons who are gone, and the implication is often reverential and somber, even religious. The collective experience of viewing a memorial allows an individual's grief to find communal space. They also play a part in "constructing a sense of belonging to a national heritage."[42] Monuments and memorials both construct a portrait of a collective. However, collective identity and memory are never devoid of political tensions. Because they are structures where identity is defined, they are inherently political spaces and thus can be manipulated towards different socio-political agendas.

Memorial scholar James E. Young disparages the use of monumentality in memorials because the conflation of monument and memorial divests the viewer of "the obligation to remember."[43] The monumental memorial gives site-specificity to a cultural memory, excusing society from the chore of maintaining and learning from the memory.[44] The massive scale and national inflected rhetoric of *Reflecting Absence*, shifts the memorial towards the intentions of a monument.

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[41] James. E. Young. "Introduction: The Texture of Memory" in *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 2-3

[42] Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 6.

[43] James E. Young. "Memory, Countermemory, and the End of the Monument" in *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000, 94.

[44] Worse still, especially for post-World War I modernists, fixed monuments resisted the march of cultural mutability. Monumentality, because its resistance to time, upheld the pre-war ideals that modernist sought to break down. Like monuments after modernism, memorials underwent a marked shift after World War

Although written in 1943, Sigfried Giedion's "Nine Points on Monumentality" describes the function of monuments in ways that resonate with Heizer's investment in the memorial as a means of bridging the gap between the past and what's to come:

> Monuments are human landmarks which men have created as symbols for their ideals, for their aims, and for their actions. They are intended to outlive the period which originated them, and constitute a heritage for future generations. As such they form a link between the past and the future.[45]

Described by Giedion, the temporality of monuments is complex. Charged with the job of reflecting and fixing ideologies, monuments bridge and stabilize the distance between past and future through concrete visual form. Like the triumphal arches of Rome, Mount Rushmore and the National Mall, monuments are celebrations of victories, politics and heroes, and are usually in service of an enduring idea of the empire or country. [46] As structures built for the collective, monuments use reductive symbols to narrate or act as guiding visual symbols of cultural identity. Because of their size and unifying agenda, monuments are central to the creation of collective national ideologies. As a bridge between "past and the future," they allow the viewer to understand her position within an ideological framework and act as a guide or beacon for the future as a means of

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II, particularly in Europe. In fact, for several decades following the war, memorials were not built. The primary problem of post-World War II memorials was how to build a memorial to commemorate the Holocaust, an atrocity for which the nation-states of Europe were complicit. Young defines counter-monumentality, like The Hamburg Monument Against War and Fascism and for Peace, in Germany, whose design works to both commemorate loss and actively reject systems of oppression. Memorials of the 20th and 21st century face the challenge than of assigning singular or simple meaning to extremely complicated and challenging events

[45] Joan Ockman, "1943-1949" in *Architecture Culture 1943-1968*, (New York, NY: Rizzoli International Publications, 1993), 29.

[46] Monuments, like all cultural artifacts, have a changing historiography. After the world wars, architectural theorists attempted to reevaluate the purpose and ethical possibility of building monuments in the wake of Fascism's use of monuments as propaganda. Even functional modernist architects like Le Corbusier largely did away with monumental building practices because size rendered buildings too permanent and inflexible, characteristics that were perceived as anachronistic for the modern age that privilege adaptability and speed. Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 179.

establishing continuity. They position her towards collectively or nationally chosen ideals. To that end, monuments are, in effect, tools of orientation.

CHAPTER VI

Heizer and Orientation

As a title like *North, East, South West* makes clear: Heizer is an artist interested in the idea of orientation. But whereas traditional monuments and memorials provide a fixed point by which the spectator might find stability, Heizer's earthworks actively destabilize the viewer by blurring the boundaries between absence and presence and past and future. Concurrent with the rise of the Twin Towers were Michael Heizer first excavations into the landscape, resulting in his earliest earthworks. Indeed, *North, East, South, West*, when one takes into account both its first and second iterations, has an uncannily similar lifespan to the Twin Towers, which were, in their own right, a means of orientation, a point on the collective compass by which the world could locate the center of economic might. Hence, it is all the more provocative that in 1967, just one year after construction crews broke ground on the Towers and began the process of erecting these soaring vertical forms, Heizer, for the first time, began burrowing and creating voided sculptures, starting with the first iteration of *North, East, South, West* in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. *NESW* was, like most Heizer works, laid out along the horizontal, resisting the traditional verticality of sculpture. *North* [fig. 19] was created first and was also two stacked cubes, though it only measured four feet by four feet.[47] To name something *North* is indicative of an upwards direction, yet Heizer's work does the opposite, tunneling down. *NESW* does not follow the directional logic of its own title, thereby resisting the viewer's desire to map the work and the land by extension. By all

[47] Boettger, *Earthworks,* 109.

accounts, this disorienting sculpture, and therein, the form called *North*, served as a beginning for Heizer, marking the first time he worked with spaces that articulated not presence, but absence, a theme that he has carried through most of his career.

As previously stated, *North, East, South, West* (2002) at Dia: Beacon is the second edition of the work and, in many ways, a return by Heizer to his genesis as an earthworks artist.[48] The original iteration of *NESW* has been long lost to erosion – both because it was constructed with materials that broke down and because no attempt was made at preservation. Yet, both versions were laid out in a line and used the same four, basic shapes. In many ways, the first version was a prototype for the Dia version, permanently rendered in steel and concrete in a large indoor gallery. The name of *NESW* suggests a cyclical logic, as the title reads clockwise between the points of a compass, yet the deep depressions are laid out in a solemn row. Confusing the orientation further is the fact that the depressions are not laid out in the order articulated by the title. Read from left to right the order and inverted shapes are as follows: *North* (double-stacked cube), *South* (cone), *West* (triangular prism) and *East* (a cone). Thus, the shapes are not to be read like the movement between points on a compass, as an orienting tool. Instead the shapes, alone and when read in conjunction with their title, are distinctly and deliberately disorienting, creating distance between mapped and actual space.[49] This disorientation is compounded by the vertiginous feeling of approaching the edge of the voids.

NESW is only fully approachable under the supervision of a museum attendant. Standing at the sharp edge of each void induces a sense of vertigo. As with all

[48] Heizer rejects the title of earthworks or land artist entirely, claiming his work is not concerned with land, but with space and scale. Heizer, *Sculpture in Reverse,* 37.
[49] "Michael Heizer: North, East, South, West 1967/2002," Dia: Beacon, www.diaart.org/collection/collection/heizer-michael-north-east-south-west-19672002-2003-174-1-4, (February, 18, 2016).

components of this work, *North* is unsettling for even at the very edge of the shape, a full glimpse of the bottom of the inset cube is always obscured. For most people the glass barrier, set back nearly ten feet from the edges, provides a safe distance for viewing the voids. Yet, in some ways, the barrier heightens the feeling of fear. If one could approach the edge, one could at least attempt to witness the bottom, though the shadows cast by the sides would make a full appreciation of the space impossible. When standing at a distance, the glass barrier provides a similar conclusion; at no angle may the voids be viewed in whole. *North, East, South, West* is simultaneously awe-inspiring and profoundly disturbing, and the illusionary effect and the severe edges of the shapes force the viewer into a state of perpetual disorientation. Thus, despite their title that reassuringly implies a map, the shapes resist mastery at every angle.

Unlike the *NESW*, comprised of voids that resist directional logic, the voids that comprise Arad's *Reflecting Absence* are set in the exact position of their fallen predecessors, though they are thirty percent smaller.[50] The pools are named the *North Pool* and the *South Pool,* though unlike *NESW*, they are named for the points on the compass to which they and the original buildings correspond. The pools are easy to circumnavigate without any sense of disorientation.[51] *Reflecting Absenc*e then, positions the viewer within the grid of New York City, creating a thoroughly grounded space that reestablishes the previous spatial locations of the World Trade Center. If Heizer's *NESW* disorients its viewers, then *Reflecting Absence* attempts to reinstate order by recreating

[50] Senie, *Memorials to Shattered Myths*, 157.
[51] In *Reflecting Absence*, because the North shape does not have the severe edge, it is less likely to inspire a profound discomfort, but the monumental scale of the voids is impressive and the second voids are equally as unknowable as the shadowed inversions in the Heizer iteration. Like *NESW Reflecting Absence's* design also prevents a viewer from seeing the bottom of the second voided space and the water slips down to unknown depth.

the spatial dynamics of New York City prior to the attacks. While the Towers are not reestablished on the skyline, their foundation remains at the heart of the financial district, structures that New Yorkers and tourists must navigate and acknowledge.[52]

Thus, *NESW* and *Reflecting Absence* use the void to different effect, a discrepancy I will return to in the conclusion. First, it must be acknowledged that if *Reflecting Absence* is the response to the disorienting events of 9/11, then Heizer's earthworks are responding to a similarly volatile moment, as further examination of his desert installations can attest.

[52] There is one memorial that returns the Twin Towers to the skyline of New York City. *Tribute in Light*, a projection of twin beams of light in the former position of the towers occurs once every year.

CHAPTER VII

Disorientation in Millennial America

Heizer's obsession with monumentality, American artistic identity, and death derive from fear.[53] In the desert with one eye on the end of the world, Heizer, by his own account, was making work that could withstand the pending, nuclear apocalypse. In fact, a frantic undercurrent of doom also overhung the broader millennial mindset of the latter half of the 20th century and, importantly, the advent and heyday of earthworks (1967-74) coincided with this cataclysmic moment in American history.[54] The fallout from the Vietnam War, the failure of the counter culture movement of the sixties, rising crime rates and the continuing Cold War were all contemporaneous with Heizer's first monumental works, including *North, East, South, West* (1967), *Double Negative* (1969), *Displaced/Replaced Mass* (1969) and *City* (1972-). Additionally, the 1970s saw a rise in millennial cults whose paranoid preparations are echoed in Heizer's language when describing the start of *City* [fig. 18], citing nuclear war and inevitable doom as justification for the permanence and size of his complex.[55] These works also marked the first time Heizer used blasting and large construction machines to carve into the earth, entangling Heizer's pieces with the threat of military violence.[56] In fact, a sublimated violence is inherent in Heizer's work for he carves great cuts into the earth, like perpetual wounds that are not allowed to close, their steel linings rendering them permanent and

[53] "Part of my art is based on an awareness that we live in a nuclear era. We're probably living at the end of civilization." Heizer, *Sculpture in Reverse,* 16.
[54] Boettger, *Earthworks*, 27.
[55] Heizer, *Sculpture in Reverse,* 13.
[56] Yates McKeee, "Land Art in Parallax", 48.

timeless. Heizer's obsession with permanence, particularly in *City,* is proactively linked to his belief in an imminent apocalypse.

September 11th is considered by several theorists, including Jean Baudrillard, to be an apocalyptic moment, causing a cataclysmic shift in the order of the Western world. The contemporary national narrative of the United States is now divided into a before and after the events of 9/11. According to Baudrillard, 9/11 was an event anticipated by the paranoiac and destruction-obsessed western culture of the later 20th century. He provocatively claims that the events of 9/11, though tragic, were actually longed for by the western world, as evident by the 1990s obsession with disaster movies that feature the destruction of iconic buildings (including the Twin Towers) and the rise of paranoiac cults prepping for the end of the millennium.[57]

Of the earthworks artists, Heizer alone employed a specifically apocalyptic rhetoric and confessed his 1984 interview to his preoccupation with an apocalyptic future: "I knew I was doing something new…In my case this sensibility was based on a feeling that we were coming close to the end of the world. The idea of living in the post-nuclear age informed everything, the clock was ticking—Vietnam had threatened everybody and it was time to get to the point."[58] *City* and the second version of *NESW*, whose construction also works towards permanence, are Heizer's attempt to resist what

[57] These apocalyptic longings can also be seen in the mainstream culture of pre-9/11 United States. The popularity of blockbuster movies like *Armageddon* (1998)—a film whose opening sequence features a meteor shower that damages the Twin Towers in an uncannily similar pattern as the planes—and *Fight Club* (1999) seem to attest to a desire for cataclysmic change. *Fight Club* is a provocative example primarily because the final act of the main character Tyler Durden is to blow up skyscrapers related to finance and credit card debt. Both the fictional Durden and the 9/11 terrorists chose as their targets, centers of fiscal power as a means of exposing the exclusionary and pacifying system of capitalism. Baudrillard, *Requiem for the Twin Towers*, 2002.
[58] Heizer. *Sculpture in Reverse,* 11.

he perceives as inevitable doom. Heizer's monumental works defend against inevitable loss, by attempting to leave a mark of the past for the future.

Nowhere in Heizer's oeuvre is his engagement with monumentality so overt as in *City* [fig. 20-22] 1972-*,* nor more apocalyptic in purpose. *City* has been Heizer's obsession for the last four decades, and after its projected completion in 2020, it will likely be considered Heizer's magnum opus and the largest sculpture ever built.[59] *City*, like *Double Negative*, is in the remote desert of Nevada and is thus in dialogue with several notable sites, including the Nevada Test Site and Area 51. *City* is also close enough to the Nilhes Air Force base to warrant the occasional fighter jet sighting followed by a sonic boom.[60] A mile and half long and a quarter mile wide, *City* is a series of "complexes" spread out across long stretches of raked gravel. *Complex I* [fig.18] was completed in 1972 and takes its visual inspiration from the pyramid of Zoser [fig. 23] in Egypt and pre-Columbian monuments of Mexico. Made of reinforced concrete, packed earth, excavated onsite, *Complex I* sinks about 23 feet below ground level. As one moves around the building, the lines of the protruding, limb-like concrete forms change shape, melding and separating from one another through visual trickery. It is also massive in scale and stands at 110 feet tall. *Complex I* and *Complex II* [fig. 22] are all at once ancient and modern forms.

City, as a whole and as individual sculptural structures, is meant to function like monuments that connect past and future, and in their aesthetic and durability, they reflect this function. However, it is unclear what they are monuments *to*. Heizer says, "It takes a very specific audience to like this stupid primordial shit I do. I like runic, Celtic, Druidic,

[59] Because access to *City* is currently restricted, I rely on descriptions by critics and scholars who have been among the lucky few to enter the forbidden site.
[60] Goodyear. "The Earth Mover,"66.

cave painting, ancient preliterate, from a time back when you were speaking to the lightning god, the ice god and the cold-rainwater god."[61] Formally, the complexes are both ancient and modern. If they take their form from ancient precedents, the grey concrete and pristine geometric lines are distinctly modern and recall the smooth surfaces of Donald Judd's boxes and Carl Andre's gridded plains. Like the shifting shapes that define their forms, the complexes of *City* seem to melt and slip between the past, present and future; in their malleable aesthetic, they are intentionally situated outside of time. The timelessness of *City* is also heightened by the lack of and impossibility of habitation; it could be a long abandoned pre-historic site or futuristic complex awaiting new residents. Additionally, the construction of the *City* complexes makes them incredibly durable. In fact, *Complex One* is designed to withstand a nuclear blast, an abstract threat if it were not for proximity of the Nuclear Test Site used in the Cold War to test the nihilistic bombs. [62]

However, it is not just their size and construction that betray an apocalyptic mindset. Traditionally, the apocalypse is both an end and a beginning; a moment that destroys, but in its wake, wipes the slate clean for something new. Heizer's *City* complexes produce a similar slippage in time, referring to both the past and a to-be-determined future. *City* follows a contemporaneous trend of the late 20th century outlined by Andreas Huyssen, who notes that "the United States and Europe kept building museums and memorials as if haunted by the fear of some imminent traumatic loss." Heizer, though he always calls his works sculpture, resisting their architectonic qualities, seems to be engaged in a similar mindset, building *City* in anticipation of loss and

[61] Ibid, 63.
[62] *City* is within range of the Nevada Nuclear Test site and an air force base. Goodyear, "The Earth Mover", 66.

preparation for the future. To that end, *City* is paradoxical: an acknowledgment of an inevitable end *and* an attempt to resist. Likewise, *Reflecting Absence* both memorializes the losses of 9/11 while, via its monumental intention, simultaneously struggles against the implications of the event. It is both an acknowledgement and a warning against the very event it recalls.

I draw out the parallel timeline between *City*, *NESW*, 9/11 and the memorial to the destructive fantasies that underline 20th century America because it suggests that this desire was implicit in the culture from the time of the original *NESW* onward. In using Heizer as visual reference—an artist whose work admits to longing for or is built in anticipation of destructive events—the memorial design confesses in its very architecture to Baudrillard's claim that "somewhere, [western culture/America] was party to its own destruction."[63] *NESW*, developed by Heizer under the apocalyptic feelings of the late 60s, serves as the visual reference for the memorial that effectively commemorates and makes permanent the longed-for end of the millennium.[64]

[63] Ibid, 34.
[64] Andrea Huyseen. *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. London, UK: Routledge, 1994. 5.

CHAPTER VIII

Death

A major part of the controversy surrounding any design for the memorial was whether to demarcate the footprints of both towers. The space required to mark both footprints is massive and some thought it would take up too much valuable real estate in downtown Manhattan. But many, including the 9/11 families consider the footprints "sacred" and so the choice to include both pools was mostly embraced. However, what is curious about the footprints, as Marita Struken points out, is that they falsify the nature of the architecture. Underneath the towers was a large open space, not distinguished by the two buildings, but an underground plaza. The voids recall footprints that were never actually there. Like graves, the voids are footprints that were dug, not excavated into the ground.[65]

Through their grave shaped voids and violent construction, *Double Negative* and *City* allude to death, but works like *Displaced/Replaced Mass*, 1969 [fig. 24-25] and *NESW* make explicit reference to the subject. Considered by Heizer to be his first object-based sculpture, *Displaced/ Replaced Mass* was comprised of three rectangular depressions nearly 23 feet long and five feet deep in the Nevada Desert.[66] Inside each depression was a large granite boulder. Each boulder was arranged slightly differently within its respective depressions; 1 of 3 laid flush in the hole like a body and 2 of 3 lay on their sides and crested the rims. The association to a body or coffin in its grave is

[65] For more about the oddity of demarcating the footprints of the tower see Marita Struken's, "The Aesthetics of Absence: Rebuilding Ground Zero," 317-19.
[66] Celant, *Michael Heizer*, xxv.

inescapable here and Heizer himself likens the work to Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb,*1520 [fig. 26]. [67] The viewer would have stood above the work, observing the granite bodies, and while a ramped side allowed the viewer to approach the stone, the act must have felt like entering a tomb, a descent into the landscape like the entrance of *Double Negative*. But, like a grave, these voids and their contents no longer exist as discrete entities, as they have slowly deteriorated and refilled over the years. Unlike the voids of *Double Negative*, here Heizer has allowed these voids to fill, and this aspect of their evolution implies the act of burial.[68]

Returning to *Reflecting Absence* and the debt it owes to Heizer, we might do well to remember that *Reflecting Absence* and the whole World Trade Center is, in fact, a mass grave. A concerted effort was made in the weeks and months following the collapse of the towers to carefully collect all human remains, a nearly impossible task given the destruction of the buildings. Downtown Manhattan was coated in a fine white dust, a substance that came to represent according to Struken, "the material remains of the bodies of the dead."[69] Thus, *Reflecting Absence* is tasked with memorializing not just the event but to act, in part, as a site-specific tomb. Like *Displaced/ Replaced Mass* and *NESW*, both of which insist the viewer consider the possibility of death, *Reflecting Absence,* in using the *North* shape is also, more straightforwardly, a tomb, heightened by the presence of the deceased.

[67] Ruth Fine, *Michael Heizer: Alters*. New York, (NY: Gagosian and Rizzoli Publications, 2016), 155.
[68] Like *NESW*, *Displaced/Replaced Mass* had interior version installed at Ace Gallery in 1977 and 1994. It should also be noted that Heizer's opinion of on the preservation of *Double Negative* has shifted over the years. Originally, he meant the work to deteriorate and disappear, but in his recent interview in the New Yorker, he expressed a desire to resort it. Goodyear, "The Earth Mover", 67.
[69] Struken, *The Aesthetics of Absence*, 312.

Thus, if *City* is meant to stand as monument, the voids of *Displaced/Replaced Mass* and *NESW* testify to the necessity of monuments by recalling the prospect of death, entombment, and disintegration. But unlike *Displaced/Replace Mass*, *NESW* and *Reflecting Absence* are built to resist weathering and are empty in perpetuity. In this way, they do not just recall death, but are evidence of the inescapable fact of death, as permanent voids that are impossible to fill. The fountains of *Reflecting Absence* then are simultaneously a monument that insists on the resurrection of America's lost past and a memorial, reflective of the enduring void left by the fallen towers and its occupants.

CONCLUSION

By way of concluding, I return briefly to the theme of orientation. As I have argued, *NESW* and Heizer's large-scale earthworks in the American West alter perceptions of scale to disorient the viewer in relation to landscape by creating works that cannot be wholly observed or mastered from a traditional viewer position. But in *Reflecting Absence*, the voided cube in effect enables a kind of mastery over the events of 9/11 because it is an easy referent to the former towers and because it reestablishes the spatial dynamics of pre-9/11 New York. Heizer's works betray an investment in permanence and thus a resistance to or even mastery over time and death. Likewise, Arad's *Reflecting Absence*, as a monumental memorial, is a design that orients the viewer in such a way as to resist and defend against the losses of that day and, consequently, the implications of the apocalyptic events of 9/11.

Reflecting Absence, reflects a melding of two ideas, at once a memorial for lives lost and a monument for the ideologies the Towers represented. Put otherwise, *Reflecting Absence* commemorates the loss of life, while at the same time commemorating the loss of a historical moment, a specific way of ordering the world. The language by which *Reflecting Absence* describes that great loss of life and of symbolic indestructibility is tied, not just to absence, but also to the idea of American exceptionalism. The Towers, according to Baudrillard, were symbolic of the superiority of western global capitalist culture and simultaneously, a failure precisely because of their twinship -- buildings that could not be topped because they were built as mirror images which locked progress into

a loop.[70] By insisting that both towers be represented in the exact footprints, thus sublimating their former presence as absence, the towers and the system of global capitalism for which they stood are resurrected in the very memorial that mourns their loss. It is partially through using Michael Heizer's visual language that *Reflecting Absence* becomes not just a memorial, but also a monument that attempts to resist and rectify the trauma of the 9/11, to recreate a space that cannot be violated by time or terror.

Heizer's sculptures have a specific and permanent goal: to act, like all monuments, as beacon in the future of the past. Using a simple, stark aesthetic infused with ancient influences, Heizer's sculptures are constructed for durability, and by placing them in the desert, they read as timeless, objects to be read in the present moment, while conjuring the past and the future. But because his sculptures are infused with a paranoiac preparation for the perceived end of days they are paradoxical. He creates them in anticipation of apocalypse so that they may withstand the event. Thus, by their creation they ward against the very moment they anticipate. In time, this same style was used to mark and memorialize an unforeseen, but arguably hoped for, apocalyptic event at the end of the millennium. *Reflecting Absence* is also a paradoxical monument, for while it is a memorial to loss and absence, it is equally, even desperately, a monument to presence and permanence. Therein rests the lie of the function of memorial, that while the nation sought desperately to return to the safety of a pre-9/11 world were America stood apart and untouchable, the memorial paradoxically renders permanent the event *and the desire to negate it*, and thus testifies to an impossible longing to return to a per-9/11 way of orienting America's global position.

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[70] Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism,* 52.

The original version of *NESW* emerged out of an era in America marked by a fundamental reordering of national identity under the heavy, apocalyptic cloud of the post-nuclear age. The second edition of *NESW* and *Reflecting Absence* emerged three decades later under a similar crisis of national identity and end-of-times rhetoric. Unlike Heizer's piece, which is meant to be disorienting in its awe-inspiring severity and magnitude, the reflecting pools are meant to be reordering. Using Heizer's visual language of monumental absence to create spaces that are meant to withstand all tests of time, the architects endowed the 9/11 memorial with a monumental, ideological presence. However, in creating both pools and naming them in their logical points on the compass the design stepped away from one of the most intriguing aspects of *NESW*. The reorienting of the shapes in Heizer's piece is meant to point to a new direction, a new way conceiving of space for the future. The doubling of the pools in the exact shadow of the towers at their appropriate cardinal directions points looks backward, not forward. If Heizer's piece was meant to be disorienting and to upend the status quo, *Reflecting Absence* is meant to do precisely the opposite: to reinstate what was by sublimating the absent towers, to reclaim the temporarily shaken ideology that collapsed with the towers. The 9/11 Memorial stands for what was lost and for what Americans insist they still have; it is a memorial, but more so, a monument to a historical, ideological moment of premillennial America.

FIGURES

Figure 1. Michael Arad & Peter Walker, *Reflecting Absence*, 2005-2011

Figure 2. Michael Arad & Peter Walker, *North Pool,* 2005-2011

Figure 3. Michael Arad & Peter Walker, Detailed view of names on *Reflecting Absence*, 2005-2011

Figure 4. Michael Arad & Peter Walker, South Pool, 2005-2011

Figure 5. Freedom Tower, New York City, NY

Figure 6. Twin Towers, New York City, NY

Figure 7. Michael Heizer, *North, East, South, West*, 2002

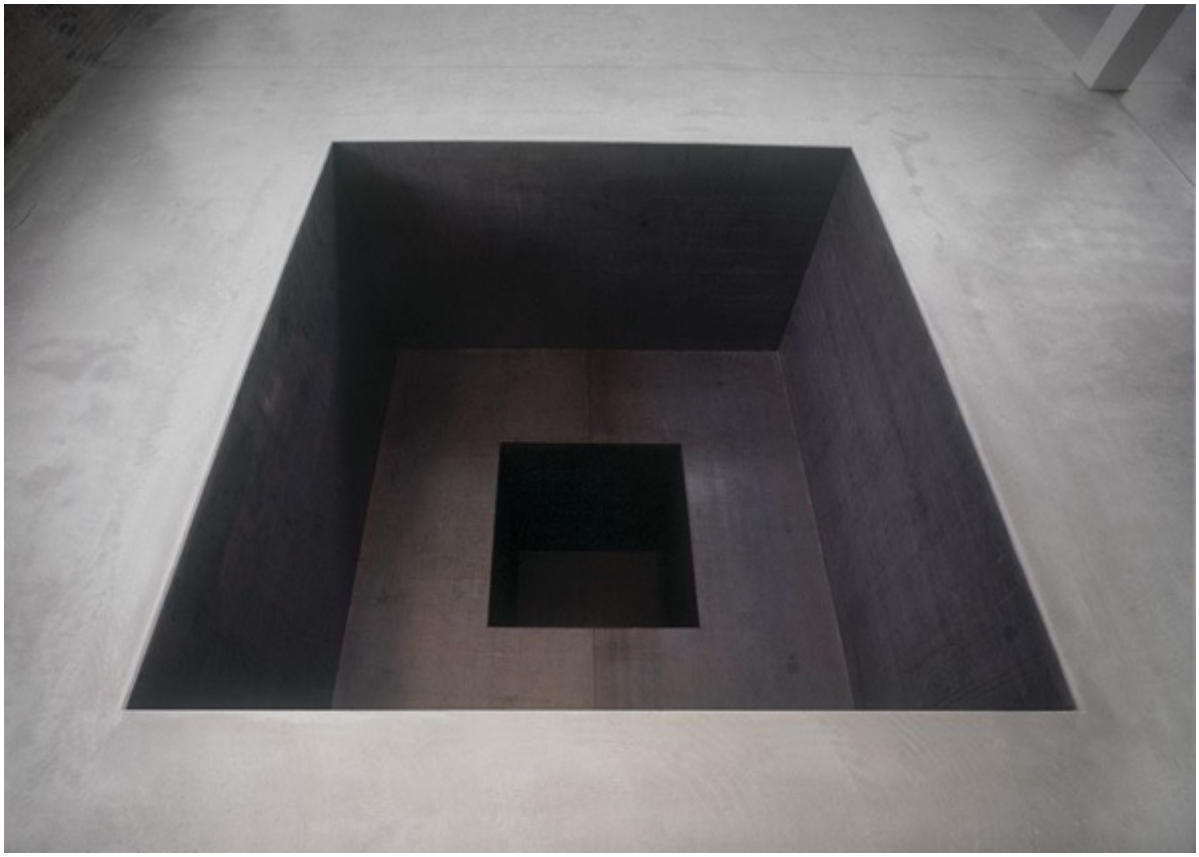

Figure 8. Michael Heizer, *North,* 2002

Figure 9. Maya Lin, “Vietnam Veterans Memorial”, 1982

Figure 10. Henry Bacon, “Lincoln Memorial”, 1922

Figure 11. “Oklahoma City National Memorial”, 2001

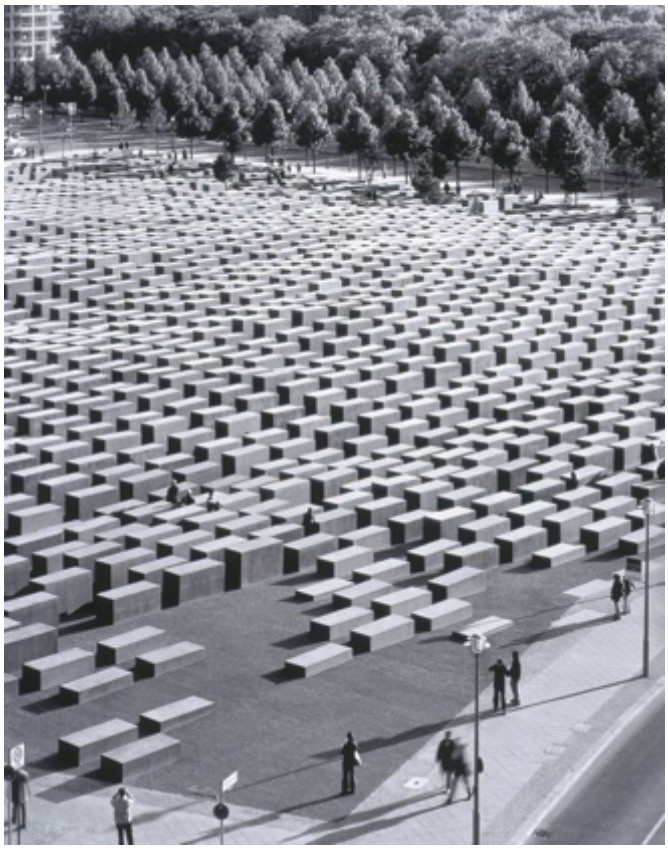

Figure 12. Peter Eisenman, “Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe”, 2005

Figure 13. Michael Heizer, *Double Negative*, 1969, Overton, NV

Figure 14. Mormon Mesa and the Virgin Mountains, Nevada

Figure 15. Michael Heizer, view from the southern cut of *Double Negative*, 1969

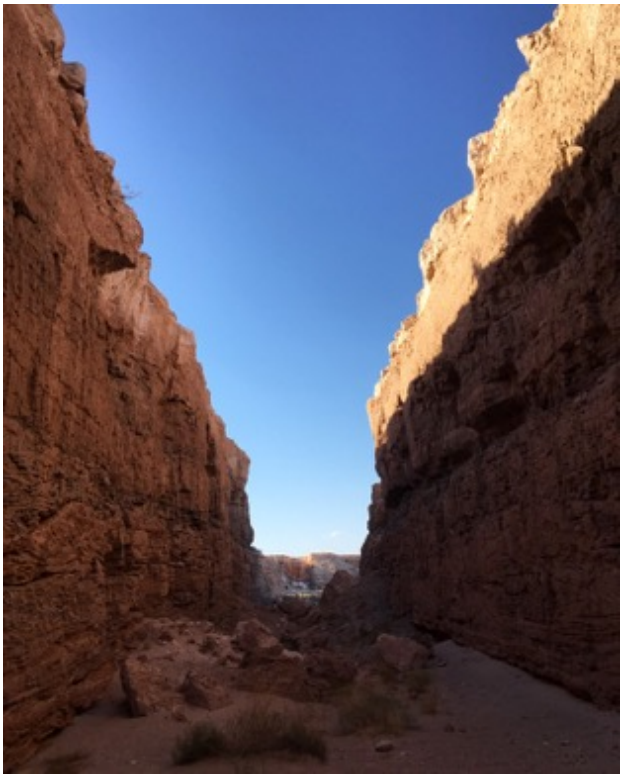

Figure 16. Michael Heizer, floor of the southern cut of *Double Negative*, 1969

Figure 17. Michael Heizer, satellite view of *Double Negative*, 1969

Figure 18. Michael Heizer, aerial view of *City*, 1972-present

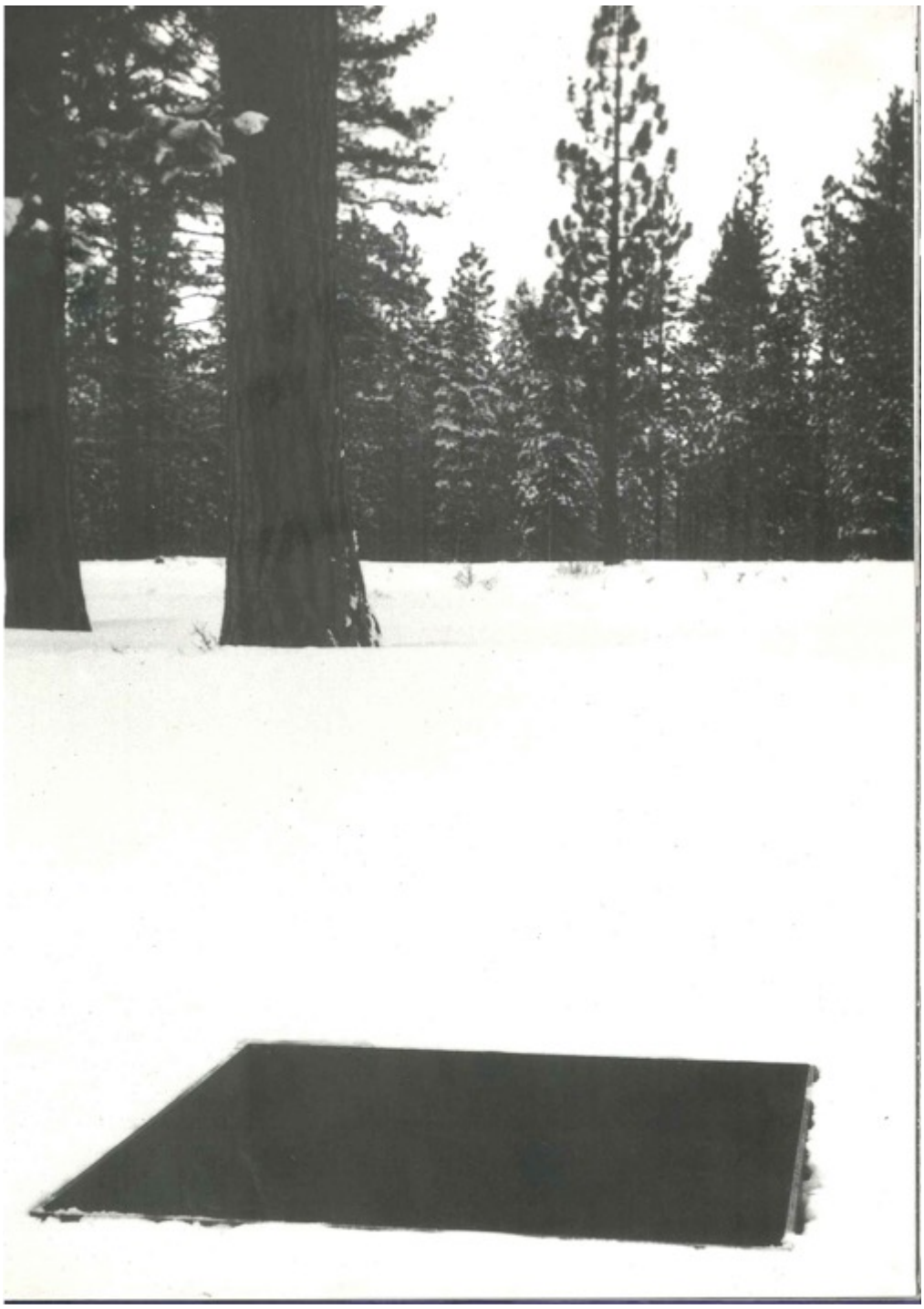

Figure 19. Michael Heizer, *North* of *North, East, South, West*, 1967

Figure 20. Michael Heizer, *Complex I* of *City*, 1972

Figure 21. Michael Heizer, *45°, 90°, 180°,* of *City*, 1972

Figure 22. Michael Heizer, *Complex II* of *City*, 1972

Figure 23. Stepped Pyramid of Zoser, 27th c. BCE

Figure 24. Michael Heizer, *Displaced/ Replaced Mass*, 1969

Figure 25. Michael Heizer, alternative view of *Displaced/ Replaced Mass*, 1969

Figure 26. Hans Holbein, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, 1520-22

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