Negative Space(s)

"But there might be a time of solidarity; in the land of blue flowers"

Lisa Blas



Figure 1. A pedestal in Baltimore that had held a statue of the former Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, author of the Dred Scott decision, until 2017. Photo by Mark Wilson, Getty Images.

The subtitle of my paper is derived from a mixed-media work by Iimmie Durham entitled Snake *Eves!* that I saw in his retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2017.1 A painting on canvas made with various found objects and diverse materials from his studio, it is a visual constellation of shapes and fragments of text handwritten across the painting's surface. The negative space, a grisaille background of chalky grey-white color, binds the ephemeral and diverse elements together in an abstract field. In art production, negative space is defined as the space that surrounds the object or

objects in an image, adding balance to a composition. In public art, the plinth is part of the negative space that constitutes the sculpture's surrounding environment. Durham's grisaille background is thus a space akin to the plinth that structurally supports the work and its identifying marks or language.

My essay proceeds from the vacant plinths that remain once monuments are removed or destroyed and examines how we might envision negative spaces as the future of public art (fig. 1).² Decommissioned historical monuments provide an opportunity to reimagine negative spaces, guided by past examples of earthworks

that show concern for the environment. Looking back to women artists working in land art from the 1960s to the 1980s. I will provide examples that holistically integrate art, space, and landscape. Rather than serial interventions stemming from minimalist strategies, the work of women artists in land art predates the ecological movement that has radically shifted our relationship to the environment. There now exists a pedagogical moment to direct the public's attention toward parallel concerns: (1) listing a complete history of each monument and the relationship to its original site, and (2) linking the debate over future historical commemoration in public space with the monument's environmental impact. To begin we must first shift our attention to fraught histories and current events in order to foreground these possibilities.

Recent outbreaks of violence throughout the United States in the form of neo-Nazi rallies and marches; shootings of African Americans by police officers; riots following the acquittals of police officers accused of wrongdoing; clashes with government contractors and Native American protestors at Standing Rock; harassment of minorities by extremists; the shooting of nine people in a Charleston, South Carolina, church; and the growing alt-right movement online have prompted an urgent debate around the legacy of white supremacy and its representation within the culture at large.³

After the violence that unfolded in Charlottesville, Virginia, when the group *Unite the Right* marched against the removal of the Robert E. Lee monument from Emancipation Park, the simmering issue of whether to remove Confederate monuments from public spaces boiled over.⁴ As with the shootings of unarmed African-American men in Ferguson and

other cities, outbreaks of civil unrest are also instantly recorded and shared on social media.5 As images of the chaos in Charlottesville began circulating on the Internet, public pressure to take down Confederate monuments reached a breaking point. 6 Such pressure yielded defacement, destruction, and then legal removal of monuments authorized by mayors from Baltimore to New Orleans while armed guards protected crews in the middle of the night.7 It was clear that there was a cause-and-effect relationship between the emboldened threats and violent acts perpetrated by white supremacist groups against minorities and the cultural attachment by such groups to symbols of the Confederacy in public spaces. For some Americans the Confederacy represents an important chapter in American history bound up in regional or familial heritage.8 They interpret the removal of these symbols as a violation of such heritage and an erasure of historical record by government intervention.

The vandalism and removal of monuments has reached beyond our borders to countries such as South Africa and Belgium, where legitimate challenges are being raised about commemorative sculptures that disavow a nation's history of colonialism, slavery, and oppression. 9 In New York City, a public letter addressed to Mayor Bill de Blasio, signed by artists and academics, asked for the removal of several monuments, including the Christopher Columbus statue at Columbus Circle. After a public hearing and survey put forth to local residents. Mayor de Blasio ordered the J. Marion Sims monument in Harlem to be removed and sent to Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn.¹⁰ (Note: this decision comes on the heels of a ten-year effort by Marina Ortiz of the East Harlem Preservation

Society, artists, and local activists). As monuments continue to be removed, the negative spaces will become the next subject of debate. How should history be re-presented in contemporary public life today?



Figure 2. The Institute for Wishful Thinking, *The Speculum Project: Speculum Installation*, 2016, made of three altered speculums etched with quotes from the writings of Dr. J. Marion Sims, vitrines, and lights. The quotes read, (left to right): "If the Vagina and outlet are ordinarily capacious a good strong northern light of clear day from a large solitary window is sufficient"; "Everything Ready to Commence the season of philosophical experiment"; and "The handle is made strong and unyielding because a considerable degree of leverage has to be exercised by it the curve being cushioned to prevent hurting the finger." Photo credit: Tommy Mintz.

New York artist Maureen Connor and the artist collaborative the Institute for Wishful Thinking have grappled with this question over the last several years, as it pertains to the J. Marion Sims monument in Harlem and monuments in Columbia, South Carolina. In 2016 the Institute for Wishful Thinking mounted a multimedia installation, *The Speculum Project*, (fig. 2) at Project: ARTspace in New York City. The exhibition consisted of a pedagogical slideshow illuminating the history behind gynecological medicine and Dr. Sims's experimentation on enslaved African-American women in the nineteenth

century. The complex history of Sims, who opened the first hospital for women in the US, is unveiled through several speculums engraved with quotes from Sims's writing that reveal his indifference to the pain his patients experienced. The slideshow introduces three women, Anarcha, Betsey, and Lucy—known only by their first names—who suffered without anesthesia under Sims's care. In a proactive stance, the Institute for Wishful Thinking suggests the creation of scholarships to medical schools in the names of Anarcha, Betsey, and Lucy and a redesign of the traditional speculum by women doctors. At the exhibition's conclusion, the group mounted a panel discussion led by artist Xenobia Bailey, transforming the white cube of the gallery into a site of social practice and community outreach.

In 2015 the Institute for Wishful Thinking produced the work *Awkward* Moment in Columbia, SC, The Game. 11 In this instance, the group collaborated with the game-design company Tiltfactor to fabricate a board game that asks players to learn repressed histories about monuments surrounding the state capitol. Using the map of downtown Columbia as a background, the game draws attention to various symbols to the Confederacy and other figures with controversial biographies. It places players in direct confrontation with details about local history and, through the game, gives them the power to change such history. Once an equestrian monument or portrait is removed from its plinth or center, a negative space remains and an opportunity to reassess the use of public space designated for cultural or historical memory arrives.¹²

In the wake of recent events, the absence of women from the historical fabric of commemorative sculpture

cannot be ignored. While there are several monuments throughout American cities honoring the brave deeds of politicians and generals, there is minimal visual presence of the contributions made by women. One example is the commemorative monument on the Antietam National Battlefield in Maryland in honor of Clara Barton, a Civil War nurse whose efforts led to the formation of the American Red Cross. Rather than a figurative sculpture or portrait mounted above eve level, Barton's monument is made from a portion of the chimney of her home and is mounted upon a lowlying plinth near the roadway.¹³

In the October 11, 2016, issue of the New Yorker, writer Rebecca Solnit unveiled an MTA subway map with women's names replacing the names of men after whom New York City and the surrounding borough subway stations had been named. Featured in her forthcoming book *Nonstop Metropolis: A* New York City Atlas (which Solnit coauthored with Joshua Jelly-Schapiro), the map is a potent re-imagination of public space from the position of gender.14 Solnit writes, "A horde of dead men with live identities haunt New York City and almost every city in the Western world. Their names are on the streets, buildings, parks, squares, colleges, businesses, and banks, and their figures are on the monuments."15

On Solnit's map, the great photographer and filmmaker Helen Levitt and Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg are adjacent to each other on the N and Q subway lines. There are activists, writers, and political figures, such as Linda Sarsour and Janet Yellen, at the end of the R line in Brooklyn, and Abigail Adams and Toni Morrison at the edge of downtown, off the 1 line.

The naming of these women on a revised subway map brings to mind the thousands of names inscribed on Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans memorial (the first departure from the figurative sculptural tradition honoring soldiers of American wars) in Washington, DC.16 As the shiny black-granite slabs cut into the landscape of the National Mall and meet at an angle, your body descends and ascends with them, making you aware of their phenomenological properties and physical correspondence with the earth. This relationship to space and to the surrounding environment is where women artists working in and around land art enter the frame. If we are to imagine negative space and its future potential, it is useful to look back in time at earthworks from the 1960s-1980s, extending from the legacy of feminism, ecology, minimalism, and land art.



Figure 3. Nancy Holt, *Sun Tunnels*, 1973–76, Great Basin Desert, Utah, © Holt/Smithson Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: Nancy Holt. The tunnels are aligned with the sun on the horizon (the sunrises and sunsets) on the solstices.

From 1973-1976, Nancy Holt constructed Sun Tunnels in the Great Basin Desert in Utah (fig. 3).¹⁷ To date, it is the first permanent work of land art by a woman artist acquired by the DIA Foundation. Made of four concrete cylinders, eighteen feet long, with a diameter of nine feet, the work is arranged like an open cross, and aligned to frame the sun on the horizon during the summer and winter solstices. Each cylinder / tunnel is perforated by a series of holes ¹⁸ that correspond to stars— Capricorn, Columba, Draco and Perseus and allow for shadows cast by the sun to illuminate the earth's rotation.¹⁹ The ability to view light from the interior and exterior of this work, and at different apertures, places the earth and sky on similar planes of visual experience. Newgrange, the Neolithic monument built in 3,200 BCE by Stone Age farmers in Boyne Valley, Ireland, functions similarly on the winter solstice when the rising sun floods the twenty-one-yard passage and chamber with light.²⁰ In both instances, astron-omical and environmental alignments are made visible through earthworks constructed with materials from the ancient world or from modern times.

In 1982 Agnes Denes created the site-specific work *Wheatfield—A* confrontation (fig. 4) at the Battery Park City landfill prior to its development as a thriving downtown neighborhood. In an iconic photograph, Denes is captured walking through a dense two-acre crop with the Twin Towers in the background. Thanks to a Public Art Fund-sponsored series, "The Urban Environmental Site Program," Denes transformed a multibillion-dollar unused dumpsite into a field of sustainable agriculture that yielded one thousand pounds of wheat.²¹ Planted with nonindigenous seeds, the

wheat articulated the growth of edible plants and was maintained by Denes and her assistants over a four-month period.



Figure 4. Agnes Denes, Wheatfield–A Confrontation (aerial view), 1982, Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan. Copyright Agnes Denes, courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, New York.

In the same neighborhood of Battery Park City ten years earlier, Mary Miss created *Untitled (Battery Park)* (1973), a series of wood panels installed on rough landfill, approximately fifty feet apart, with circular disks cut out to suggest a physical gradation of the disappearance of the sun. The project was an exercise in perspective, which Miss characterizes on her website as follows: "All the bulk of a traditional monument or monolith had been cut away from this temporary work. The viewer was engaged in the making of the piece; movement was necessary for it to become visible."²²

In 2013 Mary Miss unveiled a City As Living Laboratory project *Broadway:* 1,000 STEPS, an activist artwork that engages Broadway as a green corridor of New York. It features twenty different locations along Broadway, where each site is meant to educate the viewer about issues of sustainability and the environment. The Graham Foundation

website describes the components of the installation as

convex mirrors with diagrams [that] can be used to focus on a particular piece of street hardware. By colorcoding the street hardware, and catching its reflection in a convex mirror, explanatory text or diagrams can be provided in an attached colorcoded disc. This strategy engages the viewer by reflecting their image in the context of the decoded built environment.... Brightly colored lime-green posts and fences will call attention to the hub as pedestrians approach, defining a force field within which curiosity will be aroused and awareness augmented.23

To highlight this initiative, Miss's proposal for white-painted roofs along Broadway as a working ecosystem creates a dramatic line of sight seen in aerial perspective, envisioning the environmental future of New York (fig. 5).



Figure 5. Mary Miss, *Proposal for White Roofs on Broadway*, CALL/ Broadway: 1000 Steps, 2012, Photo credit: Mary Miss.

Performance creates a similar line of sight in *A Line As Long As a Bag of Lime* (1970) by artist Lizbeth Marano. In this work consisting of three documentary

photographs, the artist, while walking across a barren desert field, pours a trail of lime, a material that will eventually fade into the earth and disappear.²⁴ The work lasts as long as the material, drawing a very close resemblance to *The Green Line* (2004) by Francis Alÿs, where he walks while dripping a can of green paint along the armistice border of Israel and Palestine (a stand-in for the Green Line drawn by Moshe Dayan at the end of the war between Israel and Jordan in 1948).²⁵

In *Niagara Gorge Path Relocated* (1975) (fig. 6), Michelle Stuart ran a 460-foot rubbing on paper down an escarpment at Artpark, near Lewiston, NY. Working with muslin-backed paper so that the earth's color and its markings underneath could be traced, Stuart records an ephemeral monument to the landscape, the original site "where the Niagara Falls had flowed centuries earlier." ²⁶ The long, cascading visual line, as seen from the installation photograph, mimics the flow of water from another time, a spatiotemporal displacement that lingers in the mind as an afterimage.



Figure 6. Michelle Stuart, *Niagara Gorge Path Relocated*, 1975, Lewiston, NY, Copyright Michelle Stuart, courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, New York.

Alice Aycock's Low Building with Dirt Roof (For Mary) (1973), installed on her family property at Gibney Farm, Pennsylvania, strikes a note similar to Denes's work in Battery Park. In what looks like a submerged dwelling buried three-quarters deep into the ground, the roof was to be used to plant crops growing in the field surrounding it, where the sculpture would blend into its site and the landscape. In 1990 Michael Kimmelman wrote, "After reading about ancient huts functioning not only as shelters but also as burial tombs, she conceived of 'Low Building,' with its shallow grass roof just inches above the ground, and its connotations both of protection and suffocation."27 In 2010 the work was remade and permanently installed at Storm King Art Center (fig. 7).



Figure 7. Alice Aycock, *Low Building with Dirt Roof (For Mary)*, 1973/2010, permanently reconstructed at the Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, NY. Photo by Dave Rittinger.

The ephemeral installations of Cecile Abish similarly displace earth through subtle interventions. As Lawrence Alloway wrote on Abish's work for *Artforum* in 1974, "In *Field Day I*, the branches, stuck in the ground, not growing, outlined by tape on the rough ground, demarcated a temporary plot—

temporary by the nature of her technique and choice of materials. She dispenses with all those acts of condensation and unmistakable sequence which characterize Minimal sculpture. Regular parts become frayed, and irregular ones are seen to be homeomorphic."28

In the 1978 article, "Six Women at Work in the Landscape," critic April Kingsley describes Abish's approach as follows: "It seems so unassuming. She disturbs the terrain only slightly, taking possession of it only temporarily, always careful to make the pieces selfmaintaining or concerned that they selfdestruct with no ecologically harmful residue." Kingsley continues, "All of Abish's work is opened up to its environment.... when she works indoors. lately with marbles scattered on the floor, the negative spaces left in the field once a plane of plywood has been lifted into an upright position, or floated on the sea of marbles, let the floor into the work."29 In 2008 SculptureCenter in Long Island City mounted the exhibition Decoys, Complexes, and Triggers: Feminism and Land Art in the 1970s. In a review for Women Eco Artists Dialog, art historian Suzaan Boettger writes, "The women's position—working in nature but making increasingly complex architectural structures—suggests a gender fusion ahead of the fluidity of subsequent decades, which allowed women artists to predominate in current reparative environmental projects."30

In 1966 Patricia Johanson made her first experimental work outdoors, *William Rush*, which signaled her transition from painting to sculpture. Installed in a forest near Bennington College, the sculpture consisted of "steel T-beams welded together and supported on slotted pipes, forming a cantilevered horizontal surface, painted in red lead paint." A painting

functioning as a line, it created a perspectival view that pierced the densely thick forest environment of green and brown. The subsequent growth of nature over the sculpture was to be a determining factor in Johanson's work, leading to radical projects combining design, science, and architecture as they relate to environmental protection and sustainability. In her recent installation, The Draw at Sugar House/The Sego Lily Diversion Dam, now a registered state dam in Utah, Johanson created thirty-foothigh walls that will channel potentially catastrophic floodwaters under the eightlane roadway along 1300 East through a sunken corridor into Echo Canyon (fig. 8). In an interview, Johanson states, "The design combines flood-control structures with wildlife habitat, a public trail, a safe highway crossing and a historical narrative that depicts the journey of the Mormon pioneers into the Salt Lake Valley. The Sego Lily element of the project was designed as an homage to the Utah state flower that symbolized the pioneers' survival of their first winter in the valley."32



Figure 8. Patricia Johanson, *The Draw at Sugar House: Sego Lily Diversion Dam*, 2003–2018, Salt Lake City, Utah. Drone photography by Adam Isaac Hiscock. Lynne Olson, "The Artful Dam," *Catalyst Magazine*, June 29, 2018.

To conclude, with the increasing fallout from climate change, we as a public need to consider historical preservation as a dual responsibility to our collective history and the environment for the decades ahead. Commemoration in public space should allow for corrections to the historical record and accounting for the inclusivity of all people if we agree to live in a democracy. Given rising seas, warming temperatures, and the effects of pollution on the built environment, should bronze be the default material of future monuments? Are there ways to imagine the future of monuments as negative spaces where history can be read and viewed on digital screens, as in Times Square, or at a stop along Mary Miss's *Broadway: 1000 steps*? ³³ Can empty plinths be transformed to foster a synergy with nature that engenders a new form of public art? The groundbreaking work of women artists in land art (fig. 8) positioned the notion of permanence and impermanence on equal ground, arranging ephemeral materials and negative space for our future understanding. In doing so, they captured a singular vision of human experience in the landscape as we temporarily move through it.34

¹ Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, November 3, 2017–January 28, 2018; see https://whitney.org/Exhibitions/JimmieDurham.

² Photograph published in "Why I Changed My Mind About Confederate Monuments", Kevin M. Levin, *The Atlantic*, August 19, 2017.

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