

SHIFTING CONCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC SPECTATORSHIP AND 1970S FEMINIST POLITICS IN MARY MISS'S PERIMETERS/PAVILIONS/DECOYS

Tiffany Huang

Multiple movements characterized the art world of the 1970s. With its inception dating to a decade earlier, earth art was still in development.¹ Second-Wave feminist politics were well underway, and there emerged postmodernist approaches of deconstructing master narratives and recognizing that “culture is neither as homogeneous nor as monolithic...as it may seem.”² Although Mary Miss’s *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys* (1977-1978) exemplifies elements from all these movements, there have been limited attempts to fully explicate the connections that are drawn between them. Through conducting a visual analysis, this paper will argue that understanding *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys* as a piece of feminist earth art requires one to consider the shifting conceptions of the public that are embedded in Miss’s work.

To elucidate this position, I will first introduce the artwork’s basic formal qualities. In doing so, I will be referencing the importance that Rosalind Krauss has placed on defining *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys* as a “site construction”³ rather than a sculpture. Then, I will situate the earthwork within discourses that have attributed its significance to factors *beyond* denotational initiatives—namely, to redefinitions of public spectatorship. By public spectatorship, I mean the ways in which everyday individuals can experience a work of art in the public sphere. Miss herself has stated that the direct involvement of the spectator constitutes a key feature of all her artworks.⁴ In addition to being easily accessible to the public, this priority is evident in the integration of her works into their respective surroundings, as well as in the opportunities that she provides for spectators to physically engage with the pieces. Eleanor Heartney and Sarah Hamill extend Miss’s perspective on public involvement. Heartney defines public spectatorship as “a realm where communal and private experiences coexist.”⁵ It is this co-existence of communal and private experiences that Hamill emphasizes in connecting Miss’s earthworks to the context of 1970s feminist politics.⁶ Indeed, the goal of many Second-wave feminists was to fulfill a shared agenda for women that recognizes the diversity of their experiences.⁷ Overall, tracing the redefinitions of public spectatorship in *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys* aids in broadening existing knowledge on how postmodernism, feminism and earth art intersected in the 1970s.

Beginning a visual analysis of *Perimeters/Pavilion/Decoys* necessitates an understanding of the earthwork’s formal qualities, which can in turn be situated within Krauss’s formulation of “site constructions.”⁸ Constructed with vernacular building

techniques and materials, Miss's piece spans a four-acre clearing outside of Long Island's Nassau County Museum of Art.⁹ In essence, the work consists of three tower-like structures, two mounds, and an underground courtyard. Spread out across the clearing, the towers bear different heights which become discernible when the observer approaches the structures.¹⁰ Once there, the spectator can climb into each of the towers and survey the field from above.¹¹ In order to access the underground courtyard, one must notice a large, square-shaped pit that can only be seen from atop one of the mounds.¹² From there, a ladder descends into the excavation.¹³ As structures of wooden posts and beams have been erected underground, walking through the courtyard evokes the sense of passing through a space that is at once both an atrium and a tunnel.¹⁴ The courtyard is enclosed by a wall that contains a door on each side.¹⁵ These doors lead into a hidden passageway, which bears slot-like windows looking into a dark space that appears to stretch on indefinitely.¹⁶ It is precisely this interweaving of landscape and architecture that demonstrates the meaning of 'site construction.'¹⁷ In fact, site constructions form just one component of the Greimas square of structural possibilities, which Kraus formulates to describe three-dimensional artworks from the 1960s onwards that have challenged the status of sculpture as a medium.¹⁸ The Greimas square defines sculpture as any work that is neither architecture nor landscape. Other structural possibilities include "axiomatic structures" (the combination of architecture and non-architecture) and "marked sites" (landscape and non-landscape). Using *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys* as example, Krauss posits that the term "sculpture," which has previously been used loosely by many critics, is no longer sufficient to describe the different combinations of landscape and architecture that have emerged in process art and site-specific art.¹⁹

Whereas Krauss focuses on explicating the medium of Miss's artwork, others attribute the importance of *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys* to redefinitions of public spectatorship. One way of interpreting public spectatorship is to examine how Miss's piece facilitates a communal viewing experience, or, in other words, a viewing experience that could be shared across the body of the general public. In fact, three elements of *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys* evince Miss's priority of creating communal viewing experiences, all of which have been articulated by the artist and others: the accessibility of the artwork, the integration of the site construction into its context, as well as the affordance of direct audience engagement.²⁰ In terms of viewer accessibility, Miss deviates from traditional display practices by exhibiting artworks outside of the often privately-run and therefore suggestively elitist institutions of museums and art galleries.²¹ Indeed, the artist places her site constructions in locations that can be easily accessed by everyday individuals living in the city. *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys*, for one, occupies a park in Nassau County, a suburb of New York City.²² Other earthwork artists such as Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson have previously placed their works outside of museums and galleries (Figures 2.1 and 2.2).²³ The difference lies in the fact that these latter artists often "maintain[ed] their authority over the intrepid visitor who [would have needed to] trek to their installations"²⁴ in faraway and sparsely populated regions. Aside

from easy accessibility, Miss's prioritization of public involvement is revealed through her efforts to integrate her works into their respective environments.²⁵ As for *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys*, the grounds of Nassau County Museum of Art used to belong to the privately-owned Clayton estate before being bought by the county in 1969.²⁶ This private-to-public conversion is echoed by the choice Miss made to literally exhibit her earthwork outside the implicitly restrictive space of the art gallery.

Beyond being easily accessible and integrated into its environment, Miss's earth art piece further fosters communal viewing experiences by affording spectators direct and physical engagement with the earthwork.²⁷ This is in contrast to the traditional artistic convention of imposing an artwork upon the viewer, or confronting the viewer with a piece that is merely meant to be looked at.²⁸ The concept of direct engagement can be traced to Robert Morris's considerations of phenomenological relationships in Minimalist art.²⁹ For Morris, sculpture and installations encourage a bodily encounter that entails the "language, memor[ies], reflection[s], and fantas[ies]"³⁰ not of the artist, but of the works' spectators. Arguably, though, Miss's *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys* allows for experiential immediacy to a greater extent than a work like Morris's *Untitled (L-Beams)* from 1965 (Figure 3.1). Whilst the monolithic scale of Morris's work still reveals the artistic tendency of using spatial magnitude to impose an artwork upon the viewer, *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys* embodies Miss's artistic priorities of "breathing space, human scale, [and] firsthand experience."³¹ Outside of Nassau County Museum, one is not immediately confronted by the scale of Miss's earthwork as one would be with *Untitled (L-Beams)*. Instead, one discovers the spatial environment of the land art piece in a gradual or accumulative fashion by navigating the clearing, the towers, the underground courtyard and the hidden passageway.³²

While providing spectators with newfound viewing authority, the capacity to directly and physically engage with an artwork further elicits *personal reactions*. Beyond connotations of collective involvement, public spectatorship can therefore be more deeply grasped as a "realm where communal and private experiences coexist."³³ Indeed, this articulation of public spectatorship has been advanced by both Heartney and Hamill.³⁴ In the case of *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys*, private experiences are engendered by the artist's inclusion of "intimate spaces...that sti[r] the memory and imagination."³⁵ The spectator who initially assumes the three towers to be of the same size may be confused after exploring them up close and realizing that the structures in fact bear different heights. Upon climbing atop one of the mounds, they may be surprised to see the square-shaped pit that would lead to the underground excavation. Uncertain about what is present underground, the spectator may hesitate in deciding whether they should climb down the ladder or not. This same uncertainty could reproduce itself when they debate whether they should try opening a door in the wall surrounding the courtyard. Once inside, claustrophobia could accompany their journey through the passageway. Finally, fear could ensue as they look through the passageway's small windows and are unable to map the limits of the dark space on the other side.³⁶ Since there is no scripted path to follow for experiencing the earthwork, precise moments

at which these feelings occur likely vary from one spectator to another.³⁷ Furthermore, the fantasies that may be stirred would also differ according to the individual.³⁸ Simultaneously, then, experiences of Miss's artwork can be both collectively shared and individually personal.

When analyzed with this conception of the public as composed of individuals who undergo both common *and* heterogeneous experiences, *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys* can be situated within the context of Second-wave feminism. Beginning in the 1960s and lasting until the 1980s, Second-wave feminism was a movement which, through legal reforms and grassroots organizing, led to social transformations like providing women with access to abortion and credit services, protecting women from gender-based discrimination at work, and establishing women's studies programs in post-secondary institutions.³⁹ In the 1970s, one of feminism's goals was to pursue a shared agenda for all women, while recognizing that "the necessary path to that goal [was] through the diversity of individual experience[s]." ⁴⁰ Indeed, during this time, feminist politics specifically challenged the notion of essentialist femininity, advocating instead for pluralistic understandings of women who fall into different parts of the social stratification system.⁴¹ Such a focus reflects the quality of many postmodernist works of "upset[ting] the reassuring stability of [any] mastering position or [narrative]"⁴² that makes culture seem homogenous. To vocalize the heterogeneity of women's experiences, two methods were particularly employed by Second-wave feminists. One of these was consciousness-raising (C.R.); this involved women sharing their individual experiences in speak out groups, where the aim was to "help [each other] understand...sexism in their [own] daily lives."⁴³ In addition to C.R. initiatives, Second-wave feminists rallied under the slogan "the personal is the political."⁴⁴ The phrase suggests that the varied inequalities women experience in their personal or individual lives can be articulated to become part of larger criticisms of current political and societal structures.⁴⁵

According to Hamill, this feminist agenda of bringing together the diverse experiences of women is reflected in Miss's earthworks that feature holes or structural openings.⁴⁶ Drawing connections between Miss's land art pieces and 1970s feminist politics seems appropriate, especially given the artist's own identity as a woman who chooses to exhibit outside the traditionally male-dominated institutions of art galleries.⁴⁷ As she does with other pieces by Miss, Hamill frames the overall site construction of *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys* as a "social body with a skin."⁴⁸ When thought of in literal terms, the organ of the skin separates the interior of the human body from the outside world.⁴⁹ In Miss's earthwork, it appears that the "skin" is symbolized by the layer of earth that separates the surface of the field from the underground excavation. As a personified form, each side of the earthwork can be traced to a different woman who is subject to different vulnerabilities.⁵⁰ For example, after climbing atop one of the towers, the spectator can become aware of their status altering from surveyor to surveyed.⁵¹ Underground, vulnerability takes a different form. As explained earlier, one may feel claustrophobic when walking through the narrow and hidden passageway,⁵² or one may feel uneasy when looking through the slot-like windows at an undeterminable dark

expanse. Yet, as an opening in the "skin" of the earth, the large square-shaped pit opens up these seemingly different worlds to one another.⁵³ Figuratively, this may allude to the contact between women with different vulnerabilities. It is thus through the opportunity for interchanges in society that individuals can properly comprehend "the frictions and differences of nation, race and class that make up a panoply of feminisms."⁵⁴

Deemed a "site-construction" by Krauss, *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys* has been discussed in discourses around both earth art and feminist art. In bridging these separate categories, this paper made the following argument: in order to interpret Miss's piece as an example of feminist land art, one needs to analyze the shifting conceptions of the public that are embedded in the work. Rather than assuming the public to be a homogenous entity which passively looks at an artwork, the artist seems to involve a spectator who partakes in collectively shared viewing experiences *and* undergoes private responses at the same time. Regarding the aspect of collectively shared viewing experiences, the artist and scholars like Heartney and Hamill have underscored the work's easy accessibility, its integration into the site's environment, and its facilitation of direct viewer engagement. Heartney in particular has placed emphasis on the element of direct engagement, stating that physically involving oneself in the work elicits rich psychological experiences that are personal in nature. Hamill has connected the diversity of personal experiences to the 1970s feminist agenda of recognizing femininity in pluralistic terms. Ultimately, considering how the public spectator is conceived in *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys* provides insights into how other earthworks from the era harbor intersections of elements from various artistic movements.

NOTES

¹ Amanda Boetzkes, "Introduction: At the Limit of Form," in *The Ethics of Earth Art* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 3.

² Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, ed. Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 169.

³ Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (1979): 41.

⁴ Mary Miss, "On a Redefinition of Public Sculpture," in *Mary Miss*, ed. Mark Lamster (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 236.

⁵ Eleanor Heartney, "Beyond Boundaries," in *Mary Miss*, ed. Mark Lamster (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 13.

⁶ Sarah Hamill, "'The Skin of the Earth': Mary Miss's Untitled 1973/75 and the Politics of Precarity," *Oxford Art Journal* 41, no. 2 (2018): 278.

- ⁷ Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, "Introduction: Feminism and Art in the Twentieth Century," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1994), 29.
- ⁸ Krauss, "Sculpture," 41.
- ⁹ Heartney, "Beyond," 11.
- ¹⁰ Hamill, "'The Skin,'" 281.
- ¹¹ Hamill, 281.
- ¹² Krauss, "Sculpture," 30.
- ¹³ Krauss, 30.
- ¹⁴ Krauss, 30.
- ¹⁵ Heartney, "Beyond," 11.
- ¹⁶ Heartney, 11.
- ¹⁷ Krauss, "Sculpture," 38.
- ¹⁸ Krauss, 38.
- ¹⁹ Krauss, 30.
- ²⁰ Miss, "On a Redefinition," 236; Heartney, "Beyond," 10; Hamill, "'The Skin,'" 278.
- ²¹ Hamill, 278.
- ²² Heartney, "Beyond," 11.
- ²³ Heartney, 11.
- ²⁴ Heartney, 11.
- ²⁵ Heartney, 11.
- ²⁶ "About NCMA: History," Nassau County Museum of Art, Nassau County Museum of Art, Accessed April 3, 2021, <https://nassaumuseum.org/history/>.
- ²⁷ Miss, "On a Redefinition," 236.
- ²⁸ Miss, 236.
- ²⁹ Robert Morris, "The Present Tense of Space," in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T), 1993), 178.
- ³⁰ Morris, "The Present Tense," 178.
- ³¹ Miss, "On a Redefinition," 233.
- ³² Hamill, "'The Skin,'" 284.
- ³³ Heartney, "Beyond," 13; emphasis mine.
- ³⁴ Heartney, 13; Hamill, "'The Skin,'" 277
- ³⁵ Heartney, 11.
- ³⁶ Hamill, "'The Skin,'" 277.
- ³⁷ Heartney, "Beyond," 13.
- ³⁸ Hamill, "'The Skin,'" 282.
- ³⁹ Sarah T. Parlow-Lefevre, "Second Wave Feminism," in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, ed. Mike Allen (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Research Methods, 2017), 7.
- ⁴⁰ Broude and Garrard, "Introduction," 28.
- ⁴¹ Broude and Garrard, 28.
- ⁴² Owens, "The Discourse," 168.
- ⁴³ Parlow-Lefevre, "Second Wave," 3.
- ⁴⁴ Broude and Garrard, "Introduction," 29.
- ⁴⁵ Broude and Garrard, 29.
- ⁴⁶ Hamill, "'The Skin,'" 290.
- ⁴⁷ Hamill, 278.
- ⁴⁸ Hamill, 289.
- ⁴⁹ Hamill, 289.

⁵⁰ Hamill, 285.

⁵¹ Hamill, 285.

⁵² Hamill, 285.

⁵³ Hamill, 290.

⁵⁴ Hamill, 290.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- "About NCMA: History." Nassau County Museum of Art. Accessed April 3, 2021.
<https://nassaumuseum.org/history/>.
- Boetzkes, Amanda. "Introduction: At the Limit of Form." In *The Ethics of Earth Art*, 1-24. University of Minnesota Press, 2010. Accessed April 3, 2021.
<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/24465>.
- Broude, Norma, and Mary D. Garrard. "Introduction: Feminism and Art in the Twentieth Century." In *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, 10-29. Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1994.
- Hamill, Sarah. "'The Skin of the Earth': Mary Miss's Untitled 1973/75 and the Politics of Precarity." *Oxford Art Journal* 41, no. 2 (August 2018): 273-91. Accessed April 3, 2021. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxartj/kcy009>.
- Heartney, Eleanor. "Beyond Boundaries." In *Mary Miss*, edited by Mark Lamster, 9-13. 1st ed. New York, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004.
- Krauss, Rosalind. "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." *October* 8 (1979): 30-44.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/778224>.
- Miss, Mary. "On a Redefinition of Public Sculpture." In *Mary Miss*, edited by Mark Lamster, 229-36. 1st ed. Princeton Architectural Press, 2004.
- Morris, Robert. "The Present Tense of Space." In *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*, 175-209. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T), 1993.
- Owens, Craig. "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism." In *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, edited by Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock, 166-90. Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1992.
- Parlow-Lefevre, Sarah T. "Second Wave Feminism." In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, edited by Mike Allen, 1-8. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Research Methods, 2017. Accessed April 3, 2021.
<https://methods-sagepub-com.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/reference/the-sage-encyclopedia-of-communication-research-methods/i13226.xml>.