

# City Pulse - Cover Story

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## How Michigan Stores Its Fine Arts in a Box

By DANIEL STURM

In 1980, when the State of Michigan decided to acquire a major sculpture, the art community chose the world-renowned artist Michael Heizer and proudly purchased "This Equals That," the largest sculpture in the United States. They placed it just west of the Capitol in downtown Lansing. The piece was praised by art critics as a clever geometric concept showing one full circle, two halves, four quarters, and eight eighths, all within a whole. Michigan invested a hefty \$540,000- the price one pays for a sculpture referenced in art catalogs worldwide.

Irving Taran, a Michigan State University art professor, recalls often picking up visiting friends from the airport and taking them directly to see the monumental sculpture in the middle of the night. "We had popcorn and looked at it. They would say "My god, a Michael Heizer in Lansing, Mich.," and I would say "Amazing, isn't it?" and they would respond "Most amazing!"

For capital residents, a starlit evening with popcorn and metropolitan art may never again be possible: Two weeks ago, construction crews began removing the seven iron, oxide-tinted monumental structures to a state warehouse. When the sculpture was fabricated, the concrete objects had been sprayed over a stainless steel, plywood and mesh framework. According to the state Department of Management and Budget, there were cracks in the pieces that let water seep through to rot interior boards. The water is also said to have seeped through to the concrete plaza below, leaking into the two-level underground parking garage the ensemble sits atop, where spots of the garage's roof have become weak and threaten to fall without repair.

Neither Heizer, who creates his sculptures on a ranch in Hiko, Nev., nor the art community was consulted about the state's decision to dismantle Lansing's Stonehenge. A spokeswoman for the Department of Management and Budget, Penny Davis, said the state was unable to locate Heizer. She said a letter had been prepared, but the address was missing.

"That's bullshit," said Jennifer Mackiewicz, an associate for the New York Dia Center for the Arts, and Heizer's assistant in the Nevada desert for the past 11 years. She remembers the state's contacting Heizer personally when they restored the grounds seven years ago.

Indeed, I had little trouble tracking down an address for Heizer. Getting an interview with him is the hard part. Heizer is famously unavailable to the media. However, Mackiewicz said he will grant me an interview after the state has contacted him.

Mackiewicz mistrusts the claim of water leakage damaging the parking garage. The Department of Management and Budget claims that, while they were able to waterproof the plaza on top of the parking structures in 1995 and 1996, they'd been unable to fix areas beneath the sculpture.

Michael Govan, director of the Dia Art Foundation, the current sponsor of Heizer's massive land art project in Nevada, called "City," said state government is using the sculpture's lack of waterproofing as an excuse. After learning about its dismantlement from me, and debating the subject this weekend with Heizer, Govan said in a phone interview: "Originally the sculpture was on a concrete plaza, but then grass was reintroduced. It really changed the look of the sculpture quite dramatically. Rather than being on a dark plaza, it has grass and a little bit of concrete. It looked like it was sitting on dishes. In a way it already was destroyed." Govan pointed out that the 1980 piece is "or maybe was" one of America's greatest monumental sculptures. He emphasized that it was "ridiculous" that the artist wasn't consulted, especially since his address has been the same for years. When asked about taking legal action, Govan commented, "It's not like in Europe, where an artist's rights are more protected." The director of Dia said he was skeptical that Michigan is interested in restoring the sculpture – considering that it's been neglected for so long and that there has been no communication with the artist.

Davis of the Department of Management and Budget said she wasn't aware of any policy that regulates how to proceed with public art once it's fallen in disrepair. She said they'd informed Gov. John Engler, who'd approved their action plan. But since the project had become a "safety issue," it would have been the department's responsibility to proceed even without the governor's approval.

Construction workers have begun chopping up the concrete, cutting through the wire mesh and hacking up the rotted plywood. When finished, all that will be left for possible restoration will be the caging and steel structure that form the original pieces.

Given the state's more than \$1 billion deficit, it seems unlikely "This Equals That" will ever find its way out of storage, although the state said it will consult restoration experts as they fix the parking structure. Kathy Kremers, spokeswoman of the State Department of History, Arts and Libraries, said the state is asking the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs to create a contact list of art experts to evaluate the restoration costs.

Former Gov. William G. Milliken, who approved the sculpture in 1976, said he was upset to hear about the dismantlement which he hadn't known about until I called him at his home in Traverse City. He immediately telephoned Davis. "I told her that the worst thing that could happen would be to remove the various units and to destroy them." Milliken said he was assured by Davis that this wasn't the plan. "I hope they'll be a little more hesitant to take an irreversible action. I also faxed her my dedication speech, because I suspect that they wouldn't have been aware of the climate at that time."

Not just another politician on a horse

"Segmented from the beginning, Lansing has been affected by land speculators, legislators, educators, students, and corporate employees who have no long term interest in the city. Potential leadership, like potential sculpture, has not materialized in the past," writes Fay L. Hendry in "Outdoor Sculpture in Lansing."

As one of the major sculptures listed in contemporary art history books disappears piece by piece, I was left wondering about attitude of capitol-area residents toward the arts. At the Capitol dedication in 1848, Gov. William L. Greenly spoke of sparsely populated Lansing, settled in the wilderness far away from the more established centers in the southeastern part of the state, as a town that had risen "without the pale of civilization." Couldn't this old lumber outpost town handle a piece of contemporary art?

Phylis Floyd, a professor of contemporary art at Michigan State University, said she wasn't surprised to hear the art community wasn't contacted about the removal of the Heizer sculpture. After all, this was an abstract piece of art. "Very few public programs on art education stress an in-depth understanding of how art can speak," she said. By the time students go to college, their tastes are already biased toward representational art, film and television. "When we get to minimalism in my contemporary art classes, we can't get through it fast enough." Floyd points out that in order to appreciate abstract art such as "This Equals That," one needs to understand the idea of "Gestalt," or conceptional art, but unfortunately students are not taught about the rationale of abstract ideas in art history.

It was a more progressive era for artwork in 1975, when State Architect Almon J. Durkee returned from a walk across the Capitol Plaza and suggested a beautification project to then-Gov. Milliken. "I noticed how sterile the plaza was and thought it should welcome people and integrate the city with government life." Milliken agreed and initiated a Special Arts Commission that led to the construction of Heizer's large-scale outdoor sculpture, designed by the sculptor to embody the idea of integration. The commission's 40-page report and other files from 1978, now in the Michigan State University Archives and Historical Collections, document the ambitious spirit of the project. "The commission's assignment was to develop an overall plan for incorporating art and art works into State buildings, including painting, sculpture, photography, landscaping, and other appropriate means to interior and exterior beautification."

After a preliminary consideration of some 40 major artists associated with large public sculpture, the jury narrowed the list to three, and finally chose Heizer. Milliken, a strong supporter of the fine arts, said in the dedication speech on Sept. 25, 1980, that he didn't want just "another politician on the horse." Instead, the state government was going to choose a sculpture that created some controversy, that made people think. A fund-raiser raised \$290,000, of which Milliken and his wife, Helen, kicked in \$5,000. Other donations came from organizations such as the Henry Ford II Fund, Kmart, General Motors, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Kresge Foundation. The cost of landscaping and securing the underground parking garage, totaling roughly \$250,000, came from state coffers.

The sculpture, whose steel armatures had to be flown in by helicopter, is based on the configuration of the lotus flower, an ancient Egyptian symbol. Its basic component is a pillar six feet thick and 48 feet in circumference, and four others are 12 feet across, abstractly linked in the shape of a flower.

"Someday German, Japanese, and New York collectors will be sending postcards of the Heizer from Lansing," commented the Lansing State Journal one week before the dedication ceremony. Supporters and fund-raisers were enthusiastic: With this project, they claimed, 600,000 people traveling through the Capitol

every year won't need to stop in Detroit to see a Henry Moore or go to Grand Rapids to see an Alexander Calder. The giant sculpture would be lit up at night, and would be a focal point for summer concerts.

Ignorant as pigeons

Twenty-two years after lauding Heizer's lotus flower design, the State Journal featured a guest column headlined "Send sculpture to the dump" by a retired Journal reporter, John Albright. Albright argued that "This Equals That" visually evoked the romance "associated with oil refineries and sewage treatment plants." "Even their skins of rouge-colored stucco spoke an unintended yarn of Michigan's past in the Rust Belt days." The former LSJ reporter suggested that the state cut the warehouse costs and "truck it to a landfill."

Clearly, the lotus flower never bloomed. Milliken's term ended in 1983, and since then no effort has been made to educate the public about the sculpture. Today, not many residents know there was a world renowned sculpture behind the Capitol. Few who see the dismantlement know what's going on. Soon after its arrival in Lansing, "This Equals That" became a sleeping beauty with rusty spots. By the 1980s Lansing State Journal reporters had begun contemptuously referring to the sculpture pieces as "Alka Seltzer tablets." Suzanne B. Mills, executive director of the Arts Council of Greater Lansing, said that, since 1982, she couldn't recall a single visitor asking for information about the sculpture. "But I can't say that there have ever been anybody ask me about any other piece either." No postcards had been made.

Diane Kirkpatrick, a retired professor of art at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, said she was very sad about what was happening in Lansing. "Monumental sculpture in the past has usually been respected by everyone except the pigeons." Kirkpatrick participated in the original six-member selection jury, a national group of highly qualified art experts. Another Michigan member of this group was John Neff, the then-curator of contemporary art at the Detroit Institute of Arts. "We served in good faith that the state would take care of the things that we were asked to consider for the state," Kirkpatrick said.

She recalled that a budget had been approved to provide for the maintenance of "This Equals That." But after the Special Art Commission was decommissioned after Milliken's term ended, Kirkpatrick suspects there was no longer a body of public authority in place to keep-up with maintenance. "In such cases often things begin to slip, and it becomes a process very hard to reverse."

In 1993 "This Equals That" was clearly in need of renovation. It became a case for SOS! (Save Outdoor Sculpture), a national public-private initiative to document monuments and outdoor sculpture, and to help communities preserve their sculptural legacies for the next century. Susan Nichols, Director of SOS!, said they've photographed and documented 32,000 art works throughout the country. Of these, 50 percent had been in need, and 10 percent in urgent need. According to the June 1993 SOS! survey, recorded on the Smithsonian American Art Museum inventory Web site, Heizer's sculpture in Lansing was in need of "treatment urgent."

There'd been assessment and conservation funds available, and "the State government would have been eligible to apply," said Nichols. However, Michigan didn't apply for SOS! funding. "We don't actually tap everyone on the shoulder," Nichols said. Awards are made to those who apply for the grants, which in Michigan went for such works as the Abraham Lincoln at the Detroit Public Library and Detroit's General Alexander Macomb, the Alma Mater at Muskegon High School, and Firemen's Monument in St. Joseph.

When I told Kirkpatrick, a professor emeritus, that Lansing did not apply for an SOS! grant to restore its

Heizer sculpture, she nodded. "In the 1990s, the state government was not as committed to arts as the previous governments had been." Looking back, Kirkpatrick still supports the selection of "This Equals That" because it invited people to look at it and discuss it. "People's attitudes towards non-objective sculpture is always somewhat ironic. I had expected the sculpture to win friends as time went on," she said.

Members of the Greater Lansing art community say the state had an obligation to inform the artist and the community, no matter whether "This Equals That" had found friends. Roy Saper, who owns Saper Galleries in East Lansing, said he finds it interesting that the sculpture is located between two major state buildings. "Before law is passed, the legislative body holds public hearings, and we can express our belief in support or in opposition of the proposed legislation. Here is the case where we have public work of art - paid for by our tax dollars - where people were not given the opportunity to have their say."

The East Lansing resident remembers sitting near Helen Milliken during the dedication. It had always been evident to him that the Heizer sculpture needed regular maintenance and wasn't getting it. One year later Saper noticed the sculpture was no longer the same color. Two years later he saw that its edges were changing, and once he saw the structure's plywood outline. "It was very evident that the sculpture wasn't something that was going to stay," he recalls. "There is no question that it was not properly maintained."

Saper said the state didn't address the issue appropriately. "They should have consulted Michael Heizer. He could have come back and said let's apply for a several hundred thousand dollar grant." He said one option would be for the state to reconstruct the sculpture out of aluminum and ask Heizer to "kick in \$100,000." The gallery owner believes that Lansing should show a sensitivity to the artist, to those who create it, and to the space in which it's presented. To do anything else would be "stealing away a sense of history."

#### Lacking sense of history

Professor Floyd, who spent part of her childhood in Europe with her French-born mother, points out that part of the problem with the Heizer piece is that it was never "owned" by the community. "Europeans have a collective feeling of general ownership of any art in public places. Here art is much more of a commodity, it's not something that people own collectively, because art is extraneous." Floyd said this theory doesn't apply to pieces of representational art, such as the Spartan Statue on Michigan State University campus.

Since its erection in 1945, the oversized muscleman "Sparty" is the focal point of attention for students and college football fans. In 1989, a Save Our Sparty initiative raised \$100,000 to restore the statue's surface, which receives careful maintenance on an almost annual basis. This year MSU President Peter McPherson announced the plan to replace the cracking ceramic sculpture with a \$50,000 bronze replica.

James Hopfensperger, who chairs the art and art history department MSU, believes the level of care and planning largely reflects the values of its citizenry. In other words: "A municipality that cares for its public buildings and public art reflects the sort of thinking of those people." Hopfensperger said there were many examples of communities' failing to take care of public buildings and public art. "I don't think they plan to have a sculpture deteriorate, but it's a possibility given the dynamic conditions that surround any municipality."

Hopfensperger believes the Heizer sculpture failed to attract more visitors because it was out of sight for motor traffic. "One of the curiosities about living in Michigan is that much of our public lives are spent traversing our landscape in an automobile, and whether a public object is within a sight-line from an automobile is within the consciousness of the people here." He said life in the Car Capitol was different

from life in an East Coast city like Boston, where public sculptures weren't visible from automobiles but placed where one could explore them on foot. He said that MSU's "New Public Art on campus" initiative took this latter strategy when selecting a location for the \$250,000 sculpture in front of the John A. Hannah Administration Building. The sculpture commissioned to California sculptor Bruce Wolfe, showing former President Hannah, will be placed at a walking crossroads on campus, so it "would function very differently than does a piece that's sited as to be viewed by an automobile."

Saper, who serves on the East Lansing Arts Commission, said one of the considerations made when selecting a site is that to make the art visible not only by pedestrians, but from a car as well.

The Art Council of Greater Lansing's Mills also believes the Heizer sculpture was forgotten because of its remote location west of the Capitol. "Most people never get on that site." She said the same problem led to the removal of the Construction #150 last year, a stainless steel sculpture by Jose de Rivera, located at 100 N. Washington Square Mall in downtown Lansing. When the city opened up the mall for street traffic, the sculpture had to be removed. It has been stored in wooden boxes at a storage facility. A committee led by City Councilwoman Joan Bauer recommended relocating the abstract sculpture in front of City Hall. But because of the underground parking, the City must first evaluate if the ground can stand the weight of the piece.

De Rivera's sculpture was purchased by a 1970 downtown beautification committee that received a \$45,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and an equal amount of private monies. The committee originally intended to commission a work by the famous Swedish-American sculptor Claes Oldenburg, who proposed designs for a large standing mitt with ball, an alphabet Good Humor Bar, an ashtray, or a giant saw. Although the first two designs were accepted, they were never produced, due to a fabrication problem. Oldenburg's proposal for a colossal ashtray was rejected because Lansing public schools had recently begun an anti-smoking campaign. Moreover, the committee interpreted it as a statement against the Vietnam War, with the cigarette butts representing fallen soldiers. But in Martin Friedmann's book "Oldenburg. Six Themes," the artist said he hadn't meant to make an anti-war statement. He just wanted to compare his giant ashtray with monuments commemorating past wars. "We had an iconographic confusion." Oldenburg's final proposal, for a giant saw that cut through the new Lansing mall, didn't please the committee either. And so, he withdrew from the project in January 1973. "They turned it down, because it wasn't considered 'safe.' I think it's a mistake, because people need to be challenged by art," says Floyd. Today, the Alphabet Good Humor Bar is owned by the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art in La Jolla, Calif., the catcher's mitt is in a Greenwich, Conn., private collection, the Giant Saw can be seen at the Tokyo International Exhibition Center. Whatever happened to the ashtray? I couldn't find out.

Does Lansing not deserve contemporary art, because residents won't leave their cars to look at it, or even because they reject or fear the political implications of its abstraction? In an Nov. 18 editorial, the Lansing State Journal said Michigan can "do better" than Heizer's monumental work. "Better" apparently means more representational. In a comment that set the local art community on edge, the Journal editorial said that is needed is "a little more Norman Rockwell, and a little less Picasso."

"This view is extremely limiting," commented Hopfensperger. "I would like to be part of a community where we would not only embrace Rockwell and Picasso, but many varied other art forms that aren't familiar to us." Gallery owner Saper added: "That editorial trivialized somebody's assessment of art. This is a very large community, it's much more sophisticated than perhaps some editorial writer is giving credit for." Saper said that in the last decade he's had showings on both Picasso and Rockwell, and both were sold out. He said there is at least one Picasso hanging on the eighth floor of an office building in downtown Lansing.

"This community is able to accept Rockwell and Picasso."

Susan Bandes, director of the Kresge Art Museum, said it was a mistake to assume Lansing residents were generally ignorant of more challenging art. She referred to this summer's "sculpture in the streets" event, which showed 15 bronze sculptures, three -dimensional reproductions of impressionist paintings, by J. Seward Johnson. "People did not react as positively as the city thought they would. It was an example in which they brought the kind of work that Norman Rockwell does and received disappointment. I guess what you could say is that this art was not challenging. And I think people reacted to the fact that it wasn't."

Responding the criticism, Leanne Stites, director of the Principal Shopping District, that organized the \$55,000 project, said she saw "overwhelming support for the sculptures." Stites emphasized that, as business people, their main goal was to draw more residents downtown, "and not to support public art." Asked why they wouldn't invest in a permanent sculpture, she replied: "We haven't made enough money to buy a permanent sculpture yet." Stites said they're planning to repeat the event in 2003 and expect similar costs.

The last word

The removal of "This Equals That" raises the question of what should now happen with the one-half acre used by the large sculpture, and, more important: What is the future of public art in Lansing? "If they remove it, and leave green lawn there, it really does speak to the community," said MSU art professor Floyd. She suggests that the state should quickly invite experts and residents to hold a symposium on the role of public sculpture in Lansing, "so taxpayer money extends the life, rather than becoming bad advertising." She said one should consider that Alexander Calder's "La Grande Vitesse" in downtown Grand Rapids was controversial at first, but then became an emblem for the city, as citizens slowly began to take ownership. The 42-ton steel stabile was the first public sculpture in the United States to be funded by the National endowment for the Arts, and it was dedicated to the City of Grand Rapids on June 14, 1969. A graphic of it adorns the city's street signs, letter head and trash trucks. "It just requires time," said Floyd.

Certainly the last word on Lansing's "This Equals That" hasn't yet been spoken. Saper suggests getting the public involved. He says the new administration led by Gov.-elect Jennifer Granholm, who takes office in January, could conduct a survey asking state employees to circle their preferences for the use of the Capitol courtyard. "If a majority says, 'Put in trees and park benches,' then let's do that. If a majority says, 'Let's work over the next five years and select appropriate work of art,' then let's do that. If a majority says, 'We should have a pond here with codfish, or fountains,' then let's do that!"

Dia Director Michael Govan says it would be possible to restore the Heizer sculpture. "Michael would assist. He's now building a project that is 20 times as difficult. He's as brilliant an engineer as he is an artist." Govan said the Dia Art Foundation would like to help support with the proper restoration and fundraising. "Whether we can provide funds ourselves I can't say today, having not discussed this with our board," he said. Govan would like to see a public effort to end the negligent treatment of "This Equals That." "When the sculpture was made, it was one of the nation's most important pieces of art."

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