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# The disturbing remains of 'This Equals That' - A year later, Heizer's monumental work sits neglected in a field

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## The disturbing remains of 'This Equals That'

A year later, Heizer's monumental work sits neglected in a field

By DANIEL STURM

Anyone who's interested in an art encounter of the third kind should take a trip to a marshy meadow in Mason. Take the second exit of Route 127 and look for an unimposing building on nearby Jewett Road. It's the home of the Michigan Department of Transportation Repair Center, and the storage location of what once used to be one of America's greatest monumental sculptures.

Praised by art critics as a clever geometric concept showing one full circle, two halves, four quarters, and eight eighths, all within a whole, Michael Heizer's "This Equals That" occupied a plaza west of the Capitol in downtown Lansing for 22 years. But a year ago, workers removed the one-half acre sculpture, when it allegedly threatened the roof of the garage below the plaza. The sculpture's shell was removed and destroyed during the dismantlement.

Today, the remainder of "This Equals That" rests on this marshy meadow in Mason. What an undignified setting for an outdoor art show, I thought to myself while driving to the site. But even here, the halves and quarters of Heizer's steel skeleton still leave an epic impression to the observer. One must, of course, ignore the surrounding weather protection foil, which was mostly ripped off and dangled loosely around the art work, as if to signify that it doesn't deserve any better treatment than the material used for road construction projects that are often wrapped in the same kind of plastic.

Admission to the site of Heizer's deconstruction is free, but please be sure to register at the Repair Center Office first. Otherwise a man with an oily uniform and a yellow helmet might interrupt your public art experience by asking for your "state ID."

"It's a new form of environmental art," Roy Saper, owner of Saper Galleries in East Lansing, said. "It's called 'Waste.'"

Saper said Lansing is known for offering wonderful opportunities for public arts, and then taking them away again. He recalls how Jose de Rivera's stainless steel sculpture quietly went into storage. "Sculptures come and go in Lansing, but unfortunately there is no huge outcry," he said. Rivera's sculpture, entitled Construction #150, once sat in front of 100 N. Washington Square Mall. Now it is stored in wooden boxes at a waste water treatment plant on Lansing's west side. Joan Bauer, a member of Lansing City Council, said \$23,000 is needed for its relocation, a cause she is pursuing.

"This Equals That" came to Lansing after the state government decided to acquire a major sculpture. The art community chose Heizer's piece, then the largest sculpture in the United States. It was compared with the configuration of the lotus flower, an ancient Egyptian symbol, because its basic component is a pill six feet thick and 48 feet in circumference, and four others are 12 feet across, abstractly linked in the shape of a flower. The State of Michigan invested a hefty \$540,000.

Former Gov. William G. Milliken, who approved the original selection of Heizer's sculpture, said he was troubled to hear that, after its unfortunate dismantlement, the framework was now being stored on a grass field. "That's a shame," he said in a phone interview from his home in Traverse City. "The state has a basic responsibility for the sculpture. The bottom line is that they don't know what do with it. So they dismantled it and moved it away."

Sarah Lapshan, spokeswoman of the Michigan Department of History, Arts and Libraries, said that the department's director, William Anderson, spoke with Department of Management and Budget officials about ensuring that the framework was covered, and protected as well as possible from the elements.

Having seen the exposed framework with my own eyes, I can say for certain that this is not being done. And an expert contacted at the Chicago Conservation Center believes that, even if the plastic covering were not completely ripped off, this kind of storage would not provide adequate protection. Megan Ann Jones, a special projects officer, said that if the plastic does not tightly cover the framework, the sculpture probably may not even last one season. "Those parts are definitely not supposed to be exposed to rain and snow," said Jones.

The conservation expert suggested that the state build a wooden shed to protect Heizer's piece from snow and rain. Storing the sculpture outdoors without appropriate protection, said Jones, would make a possible conservation effort much more expansive. "Now you're not only dealing with [damages] inherent to the work, but also with the aggregate of all the damage that has been caused by exposure to the elements over time."

Originally, the Department for Management and Budget planned to store the artwork inside a state warehouse. The DMB's spokeswoman, Bridget Medina, said she wasn't sure why those plans had been changed. The state officials who had supervised the dismantlement could not be reached during the Veteran's Day holiday. Medina said the sculpture might not have been considered worth storing inside a warehouse, due to the extent of its damage.

The Heizer restoration process would cost approximately \$1 million, according to a DMB estimate.

When asked about the state's plans regarding the fate of "This Equals That," Lapshen said her department is discussing four different scenarios. Offering the framework to an arts community group for privately funded restoration and placement is one possibility. Seeking private funding to erect the sculpture at an alternate site is another. But they may also seek state-appropriated funds for restoration, or may choose to do nothing at all, and to dispose of the steel framework. "Either way, funding is clearly a huge obstacle. The state and the arts community are facing monumental budget challenges," said Lapshen.

#### A Lotus Flower That Never Bloomed

"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 of "This Equals That." Supporters and fund-raisers were enthusiastic: With this project, they claimed, 600,000 people traveling through the Capitol every year wouldn'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, they imagined.

Clearly, the lotus flower never bloomed.

According to the Department of Management and Budget, cracks in "This Equals That" had formed during fabrication, when the sculpture's seven iron, oxide-tinted gunite pieces were first sprayed over the stainless steel, plywood-and-mesh framework. This allowed water to seep through and rot the interior boards. The water is also said to have seeped down into the concrete plaza below, to the underground parking garage upon which the ensemble sits — dangerously weakening spots in the garage's roof. In 2002, this was the main reason to remove "This Equals That."

Michael Govan, director of the New York Dia Art Foundation, sponsor of Heizer's massive land art project in Nevada called "City," said state government was using the sculpture's lack of waterproofing as an excuse.

Heizer, who lives on a ranch in Hiko, Nev., was never consulted about Michigan's decision to dismantle Lansing's Stonehenge. Last year, when news broke that former Gov. John Engler had approved the action, a spokeswoman for the Department of Management and Budget said the state had been unable to locate Heizer. She commented that a letter had been prepared but the address was missing.

Govan said that it was "ridiculous" for the artist not to have been consulted, especially considering that his address has been the same for many years. Govan pointed out that the 1980 piece is ("or maybe was") one of America's greatest monumental sculptures. He said that he was skeptical of Michigan's interest in restoring the sculpture, considering that it had been neglected for so long, and that there was no communication with the artist.

Harriet F. Senie, associate professor of art history at City College of New York and author of "The Titled Arc Controversy," a case study of the dismantlement of Richard Serra's New York City sculpture, said that the excuse of "safety" is a coverup that's often used for removing a public piece. She recalled the example of George Sugarman's sculpture "Baltimore Federal," a General Services Administration commission of 1978, which was removed because "people were concerned that rapists could hide behind it." Senie said that whereas the Serra piece was taken down because some people hated it, "This Equals That" was being removed, more or less, "as a function of neglect."

In a recent phone interview from New York, Jennifer Mackiewicz, an associate for the Dia Center for the Arts, and Heizer's assistant in the Nevada desert for 11 years, said Heizer is perturbed about the entire situation. She said that the other governments the artist has worked with have all been much more cooperative than Michigan. Mackiewicz mentioned Seattle, which purchased Heizer's "Adjacent, Against, Upon" in 1976, and other arts commissions across the United States that own Heizer sculptures and had always contacted him prior to restoring his creations.

Mackiewicz said that seeing Michigan treat "This Equals That" so poorly was sad, but that she wasn't surprised, given the long prehistory of unprofessional treatment.

In 1996 the original colored concrete deck was removed during construction beneath the plaza and grass was used to replace the deck afterwards. A walkway was then laid down through the center of the plaza, dividing the artwork in half. "What occurred here is virtually unthinkable in the art world, for no one truly has the right to alter or destroy a work of public art," wrote supervising architect Bill Kessler in a protest letter to Engler.

Heizer also protested the plaza's renovation in a letter to Engler: "Not only was the color-related plaza which defined the sculpture from all its visual competition removed, but a very thoughtless mix of grass, concrete and rock put in its place, altering totally the clarity and simplicity of the sculpture." Heizer and Kessler asked Engler to authorize a second reconstruction of the plaza as soon as possible.

In his 1998 reply letter to Kessler, former Attorney General Frank Kelly argued that Heizer's consent for the changes had not been necessary, since there were "no provisions in his contract with the State giving him any right to exercise control over the sculpture's representation." Kelly added that in a letter eight years ago to E. Ray Scott of the Commission on Art in Public Places, Heizer had consented to changes. The artist wrote that if the state would restore the sculpture, "I am willing to have removed and replaced [the concrete] entirely with grass."

In a letter to The Detroit News, Heizer replied: "The State has cited my letter to Scott as some kind of sign-off or go-ahead to do whatever they pleased, without any control or criteria." The artist indicated that he planned to remove his name from the piece. "Should the state restore 'This Equals That' completely to its original specifications, I would rescind my decision to remove my name from this work."

Mary Ann Keeler, vice chairwoman of the Special Arts Commission that was appointed in 1975 by former Gov.

Milliken, was "furious" about Engler's approval of the action. "Not a single former commission member and not one donor was called. This was a gift to the citizens of Michigan. The piece is in hundreds of books, and kids learn about it when they take art classes in college. I cannot believe they'd destroy a \$600,000 piece, one with \$250,000 paid from our taxes. It's unconscionable."

Keeler and her late husband, Miner S., have been large beneficiaries of the arts. In the last several years, they generously donated to several libraries, museums, and health organizations in Michigan, including their most recent gift, of \$1 million to Grand Rapids' Grand Valley State University, for a library. President George H.W. Bush appointed Mrs. Keeler to the President's Advisory Committee on the Arts.

The philanthropists' attempts to influence Gov. Engler's decision to remove the Heizer piece were to no avail. But the dismantlement of "This Equals That" coincided with Jennifer Granholm's election as governor, which Keeler saw a second opportunity. In a letter to Granholm, she appealed: "You, with your Harvard education, know the significance and beauty of art. You cannot let the Heizer fall into oblivion. Restore the Heizer sculpture. By this simple act you can become the Governor who supports Art."

Keeler never received a response.

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