Women and the Land

Alice Aycock: Sculpture and Projects, by Robert Hobbs, Cambridge and London, MIT Press, 2005; 423 pages, $50.
Mary Miss, texts by Mary Miss, essays by Daniel M. Abramson, Joseph Giovannini, Eleanor Heartney and Sandro Marpillero, New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 2004; 252 pages, $85.
Art and Survival: Patricia Johanson's Environmental Projects, by Caffyn Kelley, introduction by Lucy R. Lippard, Salt Spring Island, BC, Canada, Islands Institute of Interdisciplinary Studies, 2005; 180 pages, $24.95.

BY SUZAAN BOETTGER

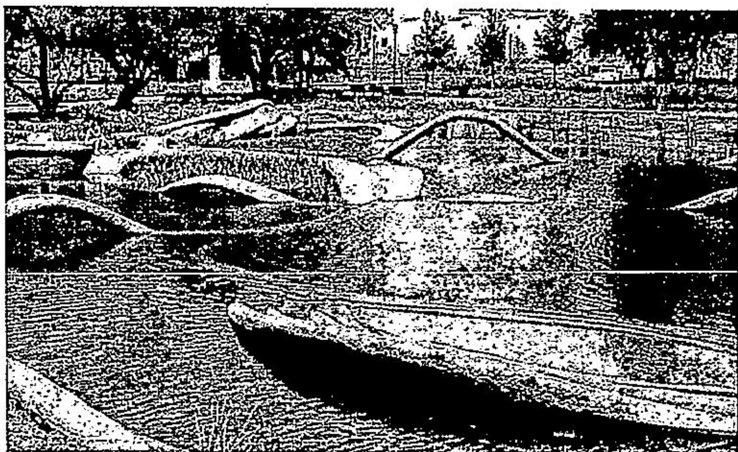
You probably know the work of sculptor Alice Aycock, whose early transient constructions in rural sites evolved into large-scale metal vortices now prevalent in international sculpture collections; she regularly exhibits in galleries and museums. And you may well have appreciated the view across the Hudson in Lower Manhattan from *South Cove* (1987) designed by Mary Miss, who works with architects on public art projects that enhance our attention to space and nature, yet whose gallery exhibitions—recently of collaged black-and-white photographs of landscapes and architecture—are infrequent. But it is doubtful, unless you are well versed in women artists or ecological art, that you have heard of Patricia Johanson, one of the foremost contemporary artists working, often for international agencies, in the realm of direct restoration of natural environments. Johanson's Web site lists her last exhibition as 1997, in Berlin.

Aycock, Miss and Johanson all came on the scene in the early 1970s, when feminist consciousness was emerging in the art world. Following the all-male earthworks movement, they were among the women artists (Agnes Denes, Nancy Holt and Michelle Stuart are others) who began to build temporary structures in undeveloped or natural environments. Lately, substantial monographs surveying decades of all three artists' works have appeared. As much as the texts themselves, the books' differing formats reveal much about how contemporary art history is written.

These publications are distinct both in the author-subject relationships generating them and in their packaging as books. The artists all made their names with nonsalable, extra-gallery work, yet the volumes' varying designs, hefts and production values indicate just how crucial commercial exposure is to an artist's renown. Aycock's presence in gallery shows, museums and sculpture collections has garnered her the kind of trophy book that every well-recognized midcareer artist deserves: a thorough analysis of her work, contextualized both intellectually and biographically by a respected scholar who is clearly attuned to this art and adds some interpretive nuances of his own. The material is presented in a carefully designed tome published by the major university press attending to new conceptual art forms. Miss, meanwhile, gets a big honorific compendium of descriptive essays and black-and-white photographs in a package that looks conventionally posh but is marred by some careless editing. And Johanson is represented by a moderate-size volume published by an idealistic nonprofit agency. The book includes drawings and documentary photographs that are almost all in full color and a text of loving advocacy.

Caffyn Kelley's *Art and Survival: Patricia Johanson's Environmental Projects* has been published only in soft cover, and with its roughly 8-by-9-inch size, it can be held easily in one's hands or lap for perusal. This increases the reader's ability to absorb the detailed descriptions of projects and to closely scrutinize the illustrations, many of them intricate drawings. One almost wants to call these glowing pictures "illuminations," because the tenor here is akin to spiritualized reverence—the artist's for nature and the writer's for her subject.

This critical respect is merited, given Johanson's radical innovations in applying an esthetic sensitivity to bio-remediation and the potential of art to "heal the earth." In 1978, in response to her exhibition "Plant Drawings for Projects" at Rosa Esman Gallery in New York, Johanson was invited to Dallas to transform the biologically dead Fair Park Lagoon into a sculptural recreation area. Working with marine biologist Richard Fullington, head of collections and research at the adjacent Dallas Museum of Natural History, she drained and replenished the once slimy pond and, initiating a practice that became typical of her work, used the twisting shapes of newly planted vegetation for the design of paths, bridges and perches that project just over the water, encouraging an intimate connection with aquatic life. The lagoon, and that part of the city, revived. Since then major projects have been commissioned by governmental agencies in Brazil, Kenya, South Korea and the U.S.



View of Patricia Johanson's Fair Park Lagoon, *1981-86, 5-block-long pond, two gunite sculptures, plants, animals; in Dallas, Tex.*

Kelley's approbation undoubtedly also derives in part from an identification with Johanson. An environmental artist herself, Kelley is on the board of the publisher, the Islands Institute of Interdisciplinary Studies, which (according to its Web site) "aims to link art and survival through interdisciplinary approaches and to foster creative solutions to environmental and social problems." The Canadian nonprofit organization deserves gratitude for producing a beautifully designed and extensively illustrated book. *Art and Survival* fills a need for information on Johanson's noncommercial model of being—she says "artists who want to make a difference should keep their goals high and their personal needs at a minimum." That remark suggests an archaic artistic persona worthy of more than just admiring reportage.

Mary Miss: Untitled (detail), 1994, seven troughs and a viewing platform, earth, wood, water, galvanized metal; at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Kelley writes in a clear, articulate fashion, but she is extremely uninformed about the art-historical milieu of the 1960s and '70s in which Johanson developed, leading her to overestimate the artist's originality. She says, for example: "Sculptor David Smith challenged her with the statement that sculpture could be horizontal. In response, Johanson built *William Rush*, a 200-foot-long [steel plate] horizontal line." All right, but what is the relation of this 1966 work to Carl Andre's floor-bound line of bricks, *Lever*, shown in the influential "Primary Structures" exhibition that spring? Additionally, Kelley separates the narrative of Johanson's art from her biography, whereas the artist's troubled marital, medical and professional history suggests that her art-making may reflect her own struggles for survival as much as the planet's. Still, until these historical and psychological deficiencies in interpretation stimulate a more complex analysis of Johanson's work, the present volume offers a useful introduction.

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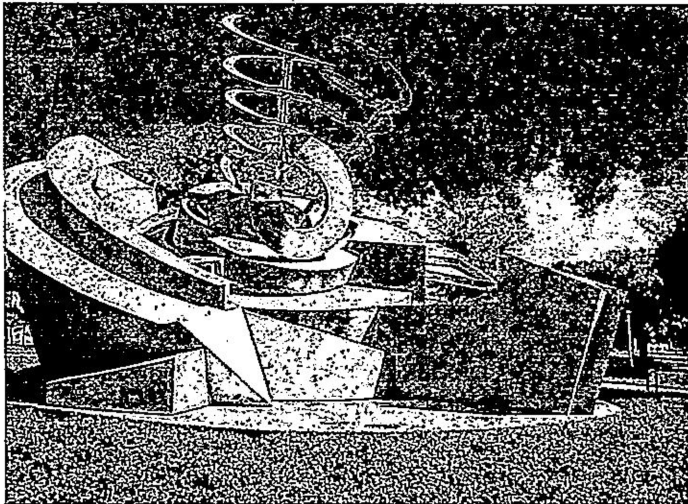
By contrast, the compilation *Mary Miss* lacks a perceptive guiding author. One gets the sense that something is "amiss" no later than the title page, when one of the four essayists is identified as *Elizabeth* Heartney (no, not an alter ego of the well-known Eleanor). This mistake is part of the book's overall cognitive dissonance. The full-page, glossy, black-and-white photograph on the jacket of this 11-by-10-inch volume, a boldly oblique view onto tree trunks and a geometric water trough, coupled with endpapers in lurid red, calls up the extroverted, commercial coding of a Barbara Kruger poster rather than Miss's subdued, contemplation-engendering works in nature. The book's aggressive design directly contradicts Heartney's incisive assessment of Miss's public art: "In contrast to art and urban experiences conceived on the entertainment model, she presents public life as a realm where communal and private experiences coexist—where one may join in a larger shared experience or step back for moments of private reverie."



Alice Aycock: Maze 2000, *2002, aluminum, 17 by 26 by 30 feet; at the University of South Florida, Tampa. Photo Vincent Ahern.*

Like the Johanson book, *Mary Miss* functions best as chronological documentation, particularly in the many well-illustrated project descriptions and proposals written by Miss herself. Her works are characterized by simple industrial materials such as unpainted lumber, wire mesh and concrete used to construct ramps, walkways, seating areas and viewing platforms that, as Miss said about her *Greenwood Pond: Double Site* (1996) at the Des Moines Art Center, "allow the physical nature of the place to be revealed and experienced multiple ways."

With her synthesis of sculpture, architecture and landscaping, Miss is a pioneering figure in Land Art. Yet beyond Rosalind Krauss's account of one environmental work at the beginning of her famous structuralist article "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" (*October*, Spring 1979), Miss's contribution has not been historicized. The essays in *Mary Miss* are broadly informative, but, as in Kelley's book on Johanson, the credibility of certain claims is hindered by the writers' lack of historical knowledge of the genre. Thus Joseph Giovannini's praise for "how radical and original Miss's departure from the norm was" sounds like both overly reductive analysis and pure hagiography. You can say, well, yes, if you think the norm in the 1960s was vertical statuary, but no, if you recall her predecessor Robert Morris's installations and his phenomenologically oriented texts in *Artforum*, just one of many radical reconceptualizations of sculpture in the decade before Miss started exhibiting. Daniel M. Abramson's more precise descriptions of Miss's "Art of Engagement" curtail blather. But most impressive is the forceful succinctness of Miss's own thoughts, which cut through rhetorical obfuscation every time they are cited by the essayists. Miss speaks, for instance, of a desire "to occupy a new territory, one that I could go out and construct for myself as a woman." Her emergence was concurrent with—and undoubtedly facilitated by—that of the feminist art movement. So it is symptomatic of the absence of an analyst with a purview beyond the artist's oeuvre or beyond current art that there is no discussion of the changing relations in the 1970s between women, nature and large construction projects. That was a configuration which Miss and Aycock were central in originating, and which Johanson later took into environmentalism.

Aycock's ambivalent response to the rise of feminism is one of many issues that Robert Hobbs addresses with some subtlety in *Alice Aycock, Sculpture and Projects.* This 11-by-9-inch, spaciously designed monograph masterfully integrates its documentary and interpretive functions, suggesting a felicitous coupling of scholar and art. Hobbs, a distinguished art historian, illuminates Aycock's work with references as intricate as Aycock's own, which range from the literary to the biographical. Given the tendency of Aycock's sculptures to thwart expectations of comfort, stability and apparent sense, her work presents intellectual and emotional puzzles. Hobbs's cerebral deciphering involves peeling back layers of sources and pulling out meanings.

Who would want to enter the idiosyncratic 30-by-20-by-12-inch *Low Building with Dirt Roof (for Mary)*, 1973, made of wood, stone and earth, and situated in a field? Yet Hobbs finds (by delving into associations with the artist's grandmother, Mycenaean graves, Greek tragedies, Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* and other sources Aycock mentioned to Grace Glueck in the *New York Times*) that it conflates the claustrophobia of a tomb with the sanctuary of home. As Aycock's constructions become more elaborate, Hobbs shows, they progressively "underscore the permeability between metropolises and necropolises." He identifies other elements, such as the ladders to nowhere set in tight enclosures or leaning against walls in her "True and False Projects" (1977), as formal "conundrums and contradictions" that manifest a creative "schizophrenia" in Aycock's art and her writing about it. These disjunctures invite viewers to contemplate the "polysemous nature of her sculpture," whose potential discomforts and dangers evoke the "difficulty in general of stable coherence."

Aycock's large networks of metal constructions of the past two decades have been inspired by her reading in areas ranging from alchemy to post-structuralism. Spread across a gallery, the repeated circular and linear forms, some with blades, call up fantastical machines, frustrating circus rides, occult maps or the collaboration of a mad scientist and an obsessive encyclopedia browser. Fortunately, Hobbs is up to the role of modern-day Virgil, guiding us through the enticing and disturbing imagery. He even has a theory to spin all this twisted arcana into reasonableness: "Aycock's unabashed indulgence in intellectual games" reflects "the tremendous desire for easily accessible, widely disparate forms of knowledge and multitudinous perspectives that characterize the beginnings of our information age." Eventually, this conjunction of artist and scholar leads the reader to a perceptual flip: Aycock's hermetically conceptualized, structurally convoluted works can also be viewed as expressionistic—they evoke a defensive impenetrability. One then desires more substantial psychological insight into the emotional conflicts stimulating Aycock's manic intellectuality.

In the 1970s, Miss and Aycock were central in originating new relations between women, nature and large construction projects; Johanson later took this configuration into environmentalism.

Author: *Suzaan Boettger recently contributed "Earthworks' Contingencies" to* Ethics and the Visual Arts, *edited by Elaine A. King and Gail Levin (Allworth, 2006).*