

DESCENDING INTO THE ABYSS OF DOUBLE NEGATIVE

BY GREG LINDQUIST

Michael Heizer's immense earthwork, *Double Negative*, is experienced less as the sculptural presence of an object than the sculpted absence of a void. It consists of two large gaps that were carved out of a mesa in 1969 through a massive project of blasting and bulldozing 244,000 tons of rock. A quarter mile separates this pair of relatively symmetrical and rectangular slices, each which measures approximately 30 feet wide, 50 feet deep and, together from end to end, 1,500 feet long. With no conservation measures taken, the slow erosion of *Double Negative* lends it the look (from many viewsheds) of a native geological feature created not by human activity but solely through the entropic accretion of time and elemental change.

Double Negative evokes the proportions and scale of urban architecture and the directional orientation of cathedrals. It also represents an enormous expansion in the size of Minimalist work of the time. Where Heizer's peers altered the way one perceived the interior spaces of exhibition rooms, *Double Negative* transforms the way one experiences constructed space in a nonhuman environment. Forty-four years later, a strong linear symmetry between the matching northern and southern transepts is the most prominent human-made characteristic. At *Double Negative*, human construction and natural formation become indistinct in a way that creates immense phenomenological and physical power.

I made the journey to *Double Negative* with the artist Mary Mattingly in a 113-degree heat wave between the third and fourth of July. The fact that our trip coincided with Independence Day underscored a certain Americanness in the work's grand scale and location. We attempted (and failed) to camp at the base of its northern swath. Like my 2011 visit to Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* in a frigid Utah winter, the unpredictable and circumscribing site-specific weather played a large role in the experience of the work.

Approximately an hour and a half northeast of Las Vegas, *Double Negative* is situated in the crumbling capillary ridges that descend from the east side of Mormon Mesa, which was once the bottom of a prehistoric ocean. With a four-wheel drive Jeep, we made our approach through a segment of steep, winding dirt roads, crested the mesa and were guided with ease to the site by a map application on my smartphone. I fell into a sudden state of isolation and decompression; I realized Las Vegas had compromised my ability to focus. The rapid blink of neon and LED, the cacophony of electronic slot machines, and blue clouds of cigarette smoke now seemed a distant fantasy. In its place, the deep silence of the desert invited a hyper-awareness of the landscape's nuanced light and rugged physicality. Heizer's dual ravines became enclosures of sensory deprivation.

If Las Vegas is a mesa surface of homogenized sensation and experience, then the void of *Double Negative* becomes an abyss for perceptual nuance and depth. Standing within the work, the void and its unsheltered geological strata become exposed as actants in a system of natural processes that merge with human interaction. The erosive rain at *Double Negative* became an appropriate metaphor for John Dewey's description of the experience of art as an

uncontained stream, free flowing and boundary-less. It is continuously merging. Similarly, Maurice Merleau-Ponty believed that our body is as interconnected to the whole sensible world as our gaze. The world is as important as our perception of it. The active nonhuman materials in the landscape—lively sandstone and vital rhyolite, sky and light—saturated my body's passive movement and inert gaze.

Mary and I photographed the spectacular conditions of golden twilight on Heizer's work. Originally empty, the excavated space has filled with debris fallen from the slowly eroding interior walls, an exposed stratified frieze of sandstone and rhyolite. Both matters have microstructures that are porous and quivering with potential for transformation. Yet, sandstone is more outwardly fragile in crumbly appearance and its porous, non-crystalline structure allows filtration and movement through and around. When it falls, it becomes sand and dust. Rhyolite, on the other hand, is only malleable when heated, becoming a variety of igneous volcanic rock.

We decided to wrap two large fallen rocks, one inside the northern transept and second in the southern, with a green tarp and twine. Our tarp-enveloped rhyolite boulders foregrounded this slow, entropic collapse of the manufactured space and nonhuman reclamation of the void. Suggesting anthropomorphic qualities, it also highlighted the agentic capacity of the boulder to act within an assemblage of these nonhuman forces. In another sense, the tarp functioned to shelter the rock from its environment, suggesting a fragility and preciousness to the geological formation.

We chose the boulders by placement, appearance, and estimation of the tarp's size. As we encircled and girdled the rocks with twine, pulverized sandstone filled the crevices in my boots—the interstitial space, I realized, between my body and the earth. The displacement and transference of physical matter by humans commingled with the natural affects of pressure and force, resistance and conformation. I allowed the dust to infill my footwear, imagining a remote yet certain future when the eroding rock would fill the great gaps Heizer cut in the mesa.

After dusk we set up our tent at the base of *Double Negative*, but we wouldn't remain for long. Shortly after sunset a lightning storm drove us off the mesa and into our Jeep. Winds shook our SUV like it was made of paper. Fearing flooded roads and entrapment, we decamped and descended the mesa. That night we slept in the Jeep on the service road—and it never rained. Temperatures remained in the blistering 90s and we awoke every hour to drink bottles of water to counterbalance dehydration. Around 6 a.m., we returned to *Double Negative* and found our weathered bivouac. Desert winds had blown our tarp nearly off the boulder. Its bedraggled form was now dictated as much by the active elements in the environment as it was by Mary and me. Baruch Spinoza described all objects as animate, though in different degrees, and said that everything is made of the same substance. Disheveled by the wind, the tarp now appeared to be part of the rock. It melded with the desert's attributes just as *Double Negative* had; indeed as everything does out there, eventually.

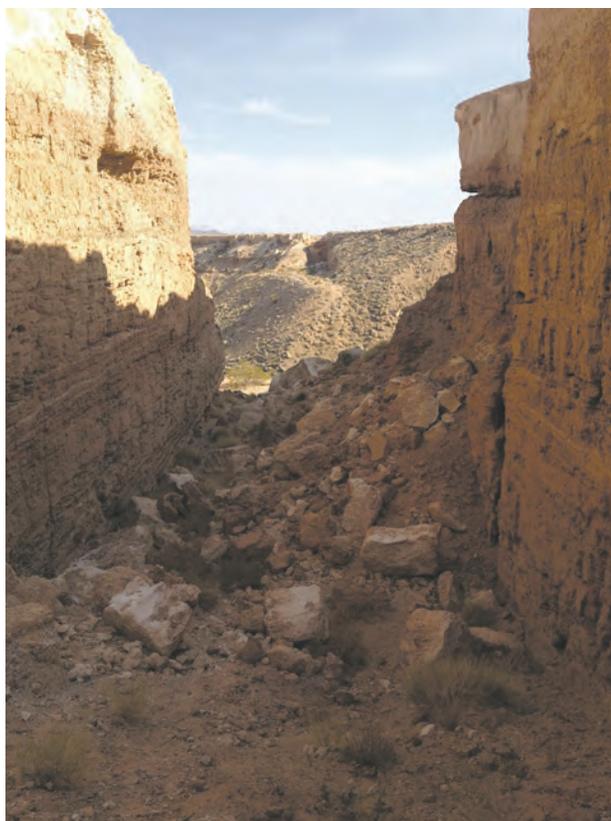
The encounter with *Double Negative* in my mind remains inseparable from its network of surroundings. How far does that extend? The experience began the moment we stepped off the jet bridge into the terminal clanging with slot machines. It included our first night of wandering from our hotel down seedy abandoned service roads and through the Ikea-like corralling sidewalks of Las Vegas's strip, ending up in the simulacrum of phthalo blue canals at the Venetian Hotel and losing money at slot machines. Maybe, though, the experience reaches as far as my first encounter with the photographs and text in *Earthworks: Art and Landscape of the Sixties* and *Land and Environmental Art*. Or, maybe it was when I was 11-years-old and dug a labyrinth of foxholes near my tree house. Eventually, the weather washed those away too.



Mary Mattingly, *Filling Double Negative* (Collaboration with Greg Lindquist), 2013. Courtesy of the artist and Robert Mann Gallery, New York. ©Mary Mattingly.



The environs of *Double Negative* on July 3, 2013. Michael Heizer, *Double Negative*, 1969. 240,000-ton displacement of rhyolite and sandstone, 1500 x 50 x 30 ft. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, gift of Virginia Dwan, photo © Greg Lindquist.



The Northern Transept of *Double Negative* on July 3, 2013. Michael Heizer, *Double Negative*, 1969. 240,000-ton displacement of rhyolite and sandstone, 1500 x 50 x 30 ft. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, gift of Virginia Dwan, photo © Greg Lindquist.

After the Lightning Storm at the Base of the Northern Transept. *Double Negative* on July 4, 2013. Michael Heizer, *Double Negative*, 1969, 240,000-ton displacement of rhyolite and sandstone, 1500 x 50 x 30 ft., The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, gift of Virginia Dwan, photo © Mary Mattingly.

