

# Michael Heizer

In the mid-1960s, Michael Heizer made a series of trips to his home states of Nevada and California to experiment in the American desert landscape. Originally a painter, Heizer had already made several works in which geometric shapes were carved out of canvases. Soon he set out to undertake the same operation in larger dimensions and in open space, free from the constraints of the stretcher and canvas, the exhibition and, ultimately, the urban context. The first in his series of monumental Land art works, titled *North, East, South, West*, was to consist of four excavations in the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California that echoed the shapes in his paintings. It was only partially completed in 1967, when *North* and *South* were produced in painted wood and metal, respectively, at 4 feet across and 4 feet deep.

Decades after the work was dismantled, Dia commissioned Heizer to produce a re-creation, this time indoors. The inauguration of this new, permanent version of *North, East, South, West* coincided with the opening of Dia:Beacon in 2003, where it has been constructed in its entirety, with the dimensions and material that Heizer originally specified for it. This work is a sequence of geometric pits: two stacked cubic forms, one larger and one smaller (*North*); a cone (*South*); a triangular trough (*West*); and an inverted truncated cone (*East*). Together they measure more than 125 feet in length and sink from the floor of the gallery to a depth of 20 feet. When the work was first developed, such dimensions had no precedent in the art of recent times.

The concept of negative space is critical for the understanding of Heizer's work. Made literally of nothing, *North, East, South, West* presents the viewer with form as the separation of void and solid mass. The volume that traditionally defines a sculpture is described in Heizer's works as absence rather than presence.

The simplified geometric forms of *North, East, South, West* suggest the underlying Euclidean lexicon of basic three-dimensional forms—box, cone, and wedge—essential for all sculpture, ancient and modern. The architectural scale and construction of Heizer's work call forth comparisons to the megalithic monuments of ancient cultures—a comparison that is explicitly addressed in his *Negative Megalith #5* (1998), a natural, menhir-like stone inscribed in a rectangular niche, installed in a neighboring gallery. The son of an anthropologist, Heizer acknowledges numerous ancient sources for some of his forms but sees the comparison as more apt in the realm of effect than of specific reference:

"It is interesting to build a sculpture that attempts to create an atmosphere of awe. Small works are said to do this but it is not my experience. Immense, architecturally sized sculpture creates both the object and the atmosphere. Awe is a state of mind equivalent to religious experience, I think if people feel commitment they feel something has been transcended."

The sheer magnitude of *North, East, South, West*, along with its physical insertion into the floor, creates a sense of potential physical danger that dramatically charges the viewing experience.

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Michael Heizer was born in Berkeley, California, in 1944, son of anthropologist Robert Heizer. After briefly attending the San Francisco Art Institute in 1963–64, he moved to New York in 1966. In 1967 Heizer began creating large Earthworks, primarily in California and Nevada. For his first one-person show, at the Galerie Heiner Friedrich, Munich, in 1969, he removed 1,000 tons of earth in a conical shape to create *Munich Depression*. He followed this with *Double Negative*, a displacement of over 240,000 tons of earth to make two vast incisions opposite one another on the edge of Virgin River mesa, Nevada. Heizer's next one-person show was at the Dwan Gallery, New York, in 1970, and that same year he exhibited at the Venice Biennale. Major exhibitions of his work have been staged at institutions such as the Museum Folkwang, Essen (1979), and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (1984). Heizer lives in Nevada, where he continues to work on *City*, a sculptural complex begun in 1972.

*North, East, South, West*, 1967/2002  
weathering steel  
Dia Art Foundation; Gift of Lannan Foundation

adjacent gallery:  
*Negative Megalith #5*, 1998  
diorite granite and steel  
Extended loan, The Menil Collection, Houston; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James A. Elkins, Jr., in memory of Dominique de Menil

