

**The Psycho-Architecture  
of Alice Aycock:  
Early Works, 1972-77**

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“A maze of course could generate real panic.”<sup>1</sup>

— Alice Aycock

In the early 1970s, Minimalist sculpture, characterized by repeated forms, machined surfaces and cool, detached, often understated presentation, was the canonical mode of working. The object was stripped down to its component materials in what many artists, critics, and theorists considered the logical extension of Formalism. Earthworks were also gaining notoriety, and though placed in site-specific locations outside the gallery setting, they shared many characteristics with Minimalist sculpture, including a hard-edged aesthetic and the use of industrial tools and materials. These movements are concerned with ideas and materials foremost; they strip down the art object and emphasize intellectual content rather than emotional or psychological components in the works. Alice Aycock's participatory, site-specific sculpture of the period 1972-77 shares many characteristics with Minimalism and Earthworks, including interest in place, use of industrial materials, and a stripped down, seemingly deadpan aesthetic. However, she distinguishes herself from Minimalism and Earthworks in that associative content is the driving force in her work. Rather than an aesthetic or conceptual experience, Aycock's focus, goal, and intention is to

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Kardon, "Janet Kardon Interviews Some Modern Maze-Makers: Interview with Alice Aycock, September 1975," Art International April-May 1976: 66.

create a psychological and emotional effect. Aycock also shares many overlapping concerns with postmodern architecture, yet, again, creates a different expressive effect.

This paper contends that psychological and expressive qualities distinguish Aycock's work from that of her contemporaries working in similar forms, and seeks to establish commonalities and differences between Aycock and Minimalism, Earthworks, and postmodern architecture. A thorough understanding of the art historical context and Aycock's place in it provides a base from which to explore a specific Aycock project as it relates to the writings of Victor Turner, a theorist concerned with psychological experience.

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Alice Aycock (1946-) began creating site-specific architectural sculptures while in graduate school at Hunter College in New York, where she studied under Robert Morris. These early works are intended to create a visceral and psychological response in the viewer. They create an "architectural correlative for collective human fears"<sup>2</sup> and work off the viewer's phobias and phillas to create discomfort and disorientation. As Aycock's work evolves to her best-known pieces whose aesthetic is based on the machine, she continues her concerns with discomforting and disorienting the viewer. Her interests in creating interior spaces and active involvement of the viewer, however, are phased out, while the sense of fantasy and personal meaning is increased, resulting in a body of work with hermetic layers of meaning and a more complex and intellectual experience. Aycock's early projects are notable for their directness and experiential qualities, as well as their architectural aesthetic, and it is on these early works, pre-1978, that this discussion will center.

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Crary, "Projects in Nature," Arts Magazine December 1975: 52.



Aycock shares some similarities with other site-specific sculptors at this time in her career; she creates works situated out in the world, outside the museum or gallery space. Carl Andre describes the evolution of sculpture as "Sculpture as form. Sculpture as structure. Sculpture as place."<sup>3</sup> This last phrase describes the site-specific thinking in sculpture; sculptors were creating environments, molding sites, making places for the viewer to interact within the realm of time and space. Robert Morris discusses the historical context of experiential sculpture, and notes that "images give way to duration, present tense, and immediate spatial experience."<sup>4</sup> Aycock is indebted to this school of thinking, in which the two- or three-dimensional object is no longer the mode of inquiry, and, instead, the artist crafts a whole-body experience in space and time. Aycock acknowledges the embodiment of the viewing subject and creates an experience which involves all of the perceiving senses, the entire body, rather than creating a purely visual experience for a disembodied eye in the tradition of Western art.

Aycock also shares the Minimalist aesthetic employed at the time, exemplified by works like Carl Andre's *Lever*, *Pyramid*, and *Well* from this period (fig. 1). She similarly uses hard-edged, rectilinear forms. Rather than high art materials like marble, rare hardwoods, or bronze, Aycock employs industrial materials like concrete, lumber, and cinder block, and these are used unchanged, straight from the factory or lumberyard. Rather than working or crafting each surface, Aycock uses the materials as they are, and favors a directness of presentation common to Minimalism. *Walled Trench*, *Earth Platform*, *Center Pit* (1974) features low cinder block walls arranged in concentric squares (fig. 2). Her construction methods, such as post and lintel, are also simple and functional.

While Aycock shares Minimalism's straight-forward presentation and use of materials, and Earthworks' shaping of site, she differs from both of these movements in multiple ways: the creation of specifically interior space, the direct use of a variety of references

<sup>3</sup> Carl Andre as quoted in Hugh M. Davies and Ronald J. Onorato, *Sitings* (San Diego: La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986) 11.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Morris, "The Present Tense of Space," *Art In America* January-February 1978: 70.



from art and architectural history and elsewhere, and the intention of forcing an uncomfortable psychological experience in the viewer. Again, the psychological impact of Aycock's works distinguishes her from both Earthworks and Minimalism.

Aycock has a different relationship to the landscape than most site-specific artists. While site is of paramount importance to other American Earthworks artists such as Robert Smithson in, for example, *Spiral Jetty* (1970) (fig. 3), Aycock's concern only minimally pertains to the specific site on which her work is constructed. Instead, she is primarily engaged in the experience of the interior space created (fig. 4). While most artists working on site-specific pieces integrate their work with the landscape, causing one to question where the artwork ends and the landscape begins, Aycock's interiors are very separate from the landscape. The surrounding landscape often serves as protection from the interiors; it is the safe, ordinary place to which one can return. In contrast to American Earthworks artists, Aycock's works are not about the experience of the landscape, but instead about the experience of the interior spaces she creates.

Aycock shares Earthworks' participatory nature yet differs in specific emotional content. Michael Heizer, Smithson, and other American men working with Earthworks are interested in a return to the sublime, and seek to create a sublime landscape.<sup>5</sup> Their work can be seen as a remanifestation of Abstract Expressionism enacted in the landscape. Vastness, majesty, and heroism characterize the considerations, scale, and emotional content of their work. One must journey over a long distance to visit their large-scale, bold projects in a vast, rugged western landscape, exemplified by Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969-70) (fig. 5). The contrast between the characteristics associated with Apollo and Dionysus becomes evident when comparing Aycock's work with that of her Earthworks peers.<sup>6</sup> The sky-god characteristics of Apollo are featured prominently in Heizer and Smithson's work as they move and shape the earth for their goals of sublimity and

<sup>5</sup> American Earthworks artists differ from British artists like Goldsworthy who employ and document a less intrusive relationship with the natural world.

<sup>6</sup> Discussion on Apollo and Dionysus from Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991) 72-98.

heroism. Aycock, instead, uses a more personal, internal, psychological approach. The Dionysian elements of fear, chaos, dislocation, and dismemberment are the guiding principles of her work. Small scale, intimate, interior, dark, moody, and fear-inducing, Aycock's works stand in stark contrast to the Earthworks created by American men in the same period.

Many Earthworks artists refer to architectural spaces, but none creates interior space in the way Aycock does, nor do they make such direct historical references. American Earthworks artists of the early 1970s create large-scale quasi-architectural structures that evoke comparisons to ancient monuments. Heizer's *Complex I* (1972) and Morris's *Observatory* (1971) (figs. 6 and 7) are immense outdoor spaces evoking public architecture, though none creates a shelter one can enter. In marked contrast, Aycock creates smaller interior spaces with references to the house and intimate personal space. Mary Miss evokes interior spaces, but her works are intended to sharpen and control the viewers' perception of the surrounding landscape in pieces like *Veiled Landscapes* (1979) and *Staged Gates* (1979) (figs. 8 and 9). Richard Fleishner creates implied interior spaces of natural materials like eight-foot-high grasses and hay bales in pieces like *Hay Interior* (1971) and *Tufa Maze* (1973) (fig. 10). Although Fleishner was influenced by Etruscan tombs and other architectural interiors, the materials used assume greater importance than the specific spaces he creates. Aycock is alone in her creation of a specifically interior architectural space.

Because Aycock's works have many architectural elements, it is also significant to note her relationship to architectural history of the 1970s. Concurrent with Aycock's early work, modernist architecture is confronted with new thinking by postmodern architects. Postmodern architecture arises in reaction to the modernist aesthetic of the glass and steel skyscraper. Characterized by the valuation of materials and geometry over human concerns and the stripping away of architectural or historical references and associations, modernist architecture attempts unadorned, mechanized, "pure" design. Philip Johnson and Mies van

der Rohe are two of the main proponents of 20th century architecture's purification of form and extreme reductionism, with works like the *Seagram Building* (1958) (fig. 11). In Mies' words, "Less is more."

Postmodern architects like Robert Venturi and Charles Moore propose the idea of architecture as fiction and representation and respond with "less is a bore."<sup>7</sup> They use historical references and ornamentation and seek to create complex and contradictory structures with narrative content. "Stylistic vocabularies are employed to achieve an architecture which is no longer abstract but which puts its arguments across in a representational manner."<sup>8</sup> For postmodern architects, different styles derived from architectural history provide the raw materials that create a fiction, a narrative. Postmodern architecture also uses humor and irony. Moore's *Piazza d'Italia* in New Orleans (1976-79) (fig. 12) features a map of Italy when viewed from surrounding buildings and includes all five classical orders combined with neon, stainless steel and rivulets of water flowing down the columns. Moore creates a dialogue, a fiction, from the contrasts between the Old World and the New, the perfect versus the fragmented, and historical exactness versus humorous alienation. Venturi and Moore reject the reduction and purity of modernism by embracing narrative content and historical references in a playful, engaging, humanist manner.

This basic understanding of postmodern architecture provides a basis from which to explore Aycock's work as representation and content. Aycock also seems to be rejecting modernist architecture and its denial of humanity, fiction and expression. She, like postmodern architects, uses historical references in her architectural works, and creates complex and contradictory structures designed to evoke human emotions and involvement. However, Aycock uses her structures for a completely different end. While Venturi and Moore create structures that are playful and engaging, Aycock's works elicit comparison to

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<sup>7</sup> Heinrich Klotz, *The History of Postmodern Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1988) 128.

<sup>8</sup> Klotz 130.



“pre-columbian art...obsessive, brutal, angry, extravagant, aggressive, fearful.”<sup>9</sup> Her choice of stylistic and historical referents is based on their expressive potential as frightening, mysterious, and disorienting. The psychological edge she seeks invokes phobias and discomfort. Again we see how Aycock shares some overlapping concerns with architects of the early 70s, yet her work is distinguished by evoking a vastly different set of psychological experiences in her viewers.

While other site-specific artists evoke architectural references, Aycock directly quotes from very specific references. At various times, she cites architectural sources from ancient history, contemporary history, popular culture, and personal recollection. At her installations and sites, Aycock often includes written material denoting these sources and thinking processes. To describe the genesis of one work, *Simple Network of Underground Wells and Tunnels* (1975) (fig. 13), she lists “cave and pit dwellings, tombs, cellars, war bunkers, bank vaults.”<sup>10</sup> Many of her references are from ancient sites. In 1970-71, she visited Knossos and Epidaurus, and specifically mentions the tholos, labyrinth, and tomb systems as influential in her work.

Aycock published Beginnings of a Complex (1976-77), a short picture book that combines photographs, drawings, and texts, which expands on and complicates these references. Not only does she cite specific architecture, she also mentions cultural and pop-cultural references from movies (*Metropolis* and Godard’s *Les Carabiniers*), literature (descriptions from Defoe, Poe, and Borges), television (make-shift shanties on *Little Rascals*), art history (Bosch and Piranesi), and academic books documenting architecture.<sup>11</sup> Intermingled with all of these external texts are mentions of different places Aycock has seen, lived in, heard about, and dreamed, most often settings for vivid emotional occurrences. These personal references are of the utmost importance in her work, and it is notable that they serve as valid texts to collect from and refer to,

<sup>9</sup> Margaret Sheffield, “Alice Aycock: Mystery Under Construction,” *Artforum* September 1977: 63-65.

<sup>10</sup> Crary 53.

<sup>11</sup> Alice Aycock, Project Entitled “Beginnings of a Complex...” (New York: Lapp Princess Press, 1977) .

commensurate with literary or historical references. Again, Aycock chooses these references not only for their architectural setting, but for their expressive, psychological content.

Aycock's free-form culling of references and forms from art history has led to a general misreading of her early work. Her surface eclecticism has led many critics to focus on the symbolic and metaphoric content of her work, when in fact her primary interest is on the immediate physical experience of the space itself, the phenomenon of experience.<sup>12</sup> She is "interested in bizarre spatial experiences, those that would have a psychological edge."<sup>13</sup> This is her most important difference from Minimalist and Earthworks artists, and from postmodern architects: she seeks to evoke a strong psychological response in the viewer, most often discomfort or fear.

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Reading Aycock in terms of her relation to the work of Victor Turner, a theorist writing about a specific psychological state he calls "liminality," yields salient issues for further consideration of the psychological impact of Aycock's work. An analysis of Aycock's *Project Entitled "Beginnings of a Complex..."* shows that viewers of this project experience an emotional state akin to Turner's definition of a liminal experience.

Victor Turner, an anthropologist writing in the 60s, defines liminality as a state where one experiences a loss of self and a transformation. According to his anthropological definition, a social ritual or process serves to dissolve, tear down, or destroy individuals' identities before helping them construct or come into their new identity. The liminal phase in a ritual or social structure is fluid and outside the usual constraints of a culture, and thus fosters change. Some examples include the military's basic training, or a primitive culture's

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<sup>12</sup> Janet Kardon, "Janet Kardon Interviews Some Modern Maze-Makers: Interview with Alice Aycock, September 1975," *Art International* April-May 1976: 65-66.

<sup>13</sup> Kardon 65.

initiation rites into adulthood. Though primarily concerned with social rituals, Turner also describes the psychological state related to a liminal experience. Turner characterizes the liminal state as evoking feelings of humiliation, discomfort, disorientation, lack of control, and a resultant loss of self.

Literature and art can represent or describe liminal experiences. For example, in Alice in Wonderland, Alice travels underground into a world of absurdity, paradox, and dismemberment, before her return to the mundane reality of the meadow. Rather than represent a liminal state, Aycock's *Project Entitled "Beginnings of a Complex..."* creates a liminal experience in viewers. Taken on a literal journey through time and space, viewers undergo a profound psychological experience.

*Complex* was built as a temporary installation for the "Dokumenta" exhibition in Kassel, Germany (figs. 14 and 15). Constructed of concrete and wood, the complex features underground tunnels which connect five disparate tower structures. Upon entering the complex, viewers find themselves in a subterranean maze (fig. 16), in a system of narrow tunnels only 48" high, confronted with dead-ends and wrong turns. When an opening with a ladder provides escape upward from the dark tunnels, viewers find themselves trapped again, this time enclosed in well shafts or towers or on high ledges above the ground, still unable to escape from the complex, forced to return to the dark. For this project, Aycock imagines an "aerial maze — vertigo and weightlessness."<sup>14</sup>

Aycock is interested in "reaching some kind of threshold level — of claustrophobia, acrophobia,"<sup>15</sup> based on the physicality of the space created. To design many of these early works, Aycock layed them out with a tape measure to imagine how the space would feel to be in. She has said, "a maze of course could generate real panic."<sup>16</sup> *Complex* combines the experience of two phobias in quick succession; dark, constricted tunnels with many dead-ends connect to towers, doorways, and ladders in the air from which the visitor has no

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<sup>14</sup> Aycock.

<sup>15</sup> Davies and Onorato 108.

<sup>16</sup> Kardon 66.



means to descend except back into the tunnel system. One of the most disturbing themes in Aycock's works is the presence of real physical danger. One of the shafts in *Beginnings of a Complex* forces the viewer to move between a series of ladders and openings which are almost three feet apart, while thirty feet above the ground (fig. 17). Viewers experience what for many involves a confrontation of their worst fears: fear of enclosure and entrapment, fear of heights, and an extreme disorientation. The experience of participating in *Complex* involves frustration, humiliation, and loss of control, the psychological states Turner describes as liminal.

Aycock creates constricted spaces and frustrates attempts to move through and around them. One author describes her work as "architectural black humor,"<sup>17</sup> the simultaneous invitation to explore and the impossibility or frustration of trying to do so. The structure makes visitors uncomfortable, awkward, and distrustful. It is not adapted to human functions or needs. Aycock's use of familiar materials serves to reinforce the deep unease when confronted with one of her works, which though materially familiar, is experientially unfamiliar and upsetting. Aycock's architectural projects employ "rational methods of construction to create notably disjunctive, incoherent, and ambiguous structures."<sup>18</sup> The materials and construction are very direct and un-noteworthy — concrete, cinder block, plywood, and lumber (fig. 18). These are everyday, pedestrian materials recognizable from daily life, yet Aycock upsets and subverts our expectations of architecture and constructed spaces. As Turner theorizes, liminal experiences are created outside the usual constraints of society. Aycock's structures defy the logic and rules we commonly ascribe to the built environment, and create an experience outside the confines of everyday experience.

While Aycock creates a distinctly liminal experience, the change that her works foster is less clear. According to Turner, during a liminal experience a transformation occurs that helps individuals construct new identities. The question is raised, "what change has

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<sup>17</sup> Jean-Louis Bourgeois, "Review of Exhibitions: New York: Alice Aycock at 112 Green St," *Art In America* July-August 1977: 94.

<sup>18</sup> Howard N. Fox, *Metaphor: New Projects by Contemporary Sculptors* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982) 47.

occurred in viewers upon their emergence from *Complex?*” Exposure to an Aycock work may serve to allow emergence into the familiar, everyday world with perceptions sharpened and awareness increased. It may serve to remind us of our lack of control in an only superficially ordered universe. It may remind us of the deep recesses in our personal psychologies where we generally dare not tread. Or the very lack of definable new identity may be part of the disorientation one experiences.

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Aycock creates a liminal experience in those who brave her complicated structures. She moves her viewers down into the earth, through thresholds, gateways, and portals. She presents her viewers with absurdities and challenges, presents a world where the rules are broken, and where one cannot count on anything. Viewers are dismembered, lose their sense of self, and lose confidence in their perceptions and cognitions when confronted with dead ends, twists and turns, dark tunnels and entrapping towers. Aycock’s architecture seems created to confound, and designed around its very lack of function. Georges Bataille, French philosopher and surrealist, describes the world of “project,” the man-made sphere of goal-orientation, within which all of our human endeavors and rational attempts are situated. According to Bataille, objects without function allow glimpses outside the world of project into the sphere of the “immanent immensity,”<sup>19</sup> where the violent and chaotic flow of the natural world defies human comprehension. Aycock’s work serves to move us into this other realm: the arena of chaos, fear, disorder, madness, mystery, and the unfathomable.

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<sup>19</sup> Georges Bataille, Theory of Religion (New York: Zone Books, 1989) 27.



Figure 1. Carl Andre, *Lever*, 1966, brick; *Well*, 1964/70, wood; *Pyramid*, 1959/70, wood (Wold Center slide).



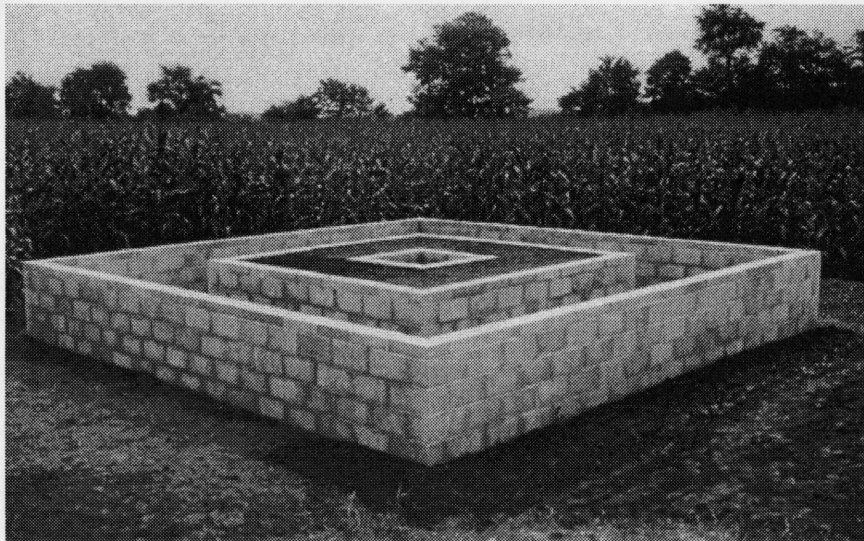


Figure 2. Alice Aycock, *Walled Trench, Earth Platform, Center Pit*, 1974 (Wold Center slide).



Figure 3. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, aerial view, 1970, Great Salt Lake, Utah (Tiberghein, p. 262).



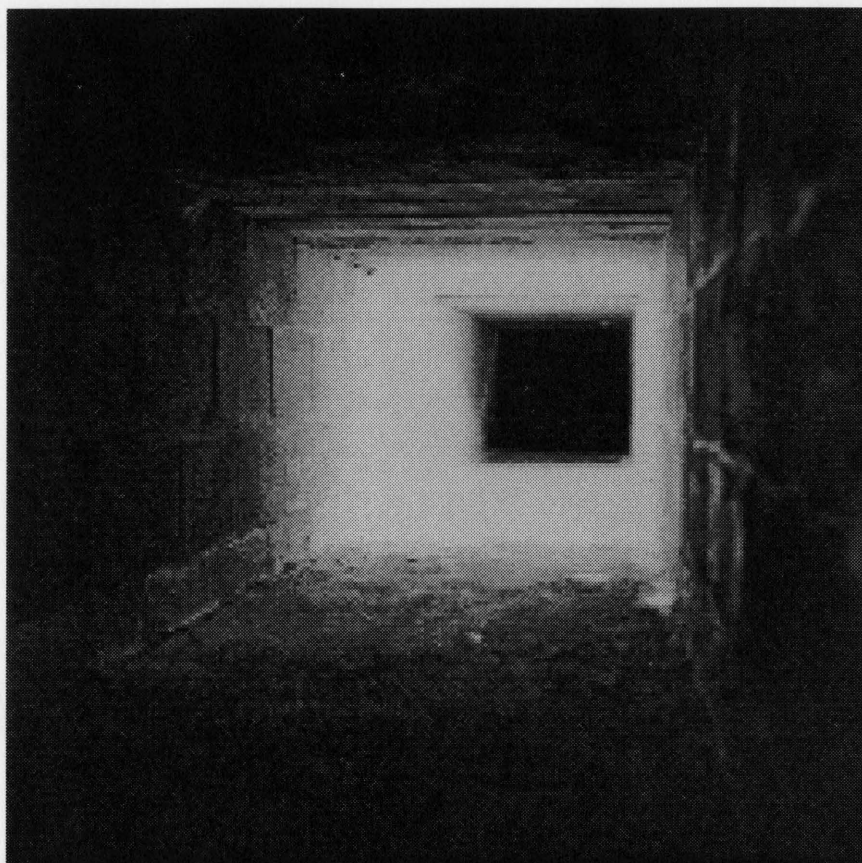


Figure 4. Alice Aycock, *Simple Network of Underground Wells and Tunnels*, interior, 1975, Merriewold West, Far Hills, New Jersey (Davies and Onorato, p. 40).





Figure 5. Michael Heizer, *Double Negative*, 1969-70, Mormon Mesa, Overton, Nevada (Tiberghein, p. 93).

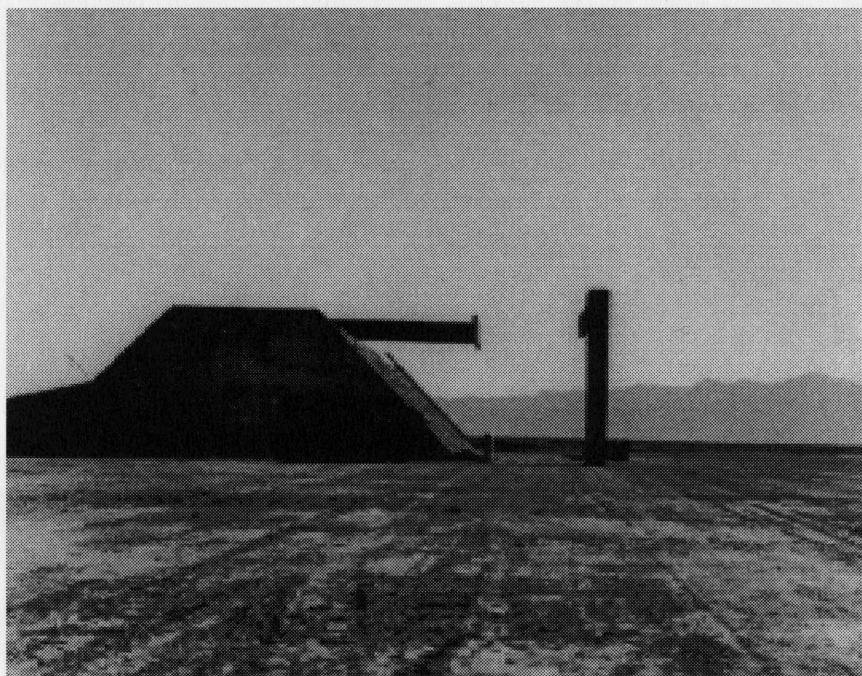


Figure 6. Michael Heizer, *Complex I*, 1972-74, Garden Valley, Nevada (Tiberghein, p. 73).



Figure 7. Robert Morris, *Observatory*, 1977, Oostelijk Flevoland, Netherlands, previously installed at another site in 1971 (Tiberghein, p. 81).



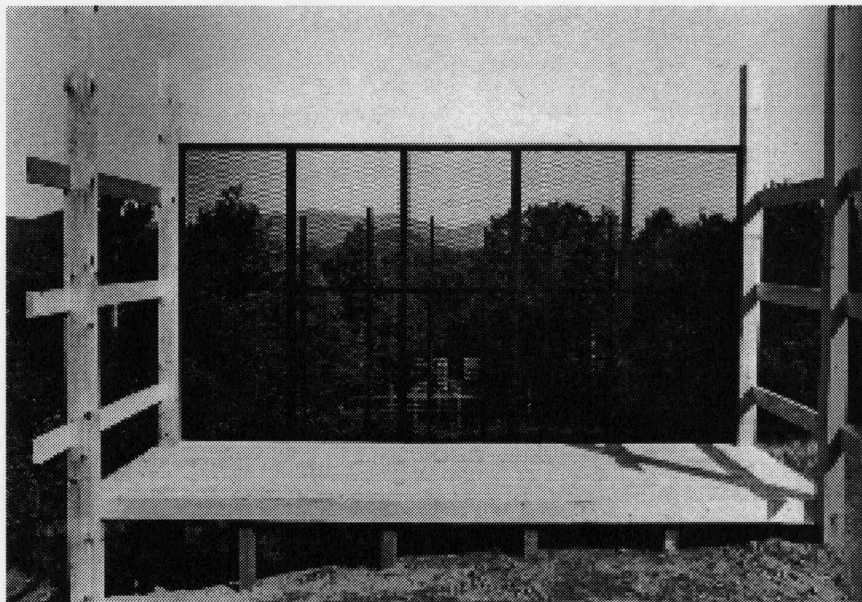


Figure 8. Mary Miss, *Veiled Landscape*, 1979, Lake Placid, New York (Davies and Onorato, p. 72).

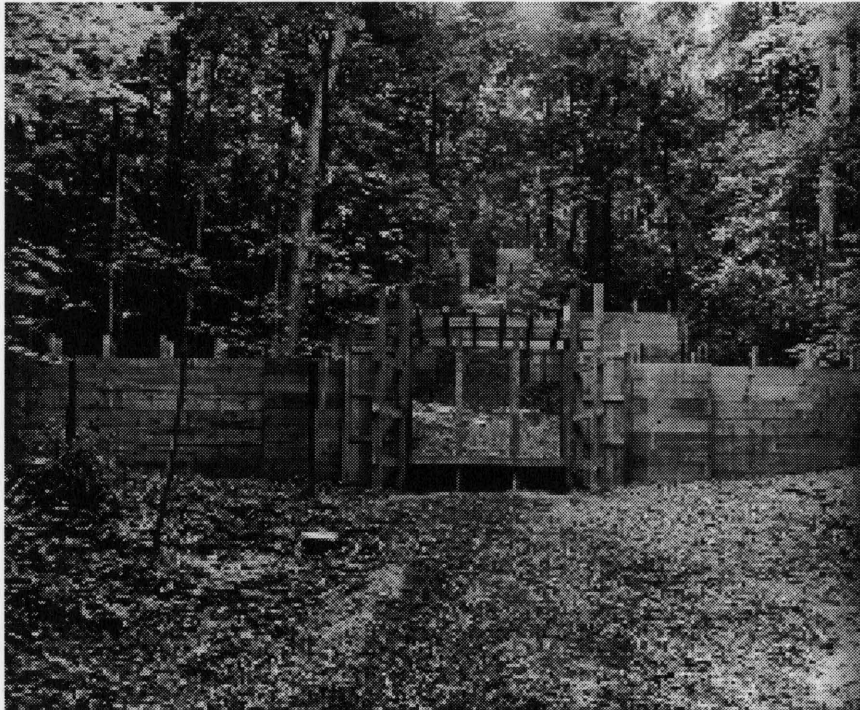


Figure 9. Mary Miss, *Staged Gates*, 1979, Dayton, Ohio (Davies and Onorato, p. 70).





Figure 10. Richard Fleischner, *Tufa Maze*, 1973, Pocantico Hills, New York (Davies and Onorato, p. 54).



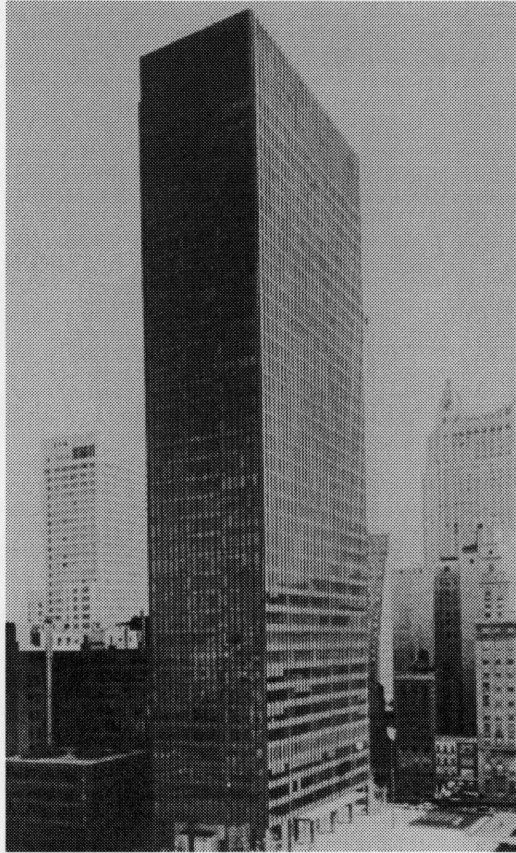


Figure 11. Philip Johnson and Mies van der Rohe, *Seagram Building*, 1958, New York City (Wold Center slide).



Figure 12. Charles Moore, *Piazza d'Italia*, 1976-79, New Orleans (Wold Center slide).



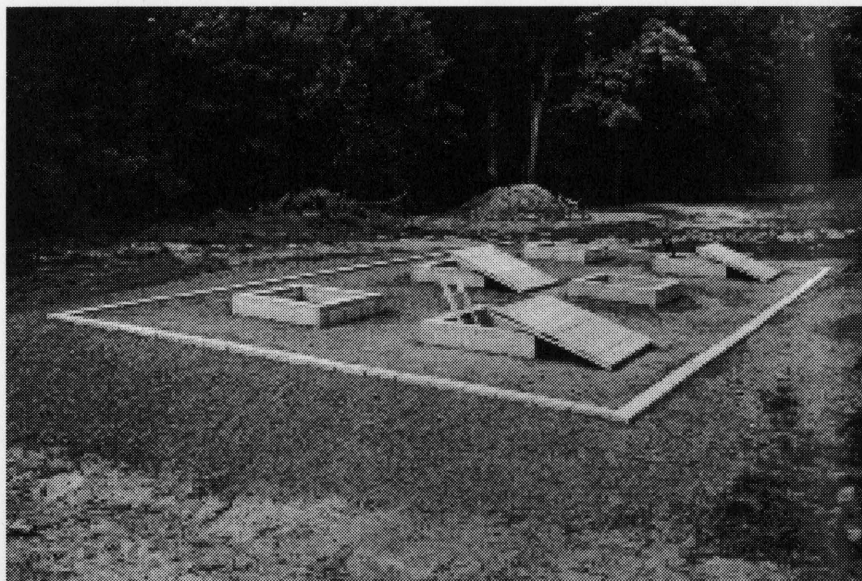


Figure 13. Alice Aycock, *Simple Network of Underground Wells and Tunnels*, site view, 1975, Merriewold West, Far Hills, New Jersey (Davies and Onorato, p. 40).



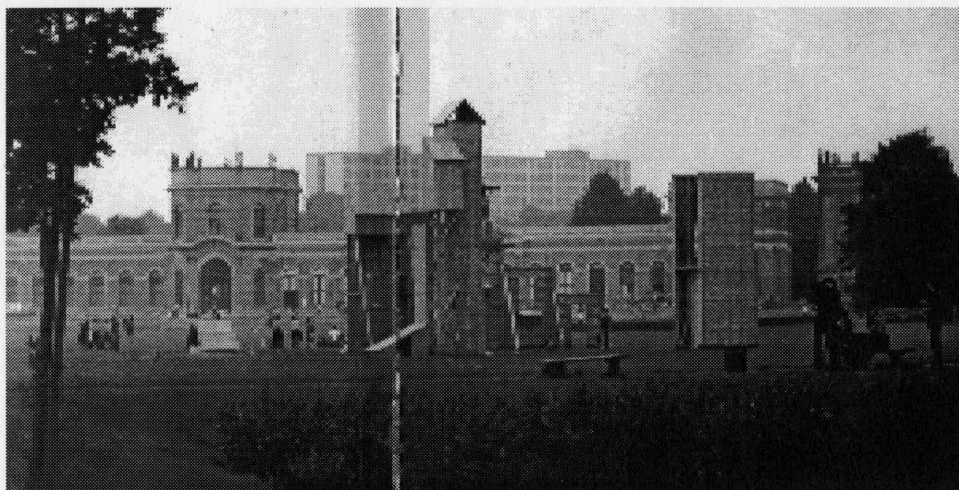


Figure 14. Alice Aycock, *Project Entitled "Beginnings of a Complex..."*, site view, 1976-77, Dokumenta, Kassel, Germany (Aycock, unpaginated).

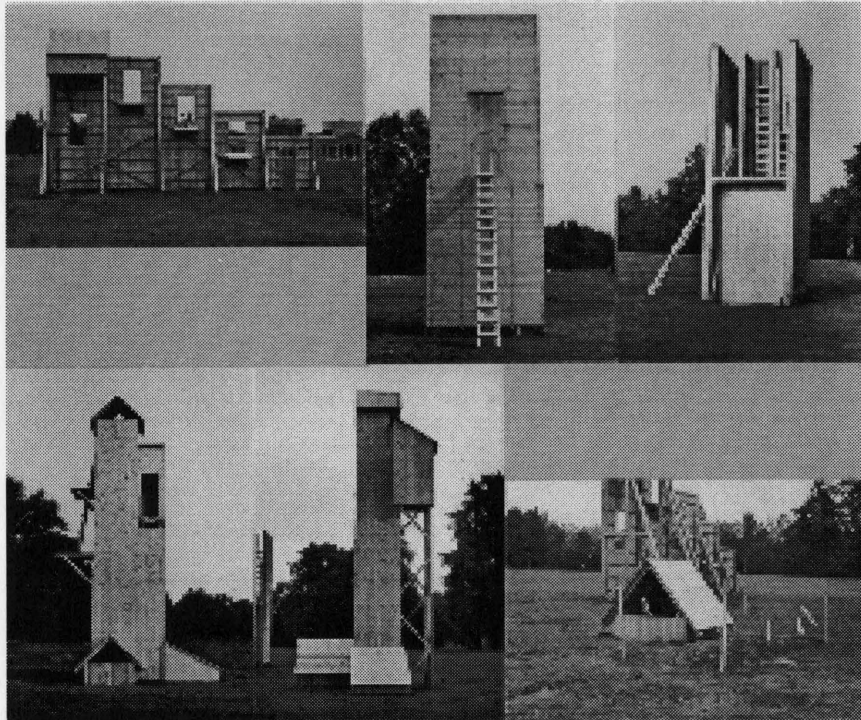
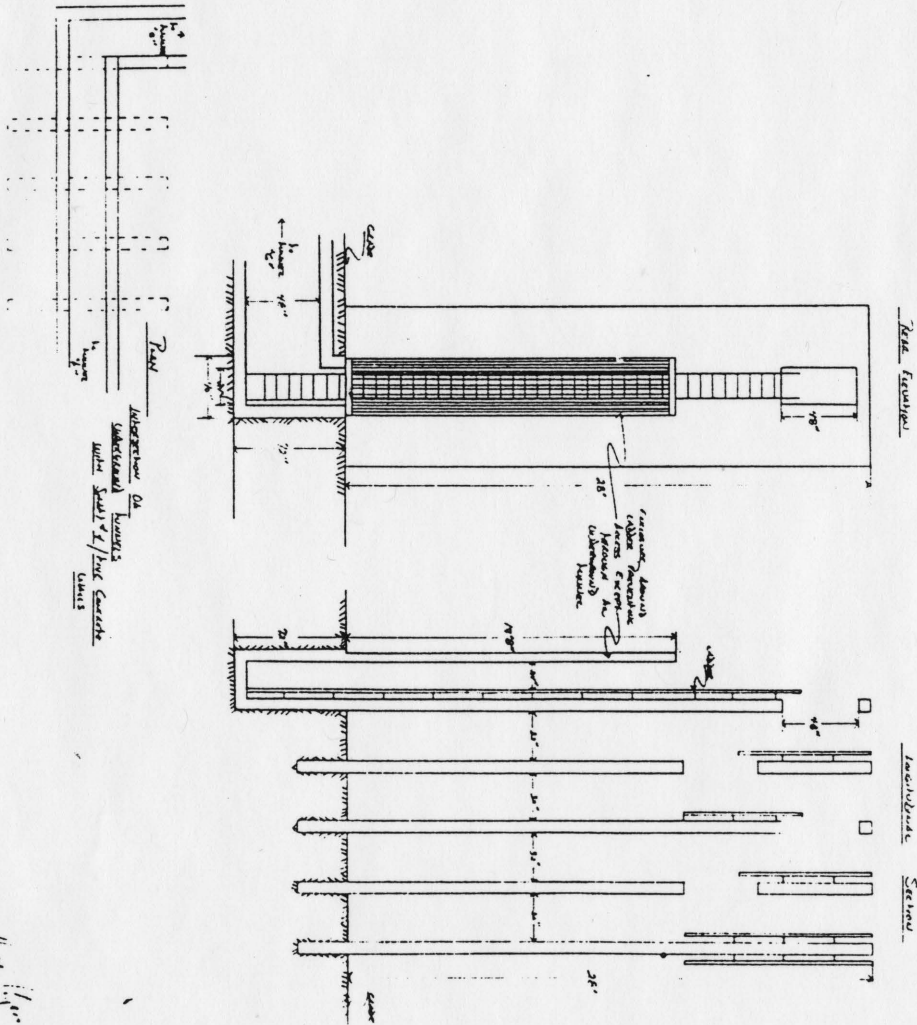
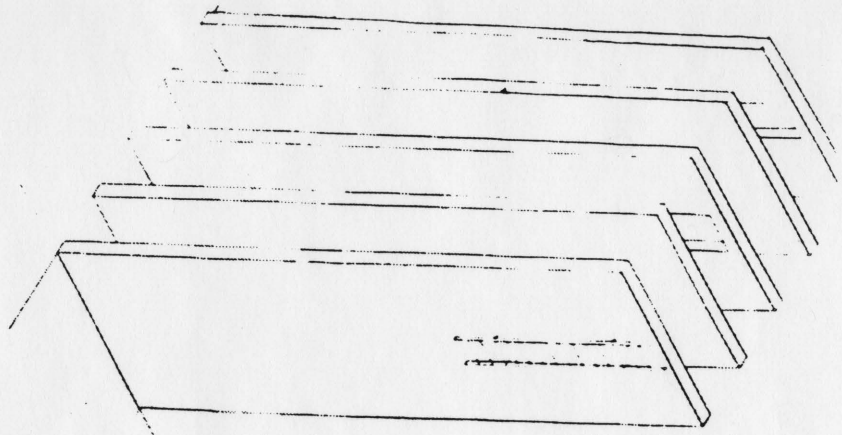


Figure 15. Alice Aycock, *Project Entitled "Beginnings of a Complex..."*, detail of shafts 1 and 2, 1976-77, Dokumenta, Kassel, Germany (Aycock, unpaginated).







SHAFT #4  
From SHAFT #3 tunnel "E" leads to tunnel "F" which runs under the live walls of SHAFT #4 to a cage attached to the back of the first of the live walls. Inside the cage is a ladder which leads to a series of doors and ladders in the walls. One climbs in a zig-zag movement from door to ladder, down to door across to ladder and up to door, finally coming to a dead end.

Figure 17. Alice Aycock, *Project Entitled "Beginnings of a Complex..."*, drawing of Shaft #4, 1976-77, *Dokumenta*, Kassel, Germany

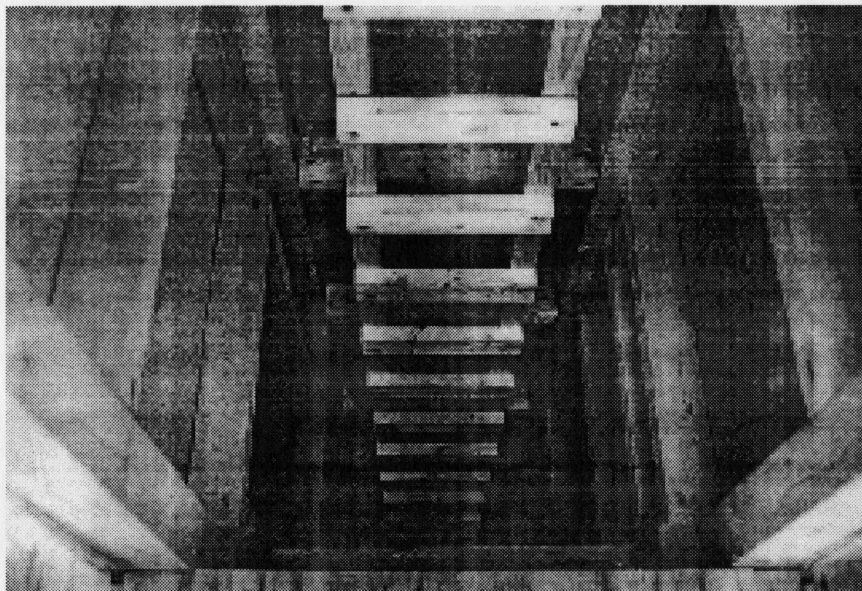


Figure 18. Alice Aycock, *Project Entitled "Beginnings of a Complex..."*, interior detail with ladder, 1976-77, Dokumenta, Kassel, Germany (Fineberg, p. 389).

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