SPA

EXP

ABE FRAJNDLICH

MARY MISS

With its landscaped walkway, footbridge, jetty, and lookout, South Cove may be the only place in Manhattan where one feels close to the sky and the water.

for very long, the sense of making definite places is very important to me,'' she reflects. Yet Miss' places respect their environs; there is no wish to dominate them. ''Coming from the West has always discouraged me from trying to leave a mark on the landscape, to establish a monolithic presence. Out there, it's very difficult to mark anything—the scale of the land is too overwhelming and the freestanding object is so easily overpowered.''

Miss studied art at the University of California at Santa Barbara from 1962 to 1966. The sculpture program she entered was traditional, stressing carving and casting, which didn't excite her. During a summer break, she took a course at Colorado College, where a teacher named Herman Snyder was influential. ''I really didn't know what contemporary art was about until I worked with him,'' Miss recalls. ''I became aware that art could be about ideas and not just about the shape of something or the look of something.''

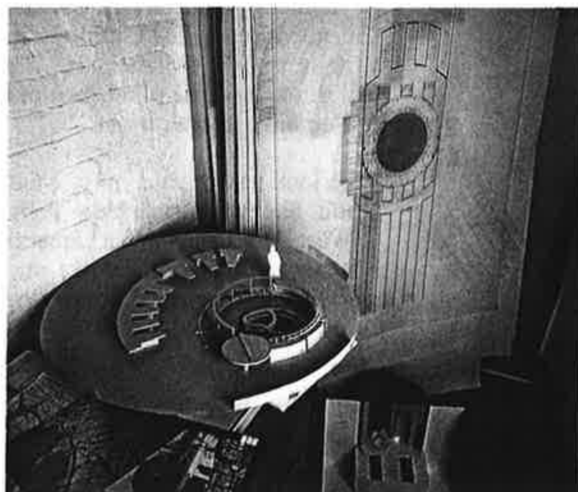
While at UCSB, Miss met Bruce Colvin, another sculptor, whom she married in 1967. (They were divorced in 1986.) At graduate school at the Maryland Art Institute, Miss started making things out of canvas and window screens. ''At that point I felt like I was starting on my own work,'' she says. ''Everything was connected after that.'' *Filter*, a steel and wire-mesh object from 1967, was large in physical area, but being transparent it had almost no body to it. The piece encapsulated many recurrent themes: a fondness for Surrealism, a persistent concern with passages and boundaries, and the interaction of structure with place.

Miss moved to New York in 1968, when Minimalism was at its zenith. She acknowledges it as a valuable point of departure. ''Minimalism was a stepping-stone,'' she says, ''although I knew I wanted to move in another direction. Minimalist artists attempted to divest their work of associative and referential content, and content was important to me, from very early on.'' Whereas sculptors like Donald Judd and Carl Andre explored solids and volumes, Miss' paramount concern was ambient space. ''For the most part, they were making large, boxlike forms,'' she observes. ''I had this strong anti-monolithic, anti-monumental tendency. But the Minimalists did put a focus on space, and that was important to me. Judd, for example, focused on objects in space by his repeated intervals between them. I took that notion and developed it.''

As Miss interpreted it, the interval was ultimately the viewer's apprehension of the space around the work of art—the ''negative space,'' as it's called in traditional sculpture, although for Miss there is no such thing as negative space. In the late '60s, Miss made small pieces that she could sandwich into her first apartment, a basement on the edge of Spanish Harlem. She used inexpensive, lightweight materials that she could manipulate herself—canvas, wood, glass, string, and wire mesh—to create bare, linear frameworks that demarcated but did not obliterate their surroundings. Fascinated by the quirks of visual perception, she saw that strong images could be fashioned from flimsy materials. *Glass* (1967), constructed of wood, glass, and string, was inspired by fishing lines and dropped anchors. Another work, an outdoor piece using stakes and ropes, recalled a Western vista in which ''miles of fencing appear as modest elements against that extended horizon.''

The early outdoor sculptures, which always grew out of something simple and concrete that Miss had seen, were essential to her development as a public artist. ''They really set the tone for the later sensibility,'' she says, ''because I never set out to be a public artist. If you said that you were interested in doing public art in the late '60s, it would have been ludicrous. At the time, my vision of public art was a bright red steel object in front of a corporate building. I just wanted to get rid of bulk, to have the work be less monolithic, so I kept making things out of canvas and string and rope and cutting away the excess.

''I found that if I put the pieces outdoors and spread them over larger spaces, they lost that monolithic form and the viewers would become engaged in a more extended way, which I really liked. They couldn't just stand around and look—they had to walk around. Over the years, the interest in the abstract notion of the viewer developed into an interest in the way that the public relates to an installation, and in work-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Plans and models for recent projects, inspired by Miss' travels and extensive site research.

about seeing the classical buildings in Rome," she says, "but more compelling to me are oil fields, or the Hoover Dam, or the edge of any American city."

Miss' most important construction of the late '70s was a complex called *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys*, which she built on the grounds of the Nassau County Museum of Fine Arts in Roslyn, Long Island, during 1977–78. The installation, which "confirmed the architectonic direction" she had been pursuing, was an ensemble of five related structures spread over four wooded acres. Three towers, two earth mounds, and a pit formed a mysterious, unfolding ruin whose story had to be pieced together by the spectator as he or she navigated the grounds and walked under the earth. Lawrence Alloway wrote in *The Nation* that the complex "was remarkable in its physical embrace of the spectator and its conceptual subtlety. . . . It should be seen, both as a model of the environmental mode in sculpture and as a convincing work in itself."

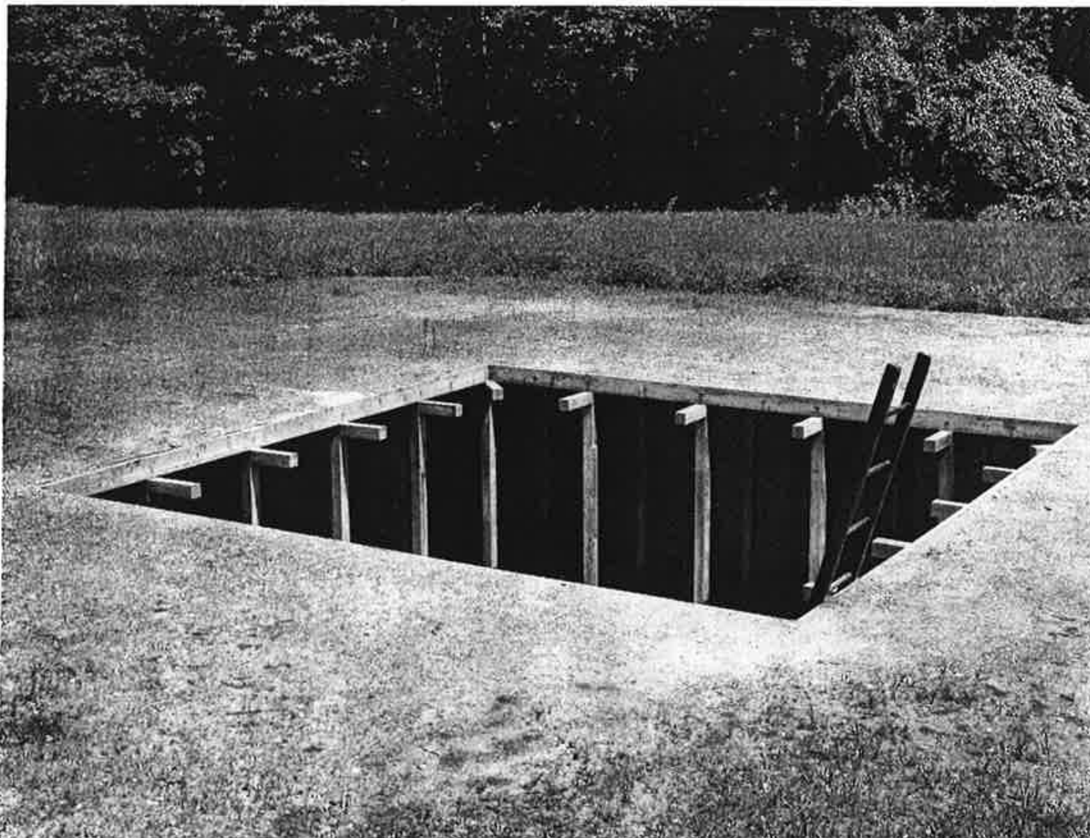
Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys was a success for Miss as a formal statement and as a model for a public interaction. "Lots of people who came out to Nassau County didn't know anything about art," she says, "but they would become engaged with the work in trying to figure it out. Artists of the past century have had less and less effect on the culture, and that has been unfortunate. The possibility of integrating art with society, of artists going out and affecting the environment, of having a role in the real world, whether it's in a county park or an urban plaza—that's what's most exciting to me."

The question of whose park or plaza it actually is—the civic authority maintaining it, the population inhabiting it, or the artist hired to change it—has become red-hot since the recent removal of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* from Federal Plaza in Manhattan and subsequent objections to *Twain*, a commission of his in St. Louis. Asked if Serra's experiences have chilled the climate for her work or for public sculpture in general, Miss replies: "I think it's ironic that it all came up now. Richard and his work represent an attitude that is quite different from ideas that have been developing in the past decade about how artists can work in public spaces. I wouldn't say that his case has affected the projects I'm working on—people are not afraid to go ahead with them. But a false separation has been created: it's as if there's tough art and soft art. I'm putting this in the broadest possible way, but some of the critics seem to think that if art is confrontational and controversial it's tough and real art, and this other kind of art that's not disruptive is pandering to the public.

"I know that, because of the complexities involved in public art, there is definitely a danger of the ideas getting watered down. For a work in a public space to be successful, it's absolutely necessary for it to maintain its strength and integrity. At the same time, the artist must acknowledge the needs of the situation. The piece has got to retain its potency, but it doesn't have to be confrontational."

Miss also believes that, out of ignorance about what large urban commissions entail, a specious distinction has been made between defiance and accommodation. "In public art," she explains, "you're taking a lot of chances, and it's not the safe position that people assume it is. The risks are there in ways that are difficult for anyone who is not inside this field to recognize. There are so many levels of responsibility." When pressed, she elaborates on how taxing public commissions can be. "I've assumed the role usually taken by an architect," she says. "These pieces are all over the country, they all have deadlines I have to meet, and yet I'm an artist who works very differently from the way architects work. Architects have a group of people who are in their office and do the design work. That's absolutely impossible for me—I want to work on my own, by myself, thinking things through. Yet I'm supposed to appear in this city on the West Coast, this place in the Northeast, or this place in the South within a very short period of time.

"It's a never-ending struggle," Miss continues ruefully, "because the one thing I want to have is completely quiet working time, day after day. I start about five in the morning and work until noon or one o'clock without answering the telephone. This is what is extremely difficult—protecting that time in the studio while still being persuasive enough to get people to allow an artist to do things that artists have never been allowed to do."



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Detail from *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys*, 1977-78. The pit, three towers, and two earth mounds formed a mysterious ruin whose story had to be pieced together by the spectator.