

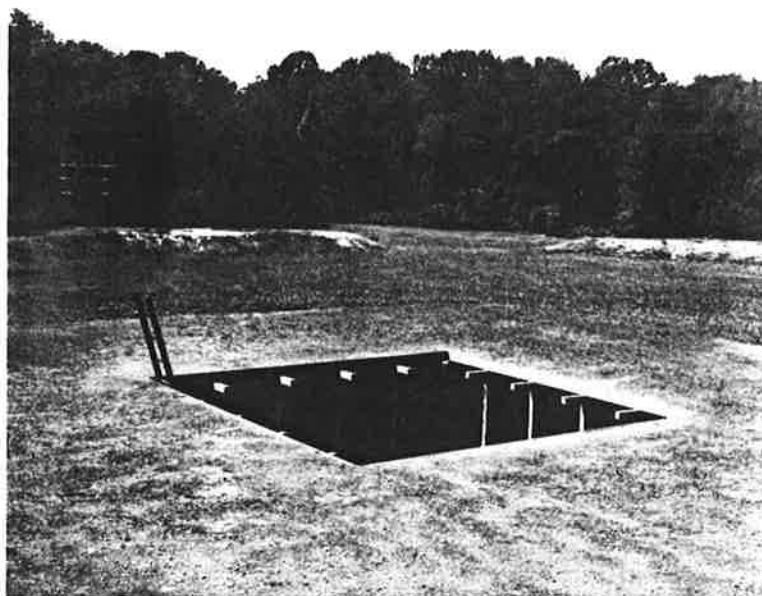
INTERVIEW

ANNE BARCLAY MORGAN

Mary Miss

Mary Miss studied at the University of California at Santa Barbara and the Finehart School of Sculpture, Maryland Institute, College of Art. Her widely recognized work crosses the boundaries among public art, site specific sculpture, architecture, and landscape architecture.

Mary Miss
Perimeters Pavilions
Decays
Nassau County
Museum, Roslyn, New York
tallest tower 18' high, pit opening
16' square,
underground 40' square,
1977-78
(photo courtesy of the artist).



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Anne Barclay Morgan: Much of your work has been in the public realm. Can you talk about working in the public?

Mary Miss: It was not something that happened right away, but over a period of time in building things on a large scale. As I was watching people interact with the pieces I realized that these were not people who usually went to museums, yet they were able to become engaged with the work. I became interested in that. I started building things outdoors in about '66 or '67; I was thinking about what it was like to walk through the pieces, walk along the coast of an island—but it was more about the individual viewer looking at the thing rather than a larger sense of a public. That was something that came later. Also, I was particularly interested as an artist in how to step outside the museum or gallery context and that impulse probably came before the acknowledgment of a public. I felt rather restricted and frustrated by the gallery situation. First of all, as a woman it really wasn't accessible to me, so I set out to make an alternative venue for myself. In taking that step, these things added up to make me more and more curious about how artists could be integrated into our culture, our society. As the years have gone on that's become more and more interesting to me, and less and less clear how it's done.

Morgan: In the '60s, was it possible to show your large scale work in a gallery?

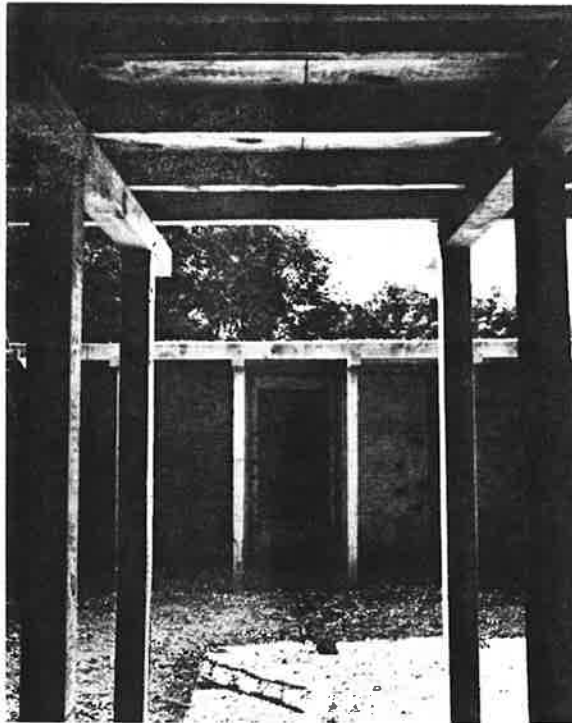
Miss: I was connected with a gallery for a number of years and I've had maybe two exhibitions over a long period of time, but I wanted to spend my time working on large scale projects and not the saleable objects that the dealer needed to have, so it became clear that we were interested in different things. And my financial situation meant that I had to keep those projects going; I couldn't take time off to work on the small-scale pieces. You had to be independently wealthy or supported to do that. But that doesn't mean that if I have something I want to show I won't show it in a gallery.

Morgan: What about your photomontages?

Miss: These are things I've been working on in the last few years, and the first time I showed them was last year at the Museum of Modern Art in a show of new photography. I've been doing photographs for many years. Whenever I started working on a project I would document sites with photographs, often taking one picture after the next, and splicing them together like we've all done since we had our Brownie cameras. I would do that with structures that I was interested in, and I found that if I manipulated them the spatial, visual, and physical effect could be changed. I blew them up to a large scale and found that the physicality was much more direct. It's really a way for me to step back and give myself breathing space from the kind of process I have to go through with the large pieces, where I'm constantly going out, meeting with groups of people, engaging in dialogue or arguments. I just go into my studio and work on these. They really are about an exploration that I'm able to have in the two dimensional form. It's very compelling to me. Also I think that in the photographs I can often get the kind of physical, emotional engagement with a space or a structure that I try to get in the projects.

Morgan: Could you describe your process in working on the projects?

Miss: Working in different parts of the country, outside Philadelphia, Des Moines, New York, St. Louis, Seattle—I'm always going to a different place to build something. I think I have a good background for doing that: my father was in the military and I lived in a lot of these places at some time in my life. But I'm really interested in going around and getting a sense of a place, talking to people, looking at the landscape, looking at the structures.



Mary Miss, *Perimeters Pavilions Decoys*, Nassau County Museum, Roslyn, New York, tallest tower 18' high, pit opening 16' square, underground 40' square, 1977-78 (photo courtesy of the artist).

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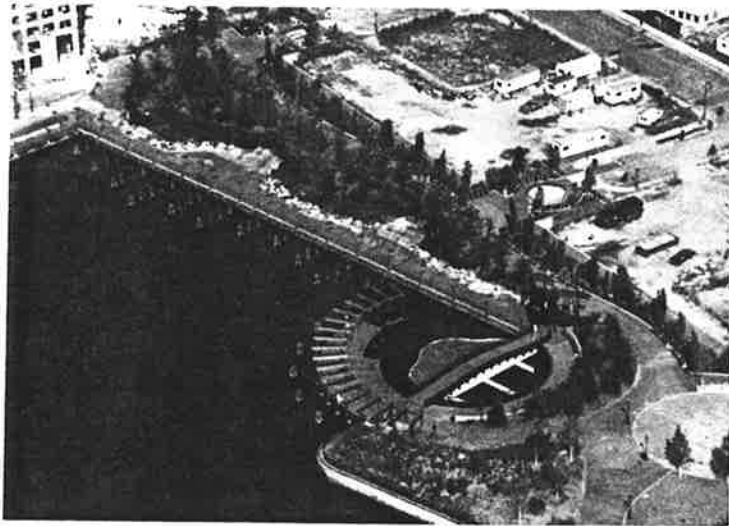


Whenever I get to a place I ask people what the outstanding engineered or built structures in the area are. In this part of Florida there is a flat landscape and very low structures, but there is also Cape Canaveral, a major engineered installation. Seeing all the kinds of things that exist in an area is really interesting, and it's kind of the raw material.

Then there's the process of collecting information about the site itself, trying to understand it. In New York City, the 14th Street Union Square Project, I've gone through the process of trying to research the history from the earliest times to the union activity in the '30s to the '50s, to get a sense of what's been happening there. Also trying to understand the structure of the place, the physicality of it: the system of subway lines that go through the station is extremely complicated. If you go into it as a passenger and try to find your way around in it without

having been in there before, it's very confusing. It's like entering a labyrinth. There are fabulous things; the IRT line is probably the finest example of industrial construction from the early 20th Century subway lines, it's just amazing. But it's very archaic as well. So I'm spending a tremendous amount of time trying to understand the space, the structure, where any possibilities might be within that framework, and within the very strict framework of what the MTA will allow to have built. About the only thing you can count on being able to do in the subways is put tile on the wall. Anything else begins to stretch the system, and I really am not interested in tile as such. I want to find a way of affecting the station, and doing it on all levels, the concourse level, the platform level, the mezzanine. It's a very slow process, not of coming up with an idea but of piecing the information together and then building upon that. It's a very long process and disconcerting to people who might be working with me who are not familiar with the way I think. They want to know where they are going before they start, and I never know. I really have to piece it together, it's like putting a jigsaw puzzle together. At this point I've identified a number of possibilities and I have to figure out what I can do.

My ideal situation would be to have a single project a year to work on, because I work slowly, trying to layer all of the information together. It would be nice to do it in an uninterrupted way. In reality I'm usually working on three, four, or five projects at the same time, because I never know which one might be cancelled or not go forward. They are not all in the development stage, I can only do that one at a time. But I might be working on construction documents for one project, trying to get the contract together for another project.



Mary Miss, South Cove, Battery Park City, New York, 2 1/2 acre site, collaboration with Stanton Eckstut, architect & Susan Child, landscape architect, 1988.

Morgan: What other projects are you working on right now?

Miss: I'm working on a project with the Des Moines Art Center, which I'm really interested in. I've been working on a project for the past year for Swarthmore College which seems to be falling apart at the last moment. I'm going to be doing something at the University of Houston. It's difficult because in a way I'm functioning as an architect or a landscape architect, yet I can't turn the work over to somebody else to do, in any substantial way. I really have to work it through myself. Right now I have an assistant who's doing work in New York with the 14th Street project, collecting information, researching, trying to find the old architectural drawings, taking measurements for me. But all she can do is collect the information; I have to figure out how I'm going to deal with it.

Morgan: At what stage do you begin drawing, or do you make sketches?

Miss: I build models, do drawings. Every once in a while I think that I can't keep going on with this work, because it's so difficult to actually get a project built. It takes so many years and you do so many proposals or have false starts that it's very frustrating. I think in the last ten years I've spent at least half the time working on projects that didn't happen. I think I've got to get better at figuring out ahead of time which things are more likely to go through, or not to go through. I've worked on a lot of large scale planning projects in the past ten years. I worked on a master plan in St. Louis for what had previously been a theater district, which they're trying to bring back. It's extremely interesting, but I don't know how much of that will be acted upon, or when. It may be years before any of it actually materializes. I worked on another project with the City of Anaheim's redevelopment agency, trying to come up with a way that art could be incorporated into the redevelopment of the downtown area, which had been torn down and was being rebuilt. Some of these large scale building projects are extremely interesting, but finally nothing comes out of them. Then there's the Riverside South Park project, for the 21 acre park on the Trump site that's on the Hudson River in Manhattan. I've

worked with three other artists and a landscape architect and a slew of architects, and after working almost a year on the project, almost everything that the artists had brought to the project was removed during the approval process. When I talk about the frustration level of dealing with this kind of work, that's what I mean.

My intention in the next few years is to try to work on smaller projects where there is more of a possibility of things actually being done, or there is a clear beginning and end. What I would hope to be doing, for instance, would be a project like the one in Des Moines, which is going to be demonstration wetland. It's really an ideal project. It's being done with the art center of Des Moines, but it's located in a city park, so I'm also working with the parks department. There is an adjacent science center that is also involved in the project, and a local garden club is interested in the idea of introducing wetlands into a city park. It's a collaboration between the institutions, but I'm also working closely with botanists and the garden club in developing this area. Again, there was a process of collecting information, going around the state looking at natural wetlands, looking

at structures in the area, meeting with Native Americans that live in the area, talking to people, really getting a sense of the place. I was going into a derelict pond area trying to figure out how I was going to build a series of structures and platforms that would operate on a number of different levels: there would be walkways and viewing pavilions that would be interesting from the point of view of the kids coming to the science center. They will be able to get down at eye level with the water: there will be a walkway into the water they can sit in and see the little critters on the surface of the water; there's a platform they climb up on and look out over the tops of the plants and see the birds, there's another walkway through the cattails. What I'm interested in is the accumulation of visual and

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physical experiences that you have as you walk through the site, and the effect. If it doesn't operate on that psychological, emotional, spatial level—if it was just providing a viewing of the wetland—it wouldn't be interesting to me. Things like this can succeed on a fairly small scale, demonstrations of what could be done on a larger scale, not necessarily by me, but with the idea of artists being involved in the development of the environment. As difficult as it is to get these projects done, as many years as they go on (the Des Moines project I've been working on for four years and it probably won't be done for another couple of years) I still find them compelling.

It's wonderful material to be drawing on. I go into situations: I don't know anything about wetlands, so I have to find out about them. Some other situation might focus on the history of a place, another on some physical characteristic of the place. You're not always going into the white box of the gallery or the museum, the perfect space, and placing something. You're interacting with the situation on many more levels. In finding ways to affect the culture, there are artists who are taking the voice of the culture and trying to manipulate it. I'm trying to operate on another level, showing people

they can have experience in layers, rather than in a single time flow. That's what keeps me curious.

Morgan: Do you feel that your work has a feminine quality?

Miss: You know, I do, but I find it a difficult question to answer because I think it is hard for me to identify it in my own work. I think that only somebody looking back at the work in another 20 years will have the perspective to decide what is more or less feminine in the work. I'm a woman, I'm making these things, I'm sure the effect is there. The things I notice, though, are that from a very early stage I've been very interested in integrating myself into the context, the environment, rather than imposing on it or standing separate from it. I think that the process that I go through, the way I interact with people, the way I collect information is a more integrated way of proceeding, rather than trying to set separate chal-



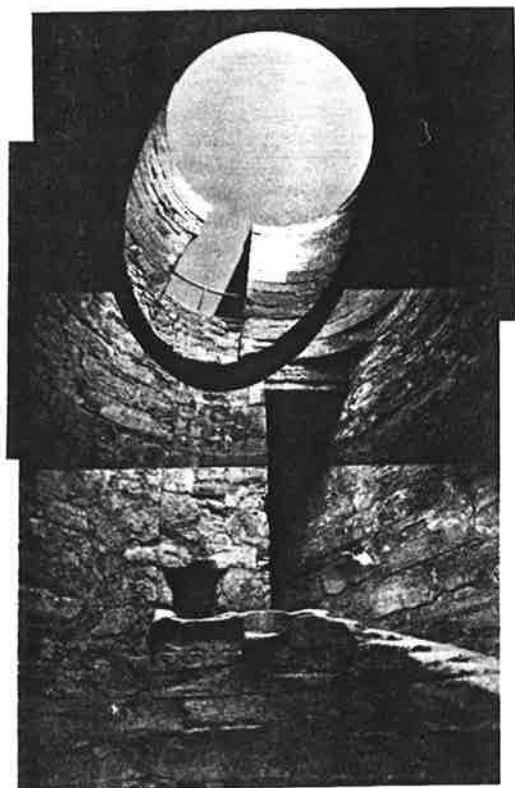
Mary Miss, South Cove, Battery Park City, New York, 2 1/2 acre site, collaboration with Stanton Eckstut, architect & Susan Child, landscape architect, 1988.

lenges. One of my primary things is trying to make intimate spaces within the public domain, make a connection between public life and interior life. Also, I have been working collaboratively for a long time. My artist friends were telling me I was crazy. Architect friends were telling me I was crazy. In some cases I think they were right. But I find that layering of information that happens in this process allows for developments that are quite unexpected. And I feel that given the state of affairs we are in, with limited resources, we have to learn how to do this much better than we have been. At any rate I think my process and the way I integrate my work into its context is what may distinguish my work as being more feminine in nature.

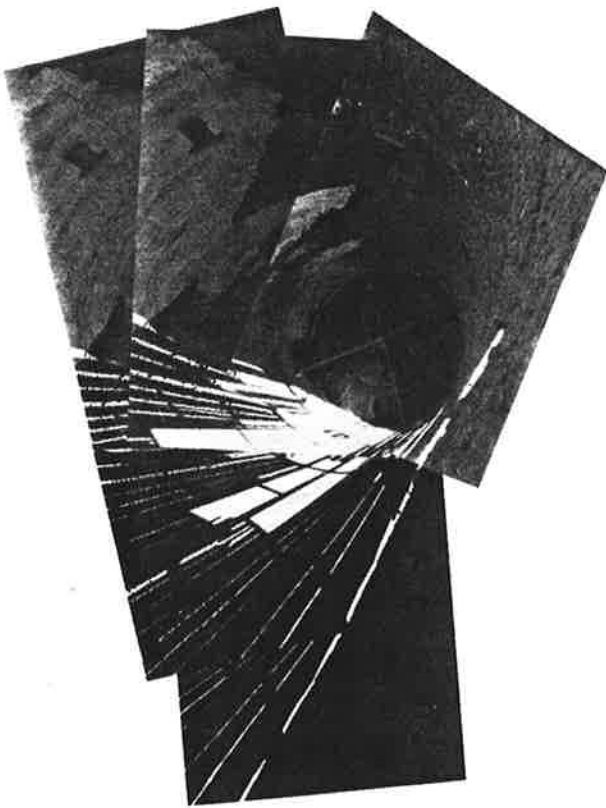
Morgan: Which of the projects do you feel were the most successful?

Miss: That's difficult to say, because there are things that I really love about various projects. An early project that I did, *Perimeters Pavilions Decoys*, with an underground structure and several towers—I worked at building that for a whole year with volunteer assistants and no big budget or heavy equipment and by the time I got done it was something really wonderful and complete. So I think every once in a while there is a key project that affects you very strongly. I think one of the most important projects I've done is the *South Cove* project at Battery Park. With that, I've really been able to observe over a long period of time how the project weathers, how it's settling in, how the growth of the plant material is affecting it, how people interact with it—really watching the interaction over a period of time. I think that it is very successful in the sense providing a place where the interior life can exist, where there can be that intimate sense in a very public place. There is an undeveloped area that cuts people off from Battery Park itself; I think when that connection is made it's going to seem much more a part of the city. Right now it's very isolated. It's almost as though it's on an island apart from the city, without having a lifeline connection. So I look forward to seeing that happen.

Morgan: Will that happen in the next couple of years?



Mary Miss, *Untitled No. 14*, black and white photo collage, 49 3/4" x 37 1/2", 1990 (photo courtesy of the artist).



Mary Miss, *Untitled No. 2*, black and white photo collage, 53 1/2" x 41 1/4", 1990
(photo courtesy of the artist).

Miss: Probably in the next three or four years. Every once in a while the people who are now in charge of Battery Park City come up with ideas to alter the project and I've been engaged in trying to defend it in its original form.

Morgan: How do they want to alter it?

Miss: At a certain point they wanted additional handicap access, although we had designed the piece to be accessible. We were able to limit the addition of ramps to places where it really makes sense. We definitely don't want to keep people out but we also don't want to put an elevator up the center of the tower. Also, currently there's some talk of getting rid of the wild area at the southern end and paving it to give people access to the water's edge. That's a very long esplanade and you can walk by the water the whole way, and it seems like keeping that one little patch wild is not such a bad idea.

Morgan: Your work seems to be concerned with intervals, not only in space but time, in a way that makes me think of music.

Miss: I have to say that music is not something I know that much about, it's not a direct influence on my work. One of the things that interested me in the larger projects was the time involved in looking

at the pieces. I think that's why I started to build things that you had to walk through, because you couldn't just walk up to something, take the image, and walk away with it. I wanted to make it necessary for you to be physically engaged with the piece and all the other levels of engagement that that would bring about.

Morgan: What do you think is the ideal relationship between landscape architect, architect, and artist?

Miss: I would say the main thing is not to get too many of them together. The Riverside South project was one of the most difficult ones I've worked on—it had four artists, a landscape architect, and several architects—and we were constantly stepping all over each other. Afterwards, it really seemed that we needed many fewer design oriented people, and more of other types of people—we really needed an environmentalist, or a historian, or somebody who could interpret the social situations that we had to deal with. But to have all of those people trying to design the park was ridiculous, it was impossible. Landscape architects are very unhappy with me, because I'm invading their territory. I've had successful working relationships with a couple, but usually it's a little tense. I really think it's unfortunate. I don't know a lot of the things that they know. It seems to me that there should be a possibility of having overlays, but people get threatened about territory and it doesn't work out so well.

Morgan: What about making work for private patrons?

Miss: I really haven't done it. One individual asked me to do something for him at one point, and it didn't happen. It's difficult because there are very few people interested in the complexity of having somebody coming into their lives and trying to work something out with them. It's the same difficulty that architects have building a house for someone. I think it's one of the hardest things that architects have to do. If you are building an office building or a school it's one thing, but you're dealing with people's psyches when you're talking about their homes, where they're going to be living.

Morgan: Have you built up working relationships with a few architects?

Miss: No, it's really been shifting regularly. I did work with Stan Eckstut in Battery Park City and Swarthmore. I enjoy working with him—I like the way he thinks, the way he approaches the situation, the research or analysis he does. I've learned a lot from him in that respect. But we unfortunately had another team with too many people, another architect was involved as well as a landscape architect. It was a very cumbersome situation, people were dividing up and it didn't work very well.

Morgan: What advice would you give to a younger artist who wanted to get into public art?

Miss: Not to feel like you have to wait for somebody to ask you to do something. Inventing a situation for yourself is really the most important thing to do, to take that step on your own. I'm sure that they'll find there is further support once that ini-

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tial step is taken. A number of the younger artists dealing with public art are coming up with interesting ideas. I can foresee more and more being done in this area, covering a wider and wider territory. But it's not about having a huge chunk of money and a huge space, having a big commission handed to you. It's about finding different ways of thinking about the public domain. Some things might be very small scale, they might be temporary, there are so many possibilities. People should act, carry out the ideas they come up with.

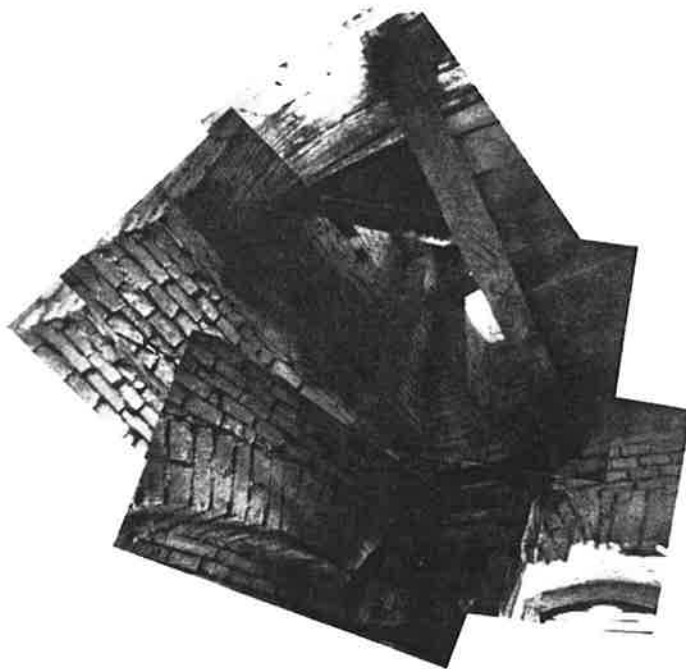
Morgan: What about the notion of beauty in public art, or the development of a more critical point of view?

Miss: I think that one of the hardest things about public art, and also one of the most interesting things, is that in a way, you are outside of the art context, you're not in a gallery show that will be reviewed. This work is being done all over the country, but it's not being looked at or being made a significant part of the critical dialogue. I think that's unfortunate. There needs to be serious discussion about what's happening, what's working, what's not working and why, what the implications of the work are. It's hard for these issues to be addressed because the situations are so complex that a regular art critic doesn't usually have enough knowledge about planning or other issues to fully understand what's going on. If somebody's writing about it from an architecture point of view they might understand those issues but not the art part of it.

Beauty is always a hard thing to address in our century. I have been willing to embrace the idea of wanting to engage a public rather than put them off or push them away, although confrontation does happen in some parts of the work. But the notion of engagement is very important to me, which is the antithesis of the avant garde situation, where you always want to be ahead of, apart from that public. You aren't looking for the engagement. It's a very different way of thinking about making work. Is it beautiful? Not necessarily within a frame of reference with respect to beauty that the person on the street is going to acknowledge. But sensuousness is something that I often want to have in the work, an engagement on that level.

Morgan: Have the controversies about public art in the '80s affect you, the Maya Lin piece or Richard Serra? Vito Acconci and others have had pieces destroyed, and so forth.

Miss: We've all had different kinds of problems, and I don't think it's a bad thing if you speak about it abstractly. I was involved in a court case with the Boy Scouts of America and the Olympic Committee in 1980 when I did a piece for the Olympics. A group of Boy Scouts destroyed the piece, and it was supposed to be up for a year. To actually go to court is a terrible thing, because as soon as you go into a legal situation you realize that as an artist you are absolutely nobody, you have no rights. You are the lowest of the low. So for anybody to have to enter that arena, whether it's Serra or whoever, it's a terrible thing. On the other hand, I think that at least the con-



Mary Miss, *Untitled No. 6.*, black and white photo collage, 52 1/2" x 49", 1990
(photo courtesy of the artist).

troveries have all brought the issues to the surface. Maybe that's being too optimistic. I think the thing that concerns me much more is the general tenor of right wing movements to censor the arts and to silence artists. I think that is truly frightening. It's not something

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that's just superficial. It's really a distrust that's being planted widely across the society by certain preachers and politicians. I think to try and silence the imagination is the most horrifying thing that any group could have done to it. I think that finally the role of any artist who is in the public is not just to make pleasing places. I think the primary job of the artists who want to work with the public is to remind people of the role of the imagination and to have that right there on the surface. If they can do that, it doesn't matter how big it is, what they are doing, it is successful.

Anne Barclay Morgan is a writer and video documentarian living in Gainesville, Florida.