

Mary Miss: Projects 1966–1987

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Mary Miss in conversation with Alvin Boyarsky

AB You seem to be in a strange game. How did you begin?

MM One summer in Colorado Springs I worked with Herman Snyder, who was interested in Cage and Rauschenberg and what was really happening at that time in the 1960s. I began to get a sense that there could be something more than just modelling — that ideas could be involved and that I could make sense of materials and structures. What seemed most interesting at the time was to get away from the model and the monolithic object. I began to work outdoors, where pieces could be spread thin over the landscape. These were tentative first steps. I was no longer dealing with an object in a room, but with different spaces and scales. I went out into unoccupied landscapes. It allowed me to experiment with a specific terrain. There were others working in the open at the time — Robert Smithson, for example — but I had difficulty relating to them. They were using the landscape as a large canvas, making their mark on it. I had grown up mostly in the West and was very aware of the futility of attempting to do this in the vast landscapes found, for example, in Canada or Colorado. I was very modest in my attempts and they usually involved the measurement of distance. One piece that I did was on Ward's Island in the East River. Twenty-foot lengths of three-quarter-inch white rope attached to stakes were weighted on the shoreline with rocks so that, when looking down the shore of the island, you barely saw anything. It wasn't like a Christo monumental wrapping; you discovered it as you walked around the edge of the island — an accumulated experience.



Vs in the Field
Liberty Corner,
New Jersey, 1969.



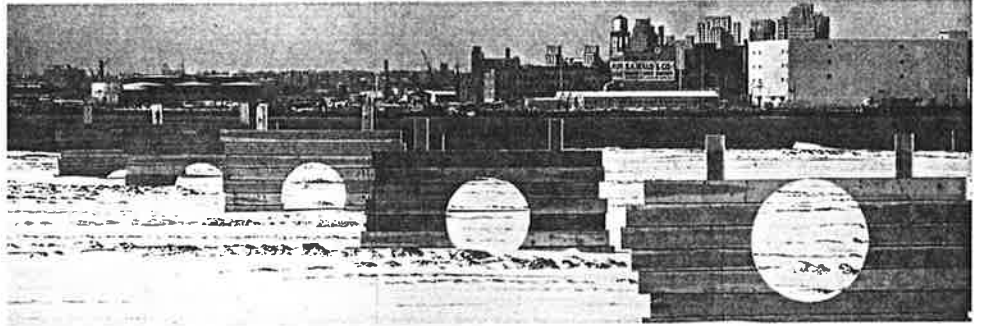
Ropes/Shore
New York City, 1969.

AB Quite a lot of your earlier projects have dealt with time. People are led through a sequence of events in response to the setting.

MM That's how I was thinking, as opposed to, say, David Smith, whose pieces are almost like signboards.

AB I remember visiting some Japanese gardens and moving through dramatic landscapes, via paths, staircases and platforms. The whole composition revealed itself informally in this way.

MM I've never been to Japan but I spend a lot of time reading about different landscapes. Books are my great pleasure. There are papers all over my studio — little pieces of paper pinned up and, when



Untitled, Battery Park landfill, New York City, 1973.

I'm in the middle of working on a project, books all over the floor. I was particularly interested in reading about Chinese and Japanese gardens, and I like the idea that you never quite know what's coming next and you never get an overview as you walk through — as opposed to the formal European perspective garden. It's such an appealing possibility that I've built it into a number of projects — for example, the Laumeier Pool complex in St Louis, in which you move from pavilion to pavilion around a strange abandoned pool. Another occasion was a structure at the ICA in London, which had various access points so that each person moving through it accumulated a different experience.



Study for Approach to a Stepped Pool, ICA, London, 1983.

AB The early structures in their natural settings appeal to architects. They see something very interesting and close to their own work — the architectural promenade. I imagine that's why you are invited to visit so many architectural schools.

MM I didn't really set out to focus on architecture. When I began to look at built structures — bridges, gas storage tanks, construction sites — it wasn't the function or structure that interested me so much as how a person walking through that space would be affected. I started to use more and more of these elements; the earliest built structures that I referred to in my work were fences. You can drive for hours through the Western landscape without hitting a town. There's nothing to follow but a beautiful ribbon of fence which never dominates the landscape, just a subtle structure marching off into the distance. In some of my early interior pieces I used a

lot of fence-like imagery.

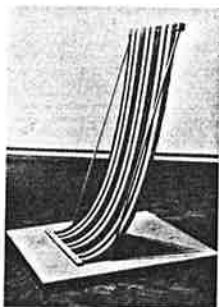
AB There seems to be a lot of Americana built into your work, and I don't mean it in the sense of Pop Art. I am reminded of typical two-by-four construction and of all the temporary structures that exist in the North American landscape — fences and sheds, gates, corrals, water-towers, etc.

MM Wherever I am travelling in the States I spend a lot of time taking pictures of all the structures I can find. These might be old stage sets from film studios in southern California — amazing places with false fronts and mostly in a very delapidated state — or something like a place called 'Bilders Atalya' (according to a sign in the front yard), a whole house built with scrap materials by a strange old man in Dayton, Ohio. I'm taking it in all the time — mine-heads, tobacco warehouses, horse farms. One of the things that ties me so much to the American landscape is that I moved every year when I was growing up, from a little town in Kansas to one in California and on to Tacoma in Washington. I'm familiar with the diversity of the landscape and I like building and setting up a dialogue with what's there. It's slightly disorienting for me to do a structure in London or The Hague because everything is so different. In Europe it seems to me that people think that there is a right way to build. Travelling through the landscape of the United States, however, it's obvious that people have just gone out and done it in a way that is very pragmatic.

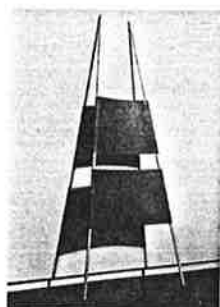
AB With a great deal of improvisation.

MM Yes, and in that sense I think that really I'm an American builder. I just got some wood and went out and built. It's a frontier mentality — my grandmother was a pioneer in her approach and I've heard stories about how she coped on a homestead in South Dakota, taking care of her family. It never occurred to me that I should do only bronze casting and marble carving, or stay at a certain scale and not step into architecture. In my early work, c. 1966–7, I was doing things made of very ordinary materials like wire-mesh, canvas and concrete. The handling of these materials was interesting to me. When I started to build on an extended scale, I had to use materials which would hold up outdoors and were fairly cheap. Wood of necessity became part of my vocabulary. I didn't know much about carpentry but I was always interested in resolving the inherent problems — for example, how do you build something underground? I would just figure out a way. Now that I have people building things for me I'm not as directly involved in the construction as in the

past. Nevertheless, I also like the idea of having access to materials other than four-by-fours.



Awning, 1966.



Untitled, 1967.

AB You seem to be getting closer to the practice of architecture. If you're not actually holding the hammer and nails in your own hands, your interests are bound to move towards the pleasures of composition and iconography.

MM I'm trying to work this out for myself. At Battery Park there's a path which straddles the different scales and I'm in the process of figuring out how to handle it. I can't stop at the concept. I'm down at the site regularly, checking out what's going on. I need contact with the process from beginning to end. Even more complicated is the fact that projects are now being built simultaneously in different parts of the country. I admire Louis Kahn's work. There's such obvious attention to detail at the Salk Institute and at the Kimball Art Museum in Fort Worth. I don't know how he did it, or how many projects he had on at the time.

AB As well as the memories of everyday regional North American places in your work, it seems that you spend a lot of time travelling abroad looking for sources.

MM Yes. For example, I'm about to take a walking trip in Ladakh.

AB I didn't even raise an eyebrow when you said it, but you're going to India for a three-week walking trip on your own?

MM No, with about ten other people, although I don't know who they are. I'm interested in the culture of that area, which is an extension of the Tibetan plateau. The villages and monasteries are quite unchanged, as opposed to those in Tibet itself, which have largely been demolished. Anyway, I spend time going to see things, whether it's in Papua New Guinea or Rome or in this case Ladakh. I never draw anything — I just spend a lot of time looking and photographing. I'm really curious about spaces that have potent experiences within them, how they've been made, what they look like, and how they work. When I'm working on a project, whether it's in Tempe, Arizona, or Seattle, Washington, or here in London, I'm using all that information.

AB So your constructions are derived from both your reading and first-hand observation?

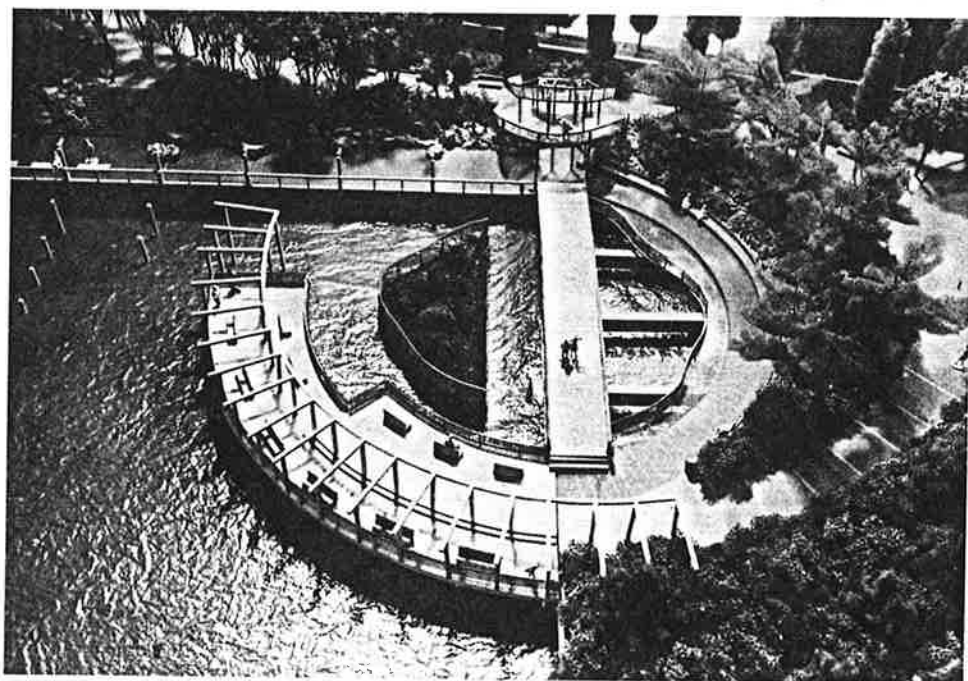
MM Yes. I'm drawing on memories of things that I've seen and read about, from childhood on, and trying to make them accessible to others. It's the experience contained in compelling situations — whether it's Bramante's spiral staircase in the Vatican or some narrowing village passageway —

and the possibility of building this into our own environment which motivates me. I have great fantasies of what places are like. Sometimes these are images that occur while I'm reading. I build a place in my mind like a Japanese garden and, although I've never been in one, it's real to me. I was interested in Mogul gardens, but when I visited some I found they weren't as I'd imagined. I was sometimes disappointed with the real thing, but I remained quite happy with my fantasy of what it might have been like. I also come across descriptions of situations in my reading which interest me. For example, in Joseph Rykwert's book *The Idea of a Town* he recounts Lévi-Strauss's commentary about a community laid out on a circular plan. When missionaries tried to convert the people, they met with little success until, for various reasons, the village was rebuilt on a rectangular pattern and the natives became so disoriented that they turned on their previous beliefs. The effect of space on people is extremely interesting. I read something by John Berger in which he described a memorable crossing of the straits at Istanbul, where the near touching of the European and Asian land masses is apparent. His description is very physical, and it pinpoints the passenger as the connector. I've always been an armchair traveller, but it's only in the last three or four years that I've started to visit some of these places. When I went to Peru a couple of years ago, I became fascinated with situations set up on different scales. I'm sure that you can conjure up what Machu Picchu looks like, cut into the hilltops in that majestic environment. In that general area I saw a big boulder called the Saihute stone, which was carved on top, not unlike a city plan. It's like a small version of Machu Picchu, approximately twelve feet across. When it rains, water goes down all the passages. I would love to have seen it pour out at the edges.

There is a beautiful in-between version at Quenco consisting of a mass of rock outcroppings, all intricately carved, with steps on top and holes for posts. Inside, there is a network of passages, not unlike those at Machu Picchu. It was amazing to observe the repetition at a small, medium, and grand scale. It's such a consistent view of how one makes one's place in the universe.

AB Are there any direct references from Machu Picchu in your recent projects?

MM I can't say specifically. Those places are so potent. I went to Peru just before I started work on Battery Park and without that imagery I don't think the organic quality would have come through as it did. For example, I thought of the rocky edge as a spine or a skin pulled away, showing the steps, which are repeated three times and which lead you down below, exposing the understructure before you come up to the viewing tower and platform, with its organic, curvilinear form. You once asked me why I would do something like that in Manhattan. I guess I really wanted to counterpoint its hardness. There were, however, a lot of other things we were thinking about at Battery Park — for example, the Statue of Liberty, just visible off the south cove, was another element. I had never taken a particular interest in it before the restoration. Then photographs began to appear in newspapers and I saw models and photographs of the structure at an exhibition. There were also some shots of the interior and of the folds. Eventually they put scaffolding up around the whole statue. It looked beautiful and I thought it should remain that way forever. I cut out all the newspaper clippings and developed a personalized reading of it which became an important element in the development of the organic structure — for example, the look-out was really derived from those early images. There were other



Battery Park Esplanade III, New York City, 1985–7. With Stanton Eckstut and Susan Child.

things we were thinking about as well. For instance, at the river's edge there are a lot of abandoned piers. You can see the wooden posts we put in the water. We had photographs of the early waterfront — a very active place with an elevated railway curving across and out over the edge and with piers poking out. I wanted to make a spine out of the new walkway, which is lower so that people could get to the water's edge and even step out on to the water, getting their feet wet at certain times when the tide was right. I tried to imagine the experience of coming from the density of lower Midtown and walking out over the water on the curving pier, or of coming down a traditional New York esplanade and arriving at a literally deconstructed place — different parts of the platform have been removed. Once you're at the point where the land, the water and the structure come together, you've reached the heart of the place. The culminating circle is defined on one side by the built and on the other by the organic.

AB I like the idea that the culmination of the jetty, that semicircular look-out space, is related somehow in plan to the internal structure of the Statue of Liberty and that people would be looking at the statue from it.

MM The public will not necessarily be aware of these particular sources, but I think it important to make a place of some cogency, so that people are moved by it. We could speak of this process as autobiographical — obviously I use my own strange collection of memories — but I hope it is something more than that. Since I've been involved in trying to define a new sense of public art, I have been interested in how to make places which contain a strong and accessible experience. Most interesting, of course, is the idea of memory and how people will connect these places with what they have previously experienced or what they might see in the future. I guess it's something ideal. I keep in mind the notion of memory palaces that I've read about. There is a description of a Portuguese priest trying to introduce memory systems to the Chinese. He was talking about a medieval system where you would imagine placing elements in a room and attaching a thing that needed to be remembered to each element. As you imagined moving through that room, the various elements would jog your memory. My fantasy is to be able to build something that triggers memories. Since we don't have any consistent body of information to draw upon, I usually rely on the physicality of the structure and its emotional, psychological and physical impact.

AB Are the sketches you've shown me in your notebooks made from memory?

MM Not necessarily. I might have traced them or built them of overlays. I don't always know where they come from or what they are. Perhaps one might start out as an early plan of Baghdad, but I care less about its origin than what it ends up as. I'd be reading and making notes and then perhaps I'd remember the drawing of Baghdad and get it and glue it down or just pin it on the wall and look at it and begin to layer various images together. You were asking me whether there's a direct relationship between my observations and the projects I get involved in, but it's not that simple. It's never just one drawing or one photograph. For instance, I was working on a project in The Hague — at the

Gemeentemuseum by Berlage — for a permanent structure in the courtyard. I loved the building and its details and I loved the courtyard, particularly the way you see it through the windows on the ground floor and then from up above. At first they didn't want me to build anything in the courtyard itself because of the landscaping, but when I went back, after a year, they agreed to let me use that space. I kept thinking about the factory-like place that it is and wanted to make a mechanical centre to the building. I was imagining a machine part there. An early drawing shows a tracing of a machine part with a strange spiral underlying it, but it ended up transformed into something else. The way I work on a project wouldn't make sense to anybody else. After twenty years I have a backlog of information. When I come to work on a space, I have so many things to start connecting up, and when I begin the drawings I overlay them even more.

AB Could I ask the embarrassing question? You're in London and you've agreed to make an installation in Bedford Square — an intact eighteenth-century London set piece, and the traditional home of the AA. You said earlier that The Hague and London are foreign territory. How will you respond?

MM Well, it's not just that it's foreign. It's also the type of site I usually avoid — a concrete space in front of a building. My immediate response to Bedford Square was that I could not enter the oval of trees in the centre of the square, that I was being kept out. That was so strange to me — it's the major part of the space, yet you can't get into it.

AB In the old days, anyone who lived here had a key and, although our students have occasionally abused that magic oval over the decades, we can still, with a certain guile, get into it for special occasions.

MM Nevertheless, it seems curious to me. I started to think in terms of an alternative place and, because of my disorientation, the astronomical devices I saw at Greenwich when I was last here came to mind — they have an implicit promise of defining location. The information kept layering, so that I ended up with a circular walkway about forty feet in diameter — I have to go into the square and lay it out to see if it's really going to work. I was thinking about circular enclosures because it's so hard to define a space on this leftover piece of a city square. The area inside the walkway will be covered with gravel. There is another raised circle with rocks in it — a foot and a half deep with a slot cut through it which will have rocks in the bottom and will be tarred. The pavilion is almost like a time-piece and includes a schematic map of the world from the eleventh century, which I decided to use on the floor.

AB Is the slot true or magnetic north?

MM It's the one on maps. There will also be an axis that goes from front to back, with another, small-scale element at the front which I haven't decided on yet. I never like to commit myself too soon. This strange measuring device will be built of wood, and the elevated area will have a wire-mesh screen. You will be able to walk around the perimeter and get into the inner circle from the pavilion. I chose sand and stone because I wanted it to look as if the surface of the paving stones was lifted.

AB There are two themes involved, the sacred circle and the 'locator', for lack of a better term. Are these part of a general enquiry on your part?

MM I keep accumulating ideas and, although each piece is different, certain images are carried through from one to the next. One of these is the astronomical device — it's like reading a Borges story which contains a metaphysical invocation of something that is measuring time and space. I've employed it in a number of pieces — at the Danforth Museum of Art, for example, I've done a floor and ceiling piece with a mirror in both which provides infinite reflections. In Boston, working on a competition for a war memorial, my notes mention that the circular form had different uses: a cosmic field, a diagram of universal order, a protective sign, a ceremonial or sacred place, a protected spot in a temple, or the form of a whole city. A recent piece in Tempe, Arizona, has a forty-foot-diameter circle. I wanted to offer some protection in a rather barren desert landscape with no shade or enclosure. The circle is three and a half feet below ground level and has a ring of trees marking its edge. There's a spiral path that goes into the water in the centre and you find yourself walking on its surface. I'm interested in the layering of references to time and space. If you're standing at the edge of that described forty-foot circle in Bedford Square, or if you step into the inner circle, you'll have a sense of a protected, enclosed space. On the platform, however, there is a schematic image of the world, derived from a specific



Study for an Entry, Framingham, Massachusetts, 1986.

culture at a certain time and place — a totally different way of telling you where you are.

AB It certainly derives from a different genre than your lyrical landscape projects, in which people are led through an adventure in observing the natural setting.

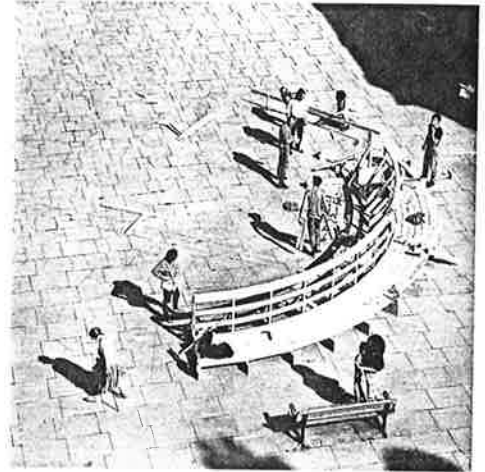
MM Well, there is a layering of perception here, but it's a compressed sandwich rather than movement through an extended space. I'm not asking for a direct recognition of all the sources, but I hope this will be a place where people will stop and spend time.

This interview was first published in the catalogue of the exhibition, 'Mega VII': *Mary Miss: Projects 1966-1987*. Additional texts by Joseph Giovannini and Mary Miss. 272 x 343 mm., 108 pp., 183 ills. Price £27. ISBN 0-904503-95-X.

Untitled, Bedford Square, London, 1987.
 Wood, stone, steel, wire mesh, paint. Outer ring
 40' diameter, 4' high; inner ring 28' diameter, 1'6" high;
 pavilion 18' diameter, 10' high; figure 6' high.
 (Photographs by Hélène Binet, unless otherwise
 indicated.)



DENNIS CRIMPTON



DIANA SALEVOURAKIS

