

# Bloomberg

## Artists Race Mortality With Eternal Monuments in Desert

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September 11, 2013, 9:00 PM PDT

From Bloomberg Markets



Sept. 12 (Bloomberg) -- If you want to behold the heavens -- not some fleeting glance skyward but the march of celestial bodies across the centuries -- you have to follow a two-lane blacktop across a parched New Mexico valley and then wind up the side of a precipitous mesa, where ruts and rocks caress the underbelly of your 4x4.

After half a dozen miles of maroon desert, an apparition materializes up ahead -- an immense stone arrowhead jutting above the ridgeline like the ruin of some ancient civilization. Eventually, when all our glass cities have shattered and our languages have died, that's exactly what it will be. For now, Bloomberg Pursuits magazine will

report in its Autumn 2013 issue, it's the as-yet-unfinished life's work of artist Charles Ross, who's been assembling "Star Axis" for 40 years and expects it to last for thousands more.

Ross, white-haired but athletic and lean, emerges from the boxy house tucked into an adjacent hillside where he and his wife, artist Jill O'Bryan, spend five months each year. It's an ungainly compound made up of two trailers parked side by side and plastered over to look like a single structure.

"We've got Internet but no electricity," Ross says by way of welcome. (A solar-powered battery charger keeps laptops and mobile phones humming.) It's a dramatic change from the couple's other home, a loft in the boutique-choked canyons of New York's SoHo neighborhood.

### Astronomical Phenomenon

The sun's an hour or so from setting over the hills when Ross takes me to see "Star Axis" in his pickup truck, his foundling dog, Blanco, supervising from the back seat. A dust storm is forming in the valley below us, and in the distance, the sky fills with ochre mist. I hope it will clear by nightfall, as "Star Axis" is in part an instrument for capturing the astronomical phenomenon called precession.

For centuries, mariners have set their course by the star Polaris, so named because of its proximity to the North Pole. But because of changes in the tilt of the Earth's axis, from our terrestrial perspective, Polaris is far from fixed; rather, it travels in a great ellipse over the course of 26,000 years before realigning itself with the northernmost point on the planet. Like a cosmic caliper, "Star Axis" reveals Polaris's relative alignment. However, it won't reveal anything if the night sky above New Mexico is hazed by swirling dust.

### Inverted Conical Void

Ross and I follow a path into a small plaza at the base of an inverted conical void that's been blasted out of the mesa face. Two curving, 76-foot-high concrete walls reach out to embrace me like a pair of great stone wings, framing a giant oval of still-clear sky. I feel as though I'm in a Stone Age version of St. Peter's Square, a space at once powerful and ceremonial. Everything around me feels permanent: slabs of rough granite, poured concrete reinforced with rebar and boulders.

“The engineers tell me that it shouldn’t need any maintenance at all, other than a bit of re-pointing every couple hundred years,” Ross says, grinning.

Across the little plaza, where the stone wings almost meet, is a triangular portal barely wide enough to admit one broad-shouldered person at a time. I pass through and start up an 11-story staircase hewn into the cliff face directly ahead. At the top, the stairs disappear into a pyramid that sits atop the mesa. Inside the pyramid, a circular opening frames a luminous disc of sky.

### Earthbound Experience

On March 24, 2100, when Polaris next aligns with the North Pole, it will sit at the dead center of that oculus; when I return a few hours from now -- and a mere 87 years from that astronomical alignment -- it should be tantalizingly close. Despite all of these celestial calculations, Ross understands that the interactions between architecture and astronomy ultimately matter less than the visitor’s earthbound experience of the land, the structures and the spaces they enclose.

“It’s that way with the ancient observatories, too -- the pyramids, Chichen Itza, the Jantar Mantar in India,” Ross says. “They were accurate measuring devices, sure, but they’re really about being there.”

“Star Axis” is one of a number of colossal artworks spread out across the American Southwest, most conceived in the late 1960s and early 1970s by a cohort of urban artists who needed more time, more money and much more space than the cramped gallery scenes of New York or Los Angeles could provide. Like homesteaders for art, they struck out separately for the mystical landscapes of Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico and Utah.

Robert Smithson created “Spiral Jetty” (1970), whose 1,500-foot whorl of black basalt juts into Utah’s Great Salt Lake. Walter De Maria laid out “The Lightning Field” (1977) in the New Mexico desert, drawing overnight visitors hoping for a serendipitous interplay of electricity and the installation’s 400 stainless steel rods.

### Wielding Bulldozers

Three of those visionaries are still laboring over their creations, each hoping to finish the project before it finishes him. All three are septuagenarians, or nearly so, and all three have spent decades wielding bulldozers like paintbrushes, with one booted foot in the wilderness and the other in the world of galleries and museums.

Ross, the eldest at 75, may be just a few summers and \$1 million from unveiling “Star Axis.” James Turrell, 70, has stopped offering deadlines for the completion of his Arizona masterwork, “Roden Crater.” Though he’s spent \$13 million and 40 years so far on his celestial observatory set inside the caldera of an extinct volcano, he declines to pin down how big a check he needs to get it done. Michael Heizer, 68, refuses to let more than a handful of people anywhere near “City,” the Brobdingnagian earthwork he’s been sculpting in the Nevada desert since 1972.

## Cosmic Ambition

The three men share an almost cosmic ambition. They hauled their egos out into America’s harsh, unpeopled expanses and left as big and indelible a mark as they could manage. Their visions for posterity are both grand and vague: Future generations will wonder at their works, but how they might be funded, finished or managed postmortem is far murkier.

“I’m building this work for later,” Heizer has said of City. “I’m interested in making a work that will represent all of civilization to this point.”

Ross and Turrell aren’t quite so grandiose, but both are clearly conscious of the long arc of time. Turrell compares “Roden Crater” with Newgrange, the Neolithic temple mound in Ireland, and Ross has mapped the experience visitors to “Star Axis” will have of the stars’ slow dance millennia into the future.

## Ross’s Epiphany

Ross grew up outside Philadelphia and arrived at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1958, following a trajectory that took him from physics and mathematics to art that trafficked in light and numbers. In 1965, the then-27-year-old artist was busy welding steel into lattice sculptures in the Bay Area when he had the kind of epiphany you read about in the Bible.

“I dreamed of drawings for a large prism, complete with all the information I needed to build it,” he says. “I didn’t pay much attention at first, but at the end of the next day, I still had these blueprints that I could call up in my mind’s eye, and I thought, ‘Well, I’d better pay attention.’”

Ross constructed a giant prism to break a beam of sunlight into a rainbow that would travel slowly along a gallery floor during the course of a day. Later, he

focused the sun's rays rather than refracting them, using a magnifying lens to burn abstract scorch marks into wood panels. He called these works solar burns.

In 1966, Ross moved to New York and went to see Virginia Dwan, the 3M Co. heiress and den mother of the avant-garde. Her SoHo gallery became a kind of permanent student lounge for young artists whose aspirations paralleled the nation's drive into space.

### 'Magical Time'

"Heizer, De Maria, Smithson -- we were all engaged in an ongoing dialogue about expanding the boundaries of art onto the Earth and into the sky," Ross recalls. "It was a magical time, and the energy for these ideas was in the air."

So was money -- a little bit, anyway. Dwan doled out startup funds and, a few years later, so did the Dia Art Foundation, bankrolled by another industrial heiress, Philippa de Menil. Armed with these meager fortunes, the artists fanned out.

Starting in 1971, Ross spent five summers driving all over Arizona, New Mexico, Texas and Utah to find the ideal spot from which to contemplate the heavens, based on what was then a simple structure: a long staircase pointed north, with a steel hoop at the top with which to capture Polaris.

### Cowboy Business Card

"I was up on a mesa in New Mexico one day when a cowboy on a horse came up over the side and said he wanted to make sure my car was parked on rock, because hot mufflers start grass fires," Ross says. "We started chatting, and I told him what I was working on, and he said, 'Oh, my dad would be interested in that.' He whipped out his father's business card. So there I am, not a building anywhere for 40 miles, but here's a cowboy with a business card."

Ross called the number on the card and reached cattle rancher W.O. Culbertson, who listened to Ross's three-minute pitch about building a naked-eye observatory and answered: "That sounds like just the sort of thing we need around here. How much land do you need?" A square mile, Ross hazarded. "Hell, we've got plenty of those," Culbertson said. "Drive around and pick one out."

## \$4 Million and Counting

Ross and his crew start each summer by organizing their tasks around available money and materials. Cold Spring Granite in Marble Falls, Texas, has donated some 1,000 tons of granite over 20 years, and a local mechanic has salvaged construction machinery and sold it to Ross for pocket change. The artist says he's personally spent about \$4 million so far, more than half from commissions for his prisms and solar burns.

For his part, Heizer bought a big chunk of desert in Nevada's misnamed Garden Valley and in 1972 got to work on his one-man metropolis. A mile and a half long and a quarter mile wide, "City" is a still-evolving complex of mounds, pathways, pits and ramps made of compacted soil, concrete and rock. Earthmovers and explosives have given Heizer a kind of artistic superpower, the ability to carve the land on an urban scale.

"It's becoming one of the most extraordinary artworks on the planet," says Michael Govan, director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and one of Heizer's principal fundraisers.

## Spent Volcano

Only about 300 miles (and the Grand Canyon) separate "City" from "Roden Crater," but Turrell's canvas is of an entirely different sort: a spent volcano an hour outside Flagstaff, Arizona, which he found in 1974 after buzzing the area in a biplane. The Dia Art Foundation helped him with the down payment; however, nobody would write a mortgage for an artwork, so Turrell adopted an occupation Western bankers would back: He became a reluctant cattle rancher.

Four decades on, Turrell's caldera has been carved into an elaborate warren of stairways, tunnels and light-filled chambers from which to view the daily spectacle of the Arizona sky. Its centerpiece is the Skyspace, a subterranean vault with an oculus overhead that fills the room with an almost palpable light. Like "Star Axis," "Roden Crater" also features a long staircase to a skyward opening.

"It's actually the tallest structure in Arizona," Turrell says. "But because it's all inside the volcano, if you go to the top and jump out, you land only 3.5 feet down."

Heizer's "City" shows up on satellite photographs as some mysterious military installation, a vast arrangement of lumps and lines. From a distance, Ross's "Star Axis" is a slash against the sky. But Turrell's construction is essentially invisible, huddled almost entirely underground.

## Final Stages

All three works appear to have entered their final stages, though none of the creators is willing to commit to an opening date. Govan says the completion of "City" is nigh but won't speculate as to precisely when.

"I wouldn't go into a painter's studio and say, 'Are you going to finish it tomorrow or the next day?' It's up to him to decide when it's done," says Govan.

If Heizer were hit by a meteorite tomorrow, it seems likely that "City" would open in truncated form. Turrell, on the other hand, says his designs for "Roden Crater" are so detailed -- down to the flooring and heated seats -- that anyone could finish it, given the time and money. Ross has been working for more than 20 years with the same local crew chief, who could presumably wrap up "Star Axis" on his own.

## Coming Soon

When they do finally open, these three disparate masterworks will become major destinations for art pilgrims. Even so, their creators are counting on isolation, rough roads and enlightened stewardship to keep the tour buses at bay. "City" is more than two hours from the nearest town, and with no place to stay, future visitors will need to drive in and out the same day.

"It's not meant to be seen by crowds," Govan says.

At "Roden Crater," Turrell is building a rustic lodge at the caldera's edge where small groups will be able to spend the night. Ross insists that only six people at a time visit "Star Axis," in order to preserve the spirit of quiet solitude. The Museum of Outdoor Arts in Englewood, Colorado, is financing the construction of a small guesthouse; designed by New York architecture firm MOS and now nearing completion, the collection of aluminum-clad cubes glints just below the ridgeline, a shiny, alien presence amid the landscape's arid beauty.

## Moonlight Tour

After dinner, Ross takes me back out to “Star Axis.” He grabs a couple of flashlights, though we hardly need them except to check for resident rattlesnakes: Moonlight frosts the mesa and diffuses in the hanging dust. Polaris is bright enough to burn through all that luminous interference and so is the Big Dipper, but the rest of the sky is a blank. Ross looks up, grimaces and shrugs. The conditions are not ideal.

And then I realize all the heavenly alignments that have beckoned to Ross for four decades can now be ignored. Even on a mostly starless night, the staircase climbing the mesa, the looming pyramid and the ocular view onto pale heavens all have a powerful, primordial presence.

I murmur in the dark, and the pyramid walls amplify my voice. Ross notes my satisfaction but misunderstands its source.

“I think your spirit is very happy to reconnect with the star alignments,” he says.

No, I tell him. It’s not the choreography of celestial bodies that bewitches me now; it’s the atmosphere in the well-proportioned vault and the way a spoken word resonates in the velvety black recesses.

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If “Star Axis,” “City” and “Roden Crater” attain the enduring power they aspire to, it won’t be because of their makers’ theories; it will be because each conquers the American West with a monument of mythic proportions. It’s not what they tell you but how they make you feel that matters; not the search for a cosmic connection but the immediate, sensual experience of colossi that evoke the pyramids.

“Well, I have no interest in guiding anyone’s experience,” Ross says. “It’s about you discovering your own.”