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THE ARTIST'S LIFE

What Happens When a Single Art Project Becomes a Decades-Long Obsession?

Rodin and Duchamp toiled away on pieces for spectacular lengths of time. But in an era of digital hyperdrive, fidelity to one work seems even more heroic.



The view of the desert in New Mexico from Charles Ross's "Star Axis" (1971-still under construction), a land art sculpture that the artist has been working on for several decades. CreditCredit© Charles Ross 2018

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By Nancy Hass

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A FEW DAYS AFTER Sept. 11, the artist Robert Longo noticed his youngest son, 6-year-old Joseph, standing in his bedroom in their Brooklyn apartment before a skyscraper made of Montessori blocks. Longo watched as the boy rammed it methodically with one of the three-inch cast-metal planes he collected, a Boeing 767-223ER, the exact model Mohamed Atta had just used to fly into the first tower of the World Trade Center. “He just kept crashing it into the blocks,” Longo, 65, recalls, “over and over and over. I just can’t get the image out of my head.”

Soon after, Longo began to translate the memory into a sculpture that he is still working on to this day. He began designing a life-size replica of a 159-foot-long 767-223ER, with an epoxy-resin charcoal-blackened exterior, which he planned to show someday at the Deichtorhallen museum in Hamburg, Germany, where its fuselage would command the entire central space, one wing jutting through the building’s arched windows like a charred limb. Viewers would maneuver around the piece, leaving footprints in the charcoal dust. Longo always imagined displaying the work in Hamburg because Atta had lived there; a friend of Longo’s had, some years before the attacks, been a passenger in Atta’s taxi and had forgotten in the back seat a gift for his young daughter, which Atta had demanded money to return.

But the 17-year slog to realize the work the artist calls “The First Plane” is still ongoing. There have been endless prototypes, numerous engineering studies, countless rounds of fund-raising. Scheduling at the Deichtorhallen, where the work was originally to be shown in February, has been problematic — that’s what happens when deadlines sprawl — and it occurred to Longo that he should contact the families of the victims who died in the flight to ensure the installation has their blessing. Where less dogged artists might consider each complication a deal breaker, Longo regards them as “wrinkles.” The image of his son and the first plane remains undimmed. Despite its elusiveness, the project has become in some ways as emotionally essential to him as the “Men in the Cities” charcoal drawing series that made his reputation in the 1980s. “I have no idea how long this will ultimately take me,” he says. “You just keep going. You don’t let it die.”



A model for Robert Longo's as-yet-unrealized work "The First Plane," which he started shortly after the Sept. 11 attacks and which requires a life-size replica of a commercial airliner. Credit "Model of First Plane Installed in the Deichtorhallen, Hamburg," 2016

ANY SERIOUS ART requires prodigious commitment. Ambitious works can take years. But there is dedication to one's craft, and then there is what many might call obsession, the decades-long fixation on a consuming project. Sometimes the work remains unfinished forever, but even those that eventually reach fruition take their toll: Both the piece and the artist can end up, in the words of Michael Heizer — who has worked for 46 years on "City," a mile-plus-long, as yet unrealized minimalist compound of ramps, slabs and chasms in the Nevada desert — "torqued and twisted" forever.

Artists throughout history have worked on single pieces for spectacular lengths of time. Auguste Rodin worked for 37 years on "La Porte de l'Enfer," a set of carved doors with more than 180 figures inspired by Dante's "Divine Comedy," commissioned in 1880 for a Paris design museum that was never built. Marcel Duchamp spent the last 20 years of his life secretly toiling in his Greenwich Village studio on the installation "Étant Donnés" (1966). The world thought he had officially retired from art to concentrate on competitive chess, but it turns out he was also concocting a room-size fantasia of sticks, aluminum, parchment and plastic clothespins, with a splayed female nude at its center. Duchamp considered the piece finished, but it was not exhibited until a year after his death in 1968. Installed permanently at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, it was designed to be glimpsed through a peephole in a heavy wooden door, as if the work itself were meant to remain a secret.

These kinds of efforts have long been acknowledged as much for the otherworldly patience they require as for their artistry. But in an era of digital hyperdrive, the meticulous, even tedious work that once went into art has been largely replaced by a keystroke, and attention spans have shrunk to virtually nothing. The notion of a contemporary artist pledging fidelity to a single work over decades now seems even more heroic.



Marcel Duchamp's final piece, "Étant donnés," which he worked on in secret for 20 years. Credit 1946-66, mixed-media assemblage, Philadelphia Museum of Art, gift of the Cassandra Foundation, 1969/Bridgeman Images. © Association Marcel Duchamp/Adagp, Paris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2018

"You have to have the sort of singular personality that enables you to delay gratification way, way beyond normal limits," says Lisa Le Feuvre, the executive director of the Holt-

Smithson Foundation, which supports the work of the husband-and-wife duo Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt, each of whom specialized in massive environmental installations that took years of planning and execution. Smithson, whose “Spiral Jetty” (1970), a 1,500-foot curl of earth and basalt on a Utah lake bed, has come to symbolize such all-consuming devotion, died as a result of his outsize ambition: In 1973, the tiny plane in which he was surveying land for his next, vast project crashed into a mesa near Amarillo, Tex. “You’re like a research scientist,” says Le Feuvre, “willing to tolerate constant failure, pick yourself up and begin again.”

Visual artists who labor for decades are often compared with writers famous for their glacially paced efforts. Ezra Pound worked for 47 years on “The Cantos”; William H. Gass began his novel “The Tunnel” in 1969, finishing it in 1995; Ralph Ellison’s follow-up to 1952’s “Invisible Man,” eventually titled “Juneteenth,” was pulled together from 2,000 manuscript pages and scraps after the author died in 1994. But a writer’s progress can be measured in pages, and the image of the writer banging his head against the wall trying to write a lone sentence is enough of a cliché that we have a colloquialism — writer’s block — to explain why a book might take eons to finish. There is no equivalent term for visual artists, however, and at any rate, the work they do can be less tangible, less narratively tidy, more difficult to define as complete — by both artist and audience. Pablo Picasso, who mostly worked very fast, once remarked, “To finish a work? To finish a picture? What nonsense!”

A work of art, then, is never completed so much as it is forever evolving, like a child. And like a child, an artwork requires attention, concern, respect, love — even though (unlike a child), it can’t return these emotions. Certain artists build the concept of a long gestation period into the work itself: “Black Square XVII,” an installation by Taryn Simon at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow, is currently an empty shelf in the museum, reserved for a chunk of vitrified nuclear waste once its radioactive properties have diminished to a level safe for human exposure — about 1,000 years from now, in 3015.



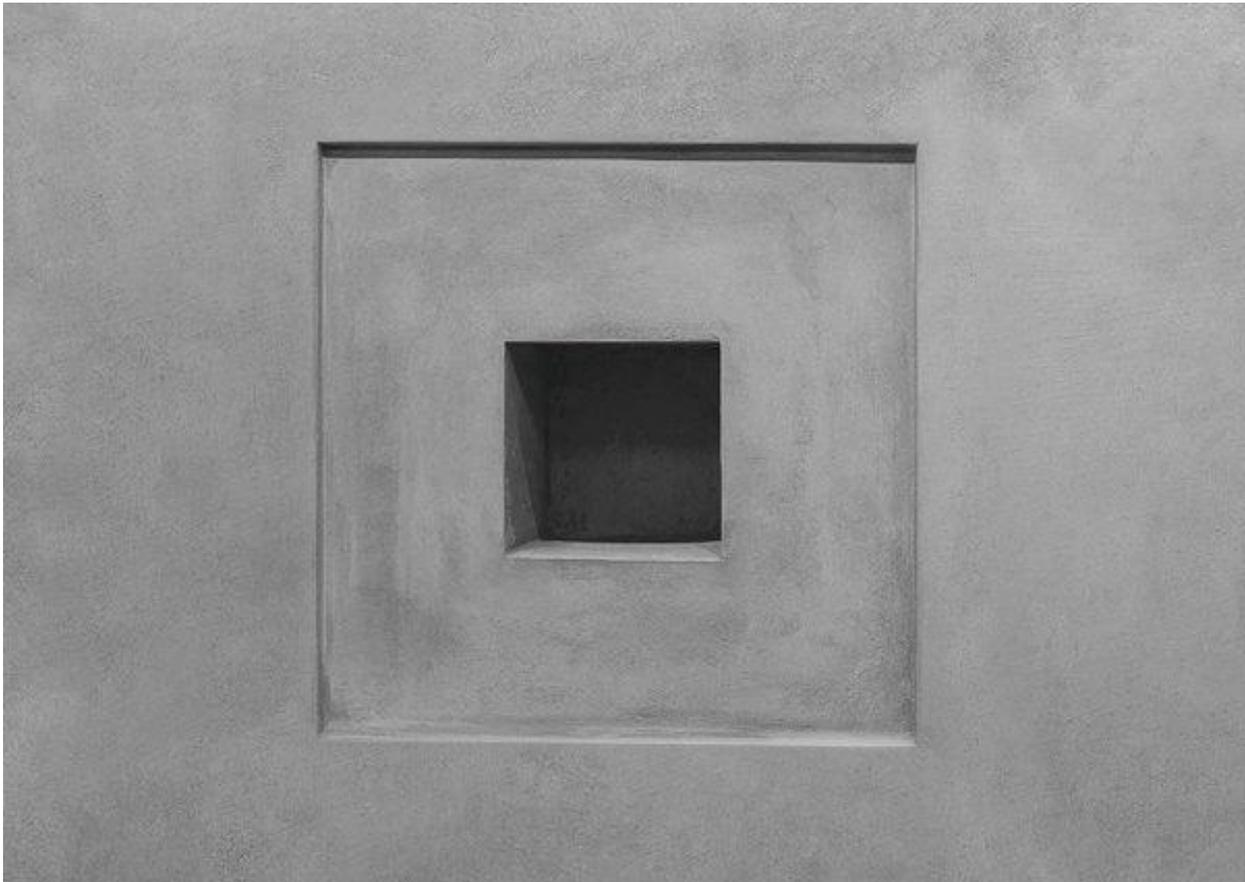
Michael Heizer's "City" has been a work in progress since the 1970s. Credit "Complex Two, City," 1970-Present © Michael Heizer/Triple Aught Foundation 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery. Photograph: Eric Piasecki

THOUGH ALL ARTISTS can be given to meditating on a piece for longer than might seem rational or sane, it is the so-called land artists like Smithson and Holt, minimalist sculptors who left New York in the 1960s for the open, malleable vistas of the American West, who remain the poster children for creative endurance, in part because of the nature of their particular obsession. Making works that can be seen from the stratosphere and can outlast the elements means blasting through rock and transporting endless tons of soil. Walter De Maria, whose 1977 "The Lightning Field" comprises 400 pointed steel poles in a 1-mile-by-1-kilometer grid on a plain in New Mexico, once joked that his "paintbrush is the Caterpillar."

The living icons of such effort are the trio of Heizer, Charles Ross and James Turrell. Each has worked almost constantly on their defining chef-d'oeuvre for at least 40 years; at this point, their efforts have arguably tipped over into performance art. "City" has reportedly cost Heizer — or rather, his funders, including the 86-year-old 3M heir and patron Virginia Dwan and the Dia Foundation — as much as \$25 million. (The artist now says he will be finished by 2020.) Since 1977, Turrell has been laboring on Roden Crater, a 400,000-year-old extinct volcano in the Northern Arizona desert, slowly turning it into what he has called a "controlled environment for the experiencing and contemplation of light." In the first phase of construction alone, he moved 1.3 million cubic yards of earth.

In an early morning phone call from the site of "Star Axis," his 11-story naked-eye observatory of sculptural forms in dirt, granite, sandstone, bronze and steel on a mesa in

the New Mexico desert, Ross, the most accessible and voluble of the three men, insists that the project he began 47 years ago will be done by 2022. (But, he concedes, “I’ve been saying it will be finished in three or four years for 20 years now.”) By many accounts, he does seem close to finishing the work, which can host six people at a time in a guesthouse on the property. One by one, visitors will scale the thousands of steps up an ascending tunnel toward an opening that will align them with the earth’s axis, witnessing the progression of the stars over a cycle of 26,000 years. Although he has private support, last year Ross sold his Manhattan loft to partially finance a foundation that will maintain the site for perpetuity.



A compartment in Moscow’s Garage Museum of Contemporary Art reserved for Taryn Simon’s “Black Square XVII,” which is expected to be completed in 3015. Credit “Black Square,” 2006–, Void for artwork, Permanent installation at Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow © Taryn Simon. Courtesy of the artist and Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, such artists tend to live at the “intersection of narcissism, obsession and megalomania,” says James Crump, who directed “Troublemakers,” a 2016 documentary about the land art movement. “You have to wonder if there isn’t an element of not being able to face the finish.” In any case, the artists themselves wind up as profoundly transformed as the landscape, for good and bad. Heizer’s wife, the artist Mary Shanahan, who was instrumental to “City,” left him four years ago, presumably depleted by the ordeal and the relationship. Not long before, he nearly died from chronic neural and respiratory problems, and developed a morphine addiction from the pain treatment. The work can start to overtake everything else, to serve as a stand-in for

reality, a kind of escape from everything that isn't the work itself. There is something attractive about continuing to tinker with a piece — perhaps superfluously — to stay in a suspended state of artistic nirvana in which the work can simply continue and the end never has to come.

But the beatific Ross, now 80, marriage intact (“though to be fair, she is my second wife”), seems to be moving one step closer to the bliss of completion with each strenuous section of “Star Axis.” The work may point toward the infinitude of the universe, but Ross measures his progress in fairly practical terms. “I consider it an adventure in geometry and astronomy, bumping into the spiritual,” he says. “It still unfolds every day for me.”

At its best, fruition after so many years may spark an unexpected late-life creative renaissance. Consider the Los Angeles-based light artist Mary Corse, 73, who since the 1960s has worked largely without the acclaim granted her male peers, including Turrell and Dan Flavin (though that recently has changed with her first solo museum survey at the Whitney and a new permanent Dia: Beacon exhibition of several works). The Tet Offensive was barely over and students were storming the Democratic National Convention in Chicago when she began “The Cold Room” (1968-2017), an immersive environment in which a wireless light box hangs in temperatures chilled to near freezing — the better to focus the viewer's mind on the light itself. Over the years, she struggled for financing, took physics classes to aid planning and built parts of it herself, but it was not until last year, at Los Angeles's Kayne Griffin Corcoran gallery, that she was fully able to display the completed work. On the gallery walls around the work hung what amounted to a survey of her artistic stages since 2003, including luminous paintings she made as she struggled to bring “The Cold Room” fully into being. “Finishing the piece has finally made the past present for me. Was it five minutes ago? Five years? Fifty?” Corse says. “Never would I have thought that this is how it would end — with a new beginning.”