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At 4:30am on March 10, 2012 the rock that would become the key component of Michael Heizer's outdoor installation, *Levitated Mass*, arrived at its destination. It had traveled along a circuitous route – busy roads and overpasses had to be avoided – from the Stone Valley Quarry in Riverside County's Jurupa Valley to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Thousands of people had viewed the rock's journey, staging late-night celebrations and even a marriage proposal as the rock slowly made its transformation from natural object to objet d'art. Another thousand were there to greet it at the Museum, along with journalists working for publications large and small – from The New York Times to the solo blogger.

They say it's the journey that's important, not the destination, and that may never have been truer than in this instance. Every major publication in Los Angeles, and many beyond, wrote about the stone's slow ride into town. The only large-market review of the finished piece, as art, was a rather tempered consideration in The Los Angeles Times.

And maybe this was inevitable. Why should we expect anyone to write about it from an art perspective? We've already learned that the rock weighs 340 tons and that the shipping specialists Emmert International built a custom vehicle, 295-feet long and featuring 196-wheels, just for the project. We've been told that the journey covered 107 miles and wound its way through 22 cities and 4 counties. We know that the trip took 11 days and that the rock was encased in high-thread-count sheets, made from Egyptian cotton, throughout. We've heard that the transportation project cost \$10 million.

LACMA itself devoted lengthy blog entries covering the rock's trek. A lot of the information mentioned above came from this blog, with the rest of the media world finding the data too tantalizing to ignore.

The worry I have is that the art industry is similarly preoccupied with this sort of data, that it's too caught up in number crunching. In other words, my fear is that it's just another corporate/bureaucratic culture. This would certainly explain all the professional networking, all the talk of branding and emerging markets. It might even explain the art we've been told to ogle for the past few decades.

1a

Watching visitors to *Levitated Mass* only exacerbates our fear that they've come because they heard about the rock's travelogue. They haven't come to experience art, they've come because they want to touch the rock they saw on the news.

Basically, they're appending their own journey to the LACMA grounds to the rock's famous road trip.

After they've secured photos documenting their proximity to the famous rock, selfies that will, in many cases, be uploaded to Facebook and forgotten about with the next news feed, it is not uncommon to hear visitors say something to the effect of: "I thought it would be bigger."

And this is a fair response. I thought it would be bigger myself, if only because at its actual scale it fails to realize any sense of awe, wonder, beauty, balance, fear . . . I could keep listing adjectives but I think you get my point. The rock would seem enormous if it were in your back yard. But even at the level of, say, a corporate lawn it stops demanding a second glance. I'm hardly a geologist or even an ardent outdoorsman but I've seen bigger rocks than this one. I've climbed on them, I've marveled at them, sometimes I just noted them and walked right on by.

It is an unimpressive rock tightly – and very explicitly, this can't be too strongly put, the braces and screwed supports are almost Brechtian in their foregrounded

nature⁵⁷ – affixed to a concrete walkway cut slightly into the earth so that one can easily walk down and stand under the rock.

That’s the piece. There’s a rock, there’s a walkway that allows you to walk under the rock, there’s some heavy bracing holding the rock in place, there’s a gravelly landscaped area that serves as a field for these objects.

It reminds me of an *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* episode, in which Charlie is dismayed to hear that Christopher Nolan’s Batman films, which he hasn’t seen, are about nothing more than “a grown man who dresses up like a bat . . . who goes around solving crimes and mysteries.” “These are Academy Award winning movies!” Charlie exclaims in anger. “Well, you know the academy, Charlie” Mac responds.

One of my reasons for writing this book is to issue the reminder that, in the case of *Levitated Mass* and all other works of contemporary art, we are the academy. Collectively, through action or inaction, depending on our place in a piece’s particular food chain, we give it, or the institution that sponsors it, a stamp of approval. If we’re not satisfied with what we’re getting from our celebrated artists and prominent institutions we can deny that stamp.

⁵⁷ I’m saying Brechtian here to be cute. What the supports really reference, though not in anything like a “critical” fashion, is building codes.

3

For five-and-a-half years, from late-2009 to early-2015, I managed an MFA program at a university.⁵⁸ For some part of that period the MFA students were allowed to bring on unpaid interns from the BA and BFA population, with the undergraduate students receiving college credit (and paying tuition on those credits) while helping the MFA produce their work, assist in exhibition installation, documentation, etc, and of course tend to the various administrative needs tasks that even a student artist encounters. At a certain point the University removed these internship possibilities. The MFAs protested vehemently, and as different waves of MFAs came in over the next few years they tended to renew these protests even after the personal experience of seeing this internship model in practice had ceased to exist.

While I almost always sided with the MFA students, and usually fought for them even when I didn't agree on a certain point, I could not support them in these protests. Student artists should learn to function as self-sufficient entities, is/was my belief. They need to be fully self-sufficient before they can even consider farming out responsibilities. However, the students didn't see it this way. Instead they saw

⁵⁸ In truth my titles and responsibilities varied, stretching to include a second graduate program or beyond, as I was an Assistant Dean for a while, but I started as manager of MFA and never let go of that particular charge. This was a very prominent and exciting MFA program, though as I write this footnote, in August 2015, things have taken a serious turn at the institution.

how the art world worked and felt, perhaps wisely, that the ability to expand one's artistic and administrative reach through the labor of others was a necessity for the contemporary artist. Being a manager is an essential skill of the contemporary artist, they believed, and one they should learn as an MFA.

2

And due to the echo chamber mentioned earlier, none of this seems strange to those who spend most of their time in the art world. Socialize with a representative group of regularly exhibiting contemporary artists under 45 years old and you'll notice the preponderance of the managerial class sensibility. Of course this dominant personality type will be echoed amongst those young artists who are still graduate students.

These are intelligent, organized, socially facile rationalists. Most of them could have gone into medicine, law, or business. Instead they chose a much less straightforward career path. This makes sense, right, following one's passion, one's heart? But that theory, as perfectly reasonable as it is, crashes against the rocks – no pun intended – of the contemporary art world, where heart is little in evidence and passion is a word used only as a pejorative.

What have these young and youngish artists followed? Their egos, as even the mainstream press now gives abundant attention to young artists? The money, as the long art market boom continues? The dream of determining one's working hours for oneself? It's probably all of the above for most parties involved. Any heart-based passion for art tends to have been driven out of young artists late in the undergraduate experience, early in the MFA experience, or by the heart-free art market/social system.

Most of those who succeed in such a system are either naturally of the managerial sensibility or they find it easy to play the part. The artists who can't wear that mask are weeded out by the system itself. This is how things tend to work in homogenous and excessively social industries. Adapt to the status quo or be marginalized.

1b

The rock, removed from nature and put into an artificially pedestrian – I mean that in every sense of the word – environment, is just not impressive. I wish it were, I wish it attained some of the complicated grandeur of Heizer's earlier *Double Negative*, but it's just a rock on top of a walkway.

It's not Michelangelo's oft-cited ability to see the statue within the stone. It's not Janine Antoni's cleverly heartfelt *and*, two 600 pound boulders ground together by

the artist's own labor to create an aptly complex representation of relationships and the surprising ways in which they achieve balance. It's not Francis Alys' *When Faith Moves Mountains*, a wonderful exercise in collective mythology and community earth-moving in which a genuine geographical transformation was enacted for abstract ends. It's just a rock on top of a walkway.

If there's a winner to be crowned here it's the Druids. Their Stonehenge – and we can argue its art designation, though it seems like the least interesting question one can raise about the formation – has a mystery, a quality of awed majesty, that is nowhere to be found on LACMA's Resnick North Lawn. Spending any time at all with *Levitated Mass* just leads one to an appreciation of the Druids' simple-but-enigmatic approach. Maybe it was a funeral ground or a healing center, maybe it was a place of worship, maybe a timekeeping device, and maybe all of these are just way-the-hell-after-the-fact speculations.

In any case, centuries before Serra, incredibly heavy objects are balanced in a precarious fashion. The solidity, and stability, of the earth is called upon and, perhaps, questioned. Our human smallness, the inability of our intellectual systems to deal with such objects, is foregrounded. Sure, some modern planner decided to build a highway uncomfortably close to Stonehenge, but when you stare at these rocks up close the last thing you think about is vehicular transportation.

And yet people do transport themselves to LACMA, park in one of the pay lots or meters, and take photos of a stone-centered monument to museo-civic ingenuity. If the rock can come in all the way from Riverside County the least they can do is give it 30-minutes of their Saturday afternoon.

That's the perspective of the audience. How about the institution and its curators, administrators, and donors? What drives them to give the piece such prominence?⁵⁹ And the magazines or newspapers that gave it space in their publications? Is this just an example of easy hype?

Moreover, what does our heralding of this piece say about our relationship to nature? The aesthetic treatment of nature has moved through several prominent art historical phases. Direct representation ruled for a while, becoming more and more perfected by initiatives of science or technology, then explicitly subjective "impressions" took over, followed by a turn inward and towards the supposed universal nature of abstraction before the radical move to a direct manipulation of nature itself.

Now, in our plugged-in age, we seem to have reached a stage defined by on-demand simulations of nature. Whereas the original Earthworks came with the not-incident requirement that viewers had to traipse through an actual landscape –

⁵⁹ Note how much real estate is devoted to the piece.

Spiral Jetty and *Double Negative* are two excellent examples of this – we now want a faux nature that comes to us, and we are prepared to be wowed by the man-made aspects of these simulations.

1c

About a decade ago I developed an idea that I would occasionally trot out after a few drinks. “There should be an Oscar for Bureaucratic Choreography,” I would say, holding up the uncanny sequence in Cameron Crowe’s *Vanilla Sky* – the scene when Tom Cruise runs through a completely empty Times Square, the city had incredibly agreed to shut down the Square and the surrounding area for a few blocks in each direction⁶⁰ – as the prototypical winner of such an award.

For better or worse, and it’s a sad reflection on the piece that it could be for better, the installation of Heizer’s *Levitated Mass* on LACMA’s Resnick North Lawn is a prime art example of bureaucratic choreography. The permits required, the palms greased, the favors called in – these aspects are infinitely more interesting than the installation itself.

Olafur Eliason has made a career out of providing on-demand services of a similar nature, and notice how the bureaucratic – the permissions, the private and public

⁶⁰ This was back when Times Square was still open to vehicles.

funding agreements – also hovers over his large scale public projects. Works of this kind are perfect representations of our bureaucratized art world. A lot of administrators had to come together to make them a reality. We've gone from the art of universal spirit, to the art of the idea, to the art of the deal, and now to the art of the permit, all in half a century.

It's easy for us to rationalize this administrative, managerial, professional hand-shaker and cheek-kisser model of the contemporary artist. We all had our minds blown in an Art History class by the radical transformation of artistic practice that Warhol invented. It lodged itself deep in our art-thinking selves. Art no longer had to be the "privileged realm" of the "solitary genius," the mad men and women (but mostly men, is the way the narrative is given to us) holed up in studios and trying to transform their blood and sweat and passion into a work of art so expressive and confrontational that the world stopped spinning on its axis. Warhol demonstrated that art could simply be made by from ideas - plus assistants or paid fabricators - or perhaps not even that. No genius or solitude required.

Warhol showed us that the artist could simply operate as a director, or "factory" supervisor - instructing others to carry out the art labor while spending much of one's time attending social events, building one's brand. It's an approach that has been mimicked and expanded upon for decades now, to

the extent that an artist like Jeff Koons sometimes employs over 100 assistants at any given time.

But at this point, this far down that particular art historical path and this dreadfully far into the neoliberal experience, how can we hold onto that as a radical or progressive model? How can we possibly sustain any notion that it functions as critique of the larger capitalist world?