



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

Nancy Hass / September 18, 2018

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.

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.



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. *Photo Charles Ross 2018*



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.”

“Star Axis”, The Solar Pyramid is a 55-foot high granite tetrahedron whose form is defined by the summer and winter solstices. *Photo Charles Ross 2018*

