Undermining the Archive

On Art and Political Ecology

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frontispiece
Mel Chin, *Revival Field*, Pig's Eye Landfill, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1991–ongoing. Plants and industrial fencing on a hazardous waste landfill, 60 x 50 x 9 ft. Photographer unknown. Image courtesy of the artist.

ARCHIVES TODAY HOLD a renewed political importance. In 2016, under the threat that the United States government would destroy documented evidence of climate change, American scientists began saving digital archives from the Environmental Protection Agency and other sources of federal scientific data to private servers.[1] Their initiative points to a question that lies at the heart of the current ecological condition: How is it possible to ground and document claims of objective truth in the face of environmental crisis? For not only are scientific facts politically contested and public knowledge under the duress of censorship and erasure, but we are reconsidering the very instruments and practices by which knowledge is asserted. The causal connections between political regimes and destructive environmental feedback loops have never seemed more evident nor more elusive. We are also confronted with a paradox: scientists understand the planet's ecological precarity, but their knowledge cannot alter the human interventions to the environment that have already led to mass extinctions. The shift to an ecological perspective, it seems, is already too late.

How might the collections of the Archives of American Art be deployed in writing a history of art and the environment suitable for such a precarious moment? How might we discover a history of political ecology from within the aesthetic history of environmental art? I would suggest that our current conceptualization of and response to this predicament originated in 1960s art movements documented in the Archives. In what follows I consider the Lucy R. Lippard Papers as a resource for understanding the co-implication of art and political ecology in the twenty-first century. Lippard is one of the most prolific and influential critics to theorize earthworks and eco-art practice. She has approached this genre through an analysis of industrial landscaping practices, representing art, environment, and politics as a shared domain of inquiry. Lippard's extensive writings and interviews also point to her investment in assembling political collectives as an integral part of art criticism, and these can be probed for their history of coordinated ecological actions.

Lippard's archive can be "undermined" for its ecological propositions: gestures and postures that establish an aesthetic ground for creating political positions regarding troubled and toxic environments. My use of the term "undermining"

derives from her 2014 book *Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West*, which charts the shift from the kinds of land use carried out by local mining companies to that of multinational corporations.[2] The titular concept refers to the spread of industrial mining infrastructures across the US, which leads to the degradation of ecosystems. "Undermining" also describes Lippard's practice of excavating political histories of land use to reveal resistance to the monopolies of resource extraction. She constructs her alternative account of the American landscape through images, maps, sites, artistic gestures, and protests. Rather than straightforwardly mining Lippard's papers for objective knowledge that destines the planet to an apocalyptic fate, therefore, I *undermine* her archive to foreground the active political ground of its ecology.

One of the main contributions to contemporary ecological thinking came from American writer, scientist, and ecologist Rachel Carson with her groundbreaking book *Silent Spring* (1962). Carson tracked the systemic effects of the insecticide DDT, charting its impact from the "realms of the soil" to national agrobusiness organizations.[3] *Silent Spring* combined the scientific and the aesthetic, as Carson did not merely explain the symbiotic relations within an ecosystem but narrated with vivid beauty the entanglements that cross chemical, geophysical, social, and political boundaries. The book's aesthetic dimension rests in its spanning of scales and perspectives to reveal the resonances between them as a complex orchestra that animates the world of insects, birds, rivers, and ultimately the political sphere of humans. Carson therefore anticipated another influential book of critical theory, *The Three Ecologies* (1989), in which philosopher Félix Guattari affirms the interdependence of three spheres of ecological activity: the environmental, social, and subjective.[4]

Likewise, Lippard adopts a holistic approach to thinking through the relationship between environment, industrial culture, and identity. *Undermining* is the culmination of a career of understanding landscape aesthetics from a topological perspective. That is to say, Lippard is attuned to the environmental agents—organic and synthetic, human and technological, political and personal—that shape the land over time and alter our historical lens. Central to her analysis is how infrastructures grow into the land, how the earth transforms as its organic matter is infused with concrete, plastics, and other manufactured substances. Here, the collision of nature and industry is the ground for Lippard's politically charged aesthetic. For example, she opens her book with a discussion of a gravel mine in her hometown of Galisteo, New Mexico. Whereas natural gravel is geological debris formed by erosion over millennia, today most gravel is industrially fabricated, made by exploding rock with dynamite and using water to separate it from its mother lode. The gravel pit is therefore an apt metaphor for the fusion of geological and industrial forces and the growing lack of distinction between natural and manufactured landscapes. Lippard observes, "If the site is not squirming with machines, it isn't clear whether the pit is industrial or natural, recently broken into for profit, or eroded by wind and water over millions of years, or art—massive outdoor productions first called earthworks in the 1960s. . . . Gravel pits transform the incomprehensibly distant geological past into dubious futures."[5]

This siting of the landscape at a pivotal turn—one in which geological time and history receive critical attention and the future hangs in the balance—links Lippard's reflections to recent theorizations of the ecological condition through the lens of the Anthropocene, a geological era marked by massive and permanent human interventions in the environment, or the Capitalocene, the specification that these interventions were spurred by the capitalist economy.[6] In this respect her archive is a rich source for exploring the ecocritical potential of art history and artistic practice.

Among the manuscript drafts, correspondence, and exhibition promotional materials in the Lippard Papers one finds a rich catalogue of the political gestures of artists and critics from whom Lippard derived inspiration. Of special note are film stills from black-and-white Westerns, a testament to her longstanding passion for the

American West and its landscape aesthetics (*fig*. 1). When this material is read carefully, it is clear that Lippard drew a sense of political and feminist posturing from the scenes of gunslingers, outlaws, heroes, and heroines. From these film stills and an equally dramatic group of photographs of artists with their work, Lippard teased a set of gestures that catalyzed a politicized form of criticism and curatorial practice.

Another way to say this is that Lippard was considering gestures as a political medium, and coextensively how politics are integral to aesthetic developments. Such a statement requires the proviso that while a gesture may be a medium of politics and aesthetics, it is neither an aesthetic means to a political end nor an aesthetic end without political means. The philosopher Giorgio Agamben considers this triangulation of politics, aesthetics, and gesture, postulating that gesture does not merely embrace social convention but also can act as a vehicle of political change: "What characterizes gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported."[7] In gesture, an action is held in its history and *ethos*, but nevertheless moves thought insofar as "it is a process of making a means visible."[8] In short, gestures can reveal the ways the body exerts itself as a social relation and a political tool.

Consider Lippard's photograph of Lyman Kipp in his studio at Bennington College in 1960 taken by Hans Namuth (*fig*. 2). Standing amid a set of his constructions that is illuminated by a play of dappled sunlight streaming in from windows outside of the image's frame, Kipp exudes a shadowy command of the space, his angled pose aligning with the sculptures' geometric partitioning. Namuth's photograph is a mythological figuration of Kipp, as a cool and tactical commandeer of spatial order. Lippard

fig. 1
Roy Rogers, Dale Evans, and Margaret Dumont in *Sunset in El Dorado*, 1945. Gelatin silver print. Lucy R. Lippard Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

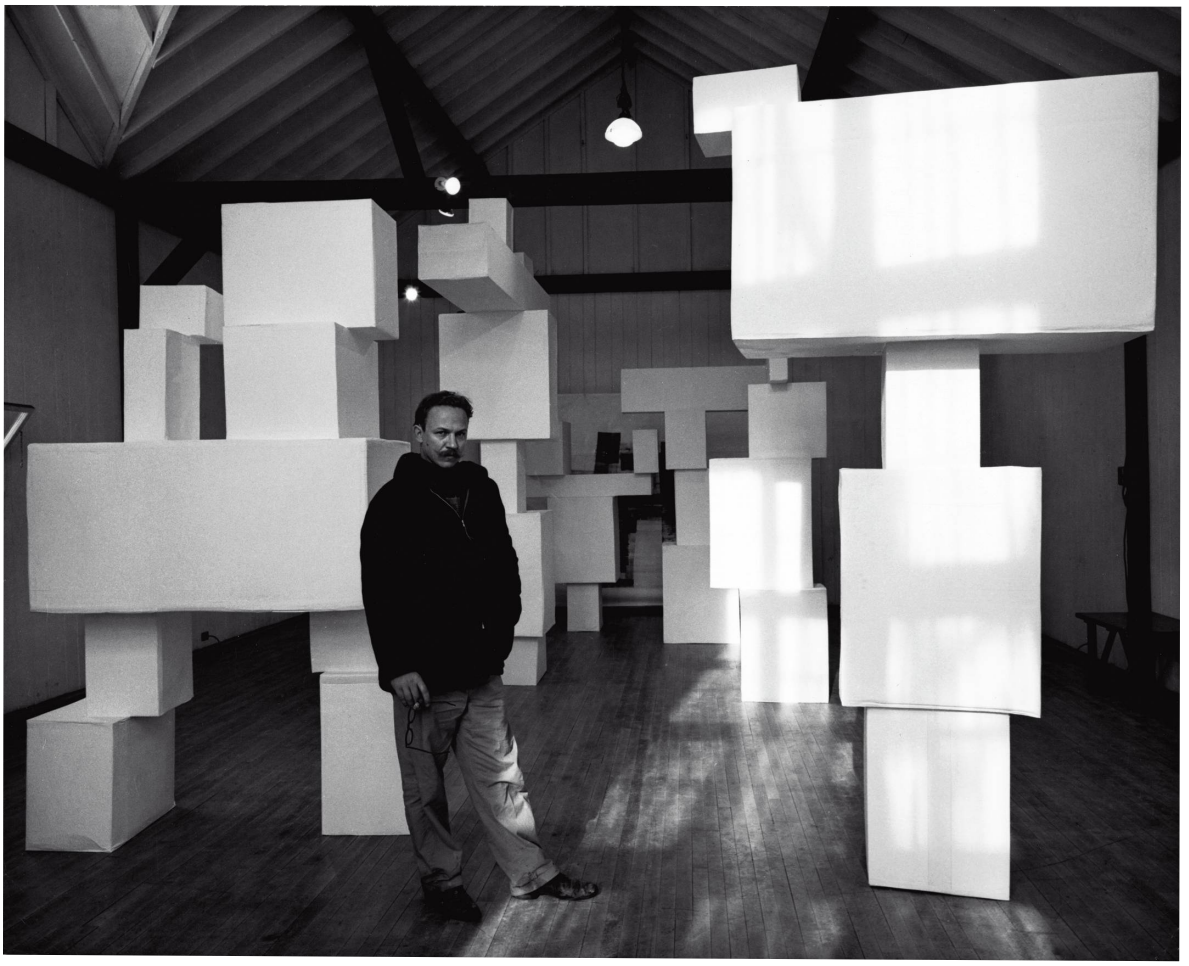

fig. 2
Lyman Kipp, Bennington College, 1960. Gelatin silver print. Photograph by Hans Namuth. Lucy R. Lippard Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. © 1991 Hans Namuth Estate.

was keenly attuned to how such images could be deployed in a curatorial vision of rhetorical postures; indeed, one of her early projects was the landmark minimalist sculpture exhibition *Primary Structures* (1966).[9] But it is the implicit rhetoric of the pose that stands out most strongly in her archive. Lippard read these dispositions as new ways of knowing and composing the world.

Lippard also collected several photographs documenting a 1962 Happening staged by the French artist and activist Jean-Jacques Lebel in Paris called *Pour conjurer l'esprit de catastrophe* (*fig.* 3). The conceptual artwork featured a reenactment of the 1961 Vienna Summit, in which two topless women seated in a bathtub wearing caricature masks of John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev engage in diplomatic negotiations, their bodies streaked with blood and plastered with newspaper clippings related to the Cuban Missile Crisis.[10] One of Lippard's photographs captures the Kennedy and Khrushchev characters engaging deeply with one another (Kennedy leans forward to meet the gaze of Khrushchev, who sits on the edge of the bath looking down at Kennedy, arms gesticulating). The image summarizes the political tensions of this historic moment, not the least of which was the emergence of a feminist activism that converged with the solidarities of other social movements, including nuclear disarmament and the student protests of Paris in 1968 (the same year that Lebel's Happening was released on film in the US). It stands at the crossroads between Lippard's research on the political history of postwar Europe and the wellspring of intersectional politics that would guide her thinking in the following decades, including feminism, decolonization, and global ecology.

The notion that a gesture can carry political weight is central to art historian Jane McFadden's argument in *Meaningless Work* (2016), about Walter De Maria's performances in the landscape in the late 1960s. For example, McFadden argues that the artist's posture in a photograph of his *Mile Long Drawing* (*fig*. 4) carries several layers of significance, resonating with the mythologies of the American West and the Viet Nam conflict.[11] This image of DeMaria lying prostrate in the Mojave Desert, perpendicular to the chalk lines he has drawn in the land, conjures at once the aftermath of a Wild West shootout and contemporary media images of antiwar activists forced to the ground by police. De Maria's gesture combined an idealized image of the past (when the good guys and bad guys were clear) with the disturbing violence of the political present.

It is with sensitivity to the relationship between bodily pose and environment that we can read the politics of the image in Lippard's papers. Over the course of the 1970s, Lippard became increasingly involved in building a critical context for global feminism. In her archive we find a fascinating collection of promotional photographs for a 1970 exhibition titled *Woman* at the New York Cultural Center. The exhibition showcased more than five hundred photographs of women of diverse ages, ethnicities, and origins in a variety of gestures and postures.[12] In Lippard's collection, these images capture the ethos of the emergent feminist movement and the sense of possibility of seeing women through an alternative perspective of their figural and facial agency. One of the images, captioned "Photograph of Two Old Women, Taken in Kansas by US Photographer Yale Joel," invites a gaze that intervenes in the conventional patriarchal ordering of the visual image. Here two women look out of an open window, their expressions united by beaming smiles as one gestures, hands outstretched, to an unseen object of attention to the viewer's right (*fig*. 5). The composition suggests companionship, intelligence, humor, and, above all, togetherness. Female solidarity is pitched from the shared direction of their attention but also from the women's distinct but complementary physical positions, one dynamically situated with the diagonal line of her

fig. 3
Jean-Jacques Lebel, *Pour conjurer l'esprit de catastrophe*, Happening, Galerie Raymond Cordier, Paris, November 25, 1962. Gelatin silver print. Photographer unknown. Lucy R. Lippard Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

fig. 4
Walter De Maria, *Mile Long Drawing*, 1968. Gelatin silver print. Earth sculpture consisting of two parallel, four-inch wide chalk lines positioned twelve feet apart and one mile long. Located in the Mojave Desert, California. Project no longer extant. Photographer unknown. © Estate of Walter De Maria.

forearms and hands activating their connection, the other posed comfortably, hands in her lap, enjoying her companion's exegesis. This Midwestern scene is a striking counterpoint to classic Depression-era photographs such as Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (1936), a portrait that personified the desperation of an early twentieth-century ecological crisis fueled by both natural and cultural causes.

The politics of feminism, global cultural diversity, and environmental politics converge in Lippard's 1992 book *Partial Recall*, in which the author assembled a set of historical photographs of Indigenous North Americans and then invited contemporary Native American artists and writers to respond to these images. Cultural and environmental diversity are likewise at the heart of *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (1997), in which she discusses historical and contemporary landscape sensibilities across cultures and geographies.[13] Whether as collector, curator, or editor, Lippard's environmental aesthetic was informed by the positioning of bodies within a political ecology.

Between the late 1960s and early 1990s, Lippard's multifaceted commentary concerning identity politics, environmental activism, and the culture wars influenced many conceptual artists. Mel Chin, for example, devised a powerful artistic practice animated by the personas, bodily gestures, and images that create the political ecology of

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environments. Chin is best known for his pivotal site-specific work *Revival Field* (1991–ongoing), in which he remediated a plot of toxic land (in Pig's Eye Landfill, located on the Mississippi floodplain near St. Paul, Minnesota) using hyper-accumulator plants to extract heavy metals from the soil (*frontispiece*, *fig*. 6).[14] The value of *Revival Field* lies not merely in the site but also in the collective contribution of the people (scientists, community members, and government stakeholders) who participated in its rehabilitation and are involved in its continued maintenance.

Chin's artistic interventions concern the social and political arenas that determine the shape and condition of environments. Take, for example, a short synopsis in the Chin Papers of a film the artist proposed making in 1983. It is short—little more than a page—and outlines four characters: William Gage, who works for "Central Corporation," having tried to infiltrate and dismantle it in his former days of political activism but who has since admitted defeat in this endeavor; his former girlfriend, Katherine Hellinger, who "scaled the corporate ladder and now is the cool and powerful head" of the company; Kurt, a vagrant and "modern day Diogenes" who regards Gage as the last honest man; and a Chameleon who takes on Gage's appearance to carry out acts of terrorism "calculated to bring to light evidence necessary to undermine the corruption and misapplied power." Ultimately, it is revealed that the Chameleon has been working in concert with Katherine. Chin outlines the drama's

fig. 5
Yale Joel, "Photograph of Two Old Women, Taken in Kansas," n.d. Gelatin silver print. Lucy R. Lippard Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

fig. 6
Mel Chin, *Revival Field*, Pig's Eye Landfill, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1991–ongoing. Plants and industrial fencing on a hazardous waste landfill; approximately 60 x 50 x 9 ft. Photographer unknown. Image courtesy of the artist.

fourfold dynamics through a series of short paragraphs, each describing one character and his or her relationship to the others. In other words, while the film narrates the demise of a bloodless multinational corporation that exploits "underdeveloped" countries, this enterprise is the result of social interaction—and ultimately political cooperation—among the characters. Chin's goal is to foreground social relations as a political and aesthetic form. The gestures among the characters are mechanisms of political change.[15]

Returning to my original notion—that the precarious status of archives demonstrates a rupture between scientific knowledge concerning our contemporary ecological condition and the possibilities for creating meaningful change through political activism—it is now possible to rethink this predicament. My journey through the Archives' Lippard Papers and Chin Papers reveals the potential of curatorial, artistic, and critical gestures to enact political, social, and environmental transformation. More than simply preserving objective facts, the archive discloses the entanglement of ecology and aesthetics, and tenders corresponding aesthetic responses (in the form of gestures, postures, and social scenarios) that propose alternative sensibilities for engaging with the environment. Thus the Archives upholds a history of the political affordances in art that develop our aesthetic relationship with the natural world.

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Notes

1 Brady Dennis, "Scientists Are Frantically Copying US Climate Data, Fearing It Might Vanish Under Trump," *Washington Post*, December 13, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2016/12/13/scientists-are-frantically-copying-u-s-climate-data-fearing-it-might-vanish-under-trump/.

2 Lippard, *Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West* (New York: The New Press, 2014).

3 Carson, *Silent Spring* (1962; reprint, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 53.

4 Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (1989; reprint, London: Bloomsbury, 2000).

5 Lippard, *Undermining*, 13–14.

6 See Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); and Jason W. Moore, ed., *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016).

7 Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 49–61.

8 Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," 59.

9 See Kynaston McShine, *Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors* (New York: Jewish Museum, 1966).

10 The inscription on the back of the image describes its subject as Khrushchev and Kennedy "in the international blood bath." Within the mechanics of the drama, the blood would have splashed and spread in direct proportion to the women's physical movements and gestures.

11 McFadden, *Walter De Maria: Meaningless Work* (London: Reaktion Books 2016), 87–90.

12 This exhibition was held from September 2 to November 8, 1970. See the press release accompanying Joel's photograph in Lippard's papers; and "Best Bits for the Sisters," *New York Magazine*, August 31, 1970, 49.

13 Lippard, ed., *Partial Recall* (New York: New Press, 1992); and Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: New Press, 1997).

14 Mel Chin, "Revival Field," accessed January 6, 2019, http://melchin.org/oeuvre/revival-field.

15 Mel Chin, "Revival Field," accessed January 6, 2019, http://melchin.org/oeuvre/revival-field.

15 Mel Chin, "Synopsis," (annotated "Mel Chin Film Dec. 1983"), Mel Chin Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.