

# ARTFORUM

May 13th, 2008

## “Decoys, Complexes, and Triggers: Feminism and Land Art in the 1970s”

SCULPTURE CENTER

44 - 19 Purves Street

May 4–July 28

Decoys, complexes, and triggers are pivotal to cause-and-effect relations; they are objects that provoke reactions. This survey, organized by Catherine Morris, brings together works that sculpt viewers' awareness of their surroundings with precision. An opening in the octagonal tower of Mary Miss's Screened Court, 1979, draws viewers inward through a loose circle of fencing, but a tighter row of steel mesh at the tower's base frustrates attempts at entrance. The perch at the top of Alice Aycock's Stairs (These Can Be Climbed), 1974/2008, offers a sweeping view of the exhibition—a spatial sensation contradicted by the cramped feeling of crouching against the gallery's ceiling. Housed in Sculpture Center, “Decoys” convincingly demonstrates how Land art can achieve its effects even where land is scarce. The inclusion of documentary photography and video reminds viewers of the art's original outdoor contexts and gives the exhibition an archive's authority by expanding its scope to some fifty works by ten women.

Projecting identity politics onto this art is problematic, especially since—as Morris acknowledges—several of the artists featured have consistently rejected the “feminist” label. Nonetheless, “Decoys” opens a useful dialogue with the seminal survey “WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution,” which can only be deliberate given Sculpture Center's proximity to P.S. 1 and the weeklong overlap of the two shows' runs. “WACK!” presented visual languages of ephemera and performance, liquidity and softness—a resistance to patriarchal values of mastery and permanence—while setting forth the proliferation of roles that women (and later, anyone) could assume as artists: the craftworker, the shaman, the activist, the diarist. “Decoys” adds to that by accounting for women artists who operated as architects, another mode current in the 1970s, and downplayed direct involvement of their hands and bodies. It might seem ironic that an ostensibly feminist show has documentation revealing that the “men's work” of the art was done by men—in a video about Nancy Holt's Sun Tunnels, 1976, male construction workers arrange massive tubes, and men in tractors drive tractors in pictures of Agnes Denes's Wheatfield—A Confrontation, 1982. But the true nature of these artists' practices is reflected by Aycock's drawings of a large-scale land piece, Project for Elevation with Obstructed Sight Lines, 1972, and a photograph of Denes, waist-high in wheat with downtown's skyscrapers at her back, surveying the field where her vision bloomed.

— Brian Droittour



View of “Decoys, Complexes, and Triggers: Feminism and Land Art in the 1970s.”

Foreground: Alice Adams, Large Vault, 1975. Background, left to right: Alice Aycock, Stairs (These Stairs Can Be Climbed), 1974/2008; Jackie Winsor, Coil Piece, 1969; Michelle Stuart, Sayerville Strata Quartet, 1976; Jackie Winsor, Cement Sphere, 1971; Suzanne Harris, Inhabitant, 1975/2008.