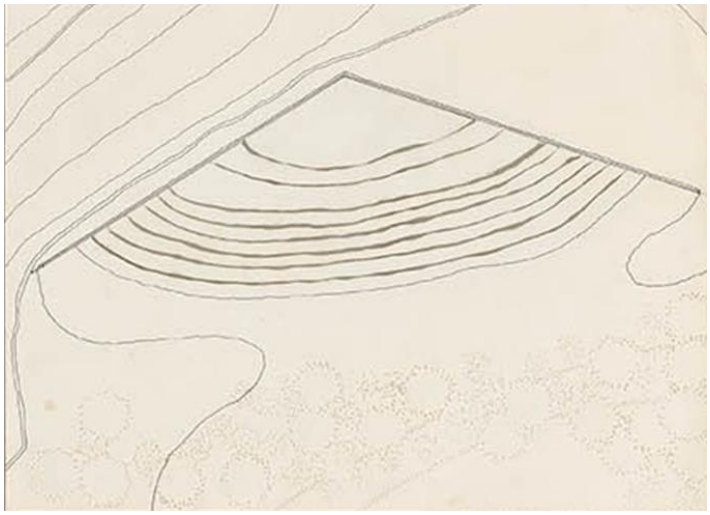
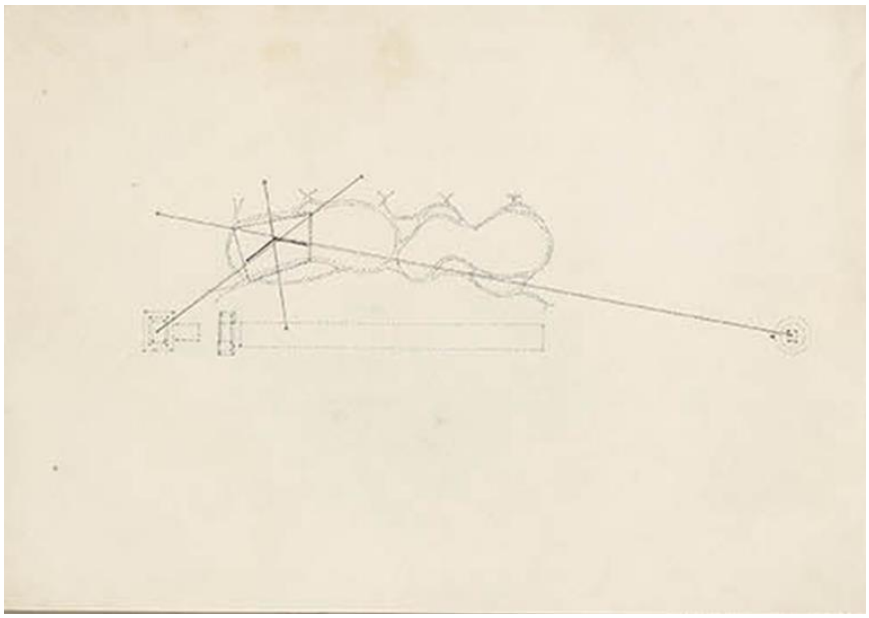
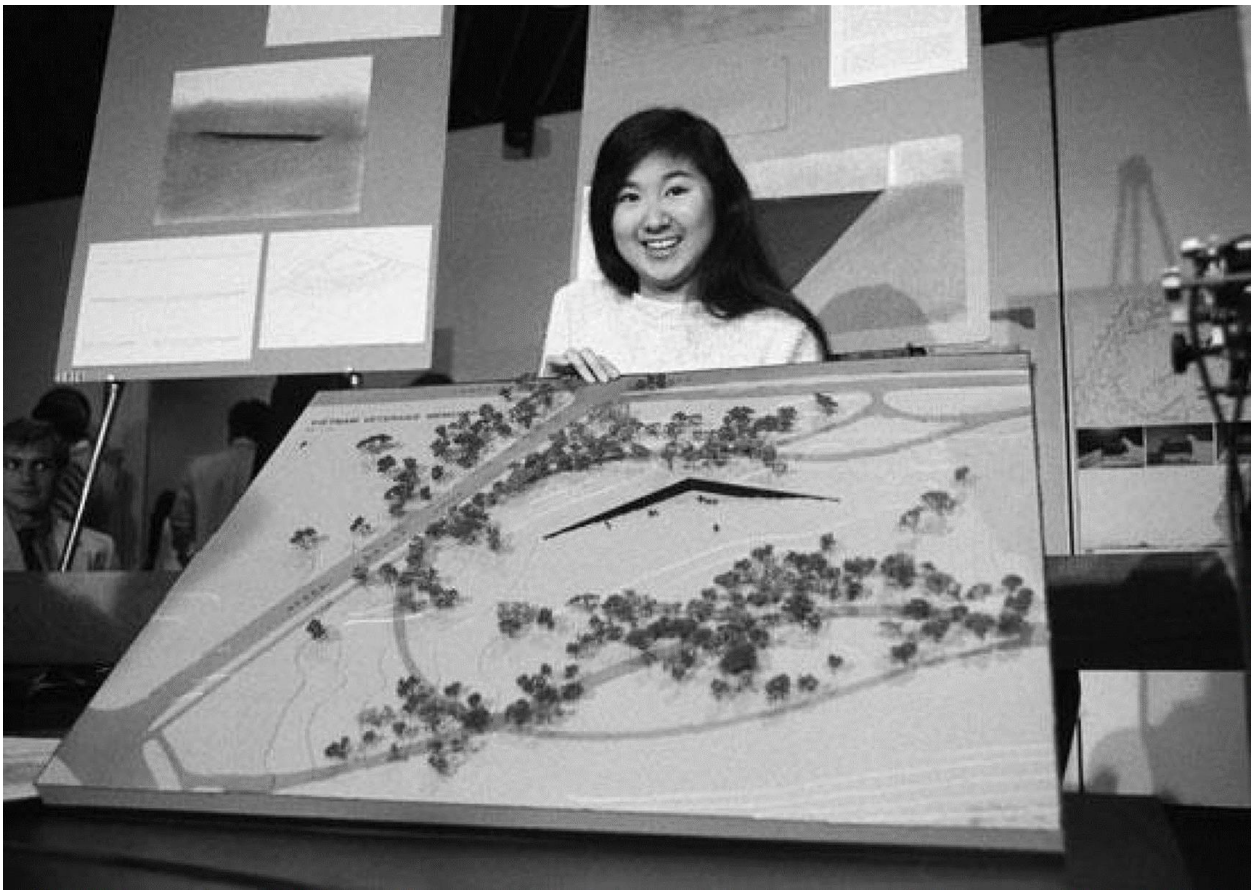
Reading the Earth
David J. Staley

"Walking through this park-like area, the memorial appears as a rift in the earth, a long, polished, black stone wall, emerging from and receding into the earth. Approaching the memorial, the ground slopes gently downward and the low walls emerging on either side, growing out of the earth, extend and converge at a point below and ahead. Walking into this grassy site contained by the walls of the memorial we can barely make out the carved names upon the memorial's walls. These names, seemingly infinite in number, convey the sense of overwhelming numbers, while unifying these individuals into a whole."

The words belong to Ohio-born artist Maya Lin. Lin was a student at Yale, taking a course on funeral architecture, and her professor suggested that, as an assignment, the students might submit proposals for a competition to design a monument commemorating the veterans of the Vietnam War.







My first experience with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was in the mid-1980s, shortly after it was dedicated. I was struck by the space that Lin has created, quiet and contemplative. Even in the midst of a bustling city, with Constitution Ave. only a stone's throw away, the Memorial is hushed, serene.

I shared this space with perhaps two dozen or so others, all of us standing in this cathedral-like space. “Brought to a sharp awareness of such a loss, it is up to each individual to resolve or come to terms with this loss. For death, is in the end a personal and private matter, and the area contained with this memorial is a quiet place, meant for personal reflection and private reckoning.” Lin writes. “The black granite walls, each two hundred feet long, and ten feet below ground at their lowest point (gradually ascending toward ground level) effectively act as a sound barrier, yet are of such a height and length so as not to appear threatening or enclosing. The actual area is wide and shallow, allowing for a sense of privacy, and the sunlight from the memorial's southern exposure along with the grassy park surrounding and within its walls, contribute to the serenity of the area. Thus this memorial is for those who have died, and for us to remember them.”

Lin begins by imagining an artwork verbally. She tries to describe in writing what the project is, what it is trying to do. She says she needs to understand the artwork without giving it a specific materiality or solid form. “I try not to find the form too soon. Instead, I try to think about it as an idea without a shape.” Which certainly describes her process in this instance: the Vietnam Memorial began as words on a page.

“My creative process balances analytic study, based very much on research, with, in the end, a purely intuited gesture. It is almost as if after months of thinking I shut that part of my brain down and allow the nonverbal side to react. It is this balance between the analytic and the intuitive, or between the left side and the right side of the brain, that is so much a part of these works.” And by “these works,” she means not only the Vietnam Memorial but the entire range of her work.

“With the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, I needed to ask myself the question ‘What is the purpose of a war memorial at the close of the twentieth century?’ My question led me to a study of war memorials, from the earliest funeral stelae to the monuments of the great wars.”

As she conducted research on monuments, she “realized most carried larger, more general messages about a leader’s victory or accomplishments rather than the lives lost. In fact, at the national level, individual lives were very seldom dealt with, until you arrived at the memorials for World War I. Many of these memorials included the names of those killed.” This was a revelation to me, as I had long assumed that Lin herself had pioneered the technique. Indeed, this was one of the reasons her work was criticized, that by listing the names of the dead the monument appeared “unheroic.”

She modeled the monument after one by Sir Edwin Lutyens in Thiepval, France.

The monument included a list the names of 100,000 people missing at the battle of the Somme (without dog tags, there is no easy way to identify the dead. The cemetery contains 70,000 bodies.) “This memorial acknowledged those lives without focusing on the war or on creating a political statement of victory or loss. This apolitical approach became the essential aim of my design; I did not want to civilize war by glorifying it or by forgetting the sacrifices involved. The price of human life in war should always be clearly remembered.”

“Then someone in the class received the design program, which stated the basic philosophy of the memorial’s design and also its requirements: all the names of those missing and killed (57,000) must be part of the memorial; the design must be apolitical, harmonious with the site, and conciliatory.”

A group of students went to visit the site: “I had a simple impulse to cut into the earth.”

“I imagined taking a knife and cutting into the earth, opening it up, an initial violence and pain that in time would heal. The grass would grow back, but the initial cut would remain a pure flat surface in the earth with a polished, mirrored surface, much like the surface on a geode when you cut it and polish the edge. The need for the names to be on the memorial would become the memorial; there was no need to embellish the design further. The people and their names would allow everyone to respond and remember.”

When she returned to Yale, she quickly sketched her idea up,”and it almost seemed too simple, too little. I toyed with adding some large flat slabs that would appear to lead to

the memorial, but they didn't belong. The image was so simple that anything added to it began to detract from it."

I have long been drawn to the Vietnam Veternas Memorial after that initial meditative experience. I later encountered the Memorial as an example of information design. That might sound like an odd description of the Memorial, but there is also a way in which Lin describes the work as a kind of information graphic or visualization. "My incorporation of text, whether a specific language or a scientific or mathematical notation, requires the viewer to read the work…I think writing is the purest of art forms." The Vietnam Memorial is, of course, filled with words, the effect of which is a kind of information display. The information designer Edward Tufte—author of *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*—examines the Memorial as an instance of exquisite visual design. "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," he writes, "achieves its visual and emotional strength by means of micro/macro design. From a distance the entire collection of names of 58,000 dead soldiers arrayed on the black granite yields a visual measure of what 58,000 means, as the letters of each name blur into a gray shape, culminating to the final toll. When a viewer approaches, these shapes resolve into individual names." "Time becomes the object of the works; the form dematerializes, becoming pure surface as you approach it, so that the text, the information, becomes the object."

Until I read Tufte—the information designer—I had not considered the Memorial as a "data visualization," which is how Tufte describes it. The monumentality of information design was influential in my own work, especially the idea of writing and the arrangement of words as an art object. In 2010, I designed "Writing Space," a textual collage.

Most recently, I designed “The Monument to Lost Data” which was displayed at a public art exhibition in downtown Orlando November 2017.

Although not as monumental as Lin’s work, I was nevertheless attempting to emulate her idea of text, of information (or in this case, the loss of information) as the art object.

There was, unfortunately, controversy around Lin’s age, race and gender. Some objected to having an “Asian” design it (even though she was born and raised in Southeast Ohio).

After the attention she garnered from the Vietnam Veterans memorial, she received commissions for other memorials, although she makes clear that she did not want to be "typecast" as a monument designer. Lin designed the Civil Rights Memorial.

"In asking myself the question of what a memorial to civil rights should be, I realized I had to give people an understanding of what that time period was about…I could not envision a closed time line, since I couldn't see or feel comfortable saying that the civil rights movement had a set beginning or end. With these thoughts in mind, I travelled to Montgomery for my first site visit. It was on this first visit…that I came across a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King in his 'I Have A Dream' speech: 'We are not satisfied and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.' Immediately I knew that the memorial would be about water."

The design consists of a curved water wall on which the quote is engraved. The plaza below contains a simple circular sculpture with the history of the civil rights movement

engraved upon it. This wall divides the plaza, creating a singular entrance up to the building and separating the public plaza from the center's entrance, creating a separate place for the memorial.

The Women's Table

In the early 1990s, Lin was commissioned by Yale University to design a memorial to the women at Yale, who were first admitted to the undergraduate class there only in 1969.

“I found that there had been women at Yale from the very start; in fact, even before they were technically allowed to enroll, women were allowed to sit in on classes, and they were called ‘silent listeners.’ I wanted to make them seen and heard.”

“I instinctively knew that I wanted to use text and a spiral time line,” meaning that once again her memorial would be a kind of information visualization posing as art.

“The use of numbers to count the women enrolled was very important. When women were first allowed into the undergraduate school, there was a strict quota on their enrollment numbers so that Yale could still graduate ‘a thousand Yale men’; the quota was bitterly disputed, and it took the administration seven years to drop the quota system. And it made the presence of women a battle over numbers.”

The spiral is left open to signify the future.

While perhaps best known for her monuments, Maya Lin might best be understood as a landscape artist. Even the Civil Rights Memorial and the Women's Table are connected to nature and to natural processes. "I carefully controlled the water over these sculptures so the water appears to naturally percolate to the surface, like a spring."

"Each of my works originates from a simple desire to make people aware of their surroundings, not just the physical world but also the psychological world we live in."

"A strong respect and love for the land exists throughout my work. I cannot remember a time when I was not concerned with environmental issues or when I did not feel humbled by the beauty of the natural world."

"So many of my projects are worked out in plasticine. Plasticine is a clay material in which oil is the medium that keeps the clay permanately plastic and fluid. It is like the earth; my affinity has always been toward sculpting the earth. This impulse has shaped my entire body of work."

Her childhood upbringing deeply influenced her art. "The topography where I grew up in Athens, in southeastern Ohio, was hilly and wooded. Behind our house were three ridges separated by streams—my entire childhood was spent playing in these woods and on these hills. I called the middle one the 'lizard's back,' because it started up from the creekbed, like a tail. It grew into a long winding ridge, and ended in what to us looked like the head of a lizard. That image and the presence of Indian burial mounds—the effigy mounds and the serpent mounds—were a profound influence on my work."

"After the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was completed, I returned to graduate school to study what I thought was my profession, architecture. But it was there that I began to spend time in the sculpture department. In hindsight, a piece I created at that time was leading me toward an idea of landscape that has followed me throughout my work."

Aligning Reeds (1985) no image: “it has since disappeared.”

“I inserted a series of variegated painted-aluminum rods into [a river outside New Haven] so that from most angles the rods just blended in with the reeds. But at one point at the opposite bend in the river the ‘reeds’ aligned. It was the insertion of a barely perceptible ordering of the natural environment.”

“It is a belief I have. The insertion or intrusion of a quiet order. If you are paying attention, you may notice it; if not, you won’t. It’s indicative of how I like to work with a site: creating a work that quietly merges with its site so that there remains an ambiguity if it is man-made or a naturally occurring phenomenon.”

Open-Air Peace Chapel, Juniata College, Huntingdon, PA (1988-89) (Two Sides)

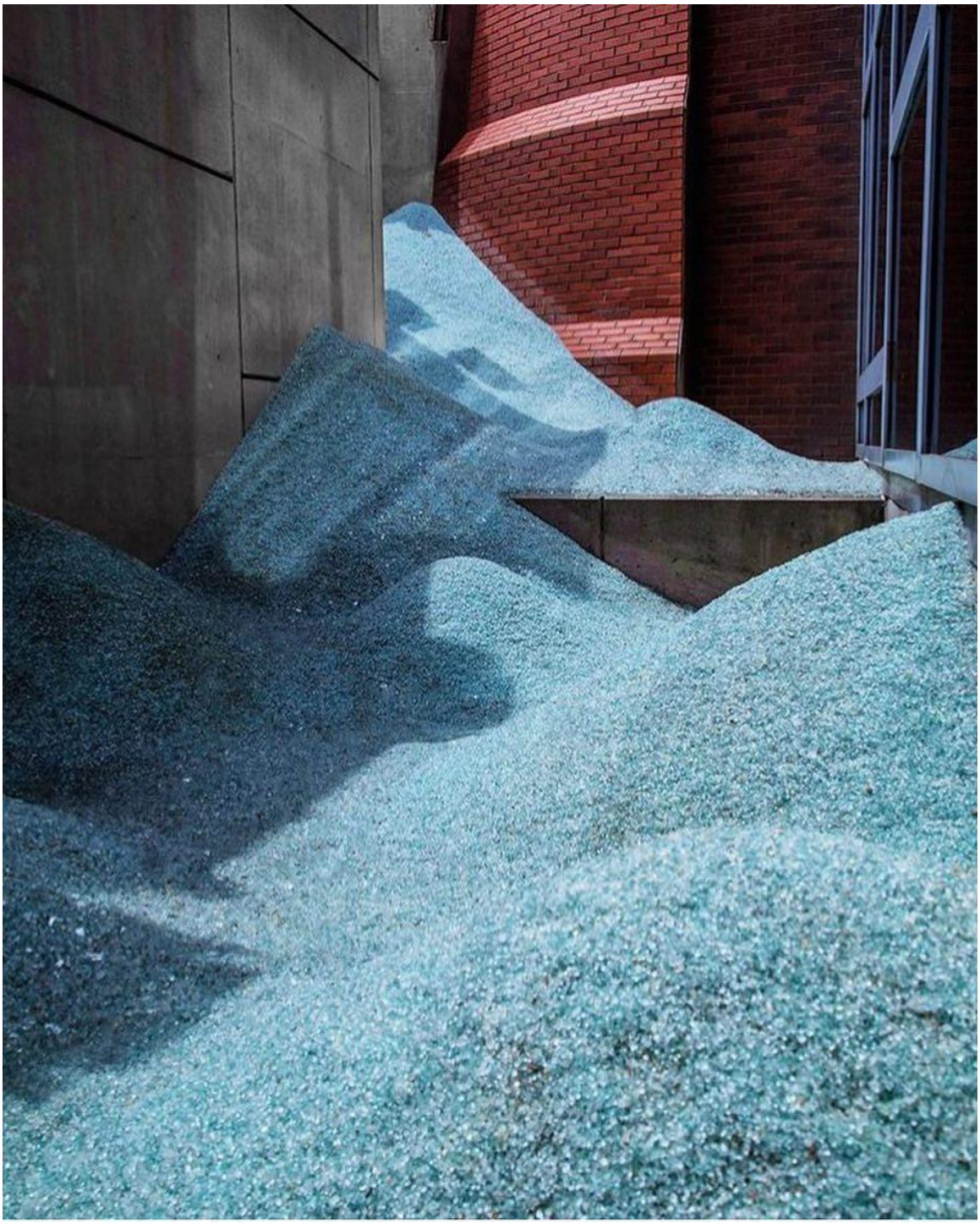
At about the time she was completing the Civil Rights Memorial, Lin was working on an open-air chapel at Juniata College in Pennsylvania. “On my first visit to the site, I was drawn to two areas simultaneously: a large hilltop that seemed to be the center of the site and a heavily wooded secluded ridge that was several hundred feet away. The ridges seemed to me to overlook and visually connect to this very open and prominent site.”

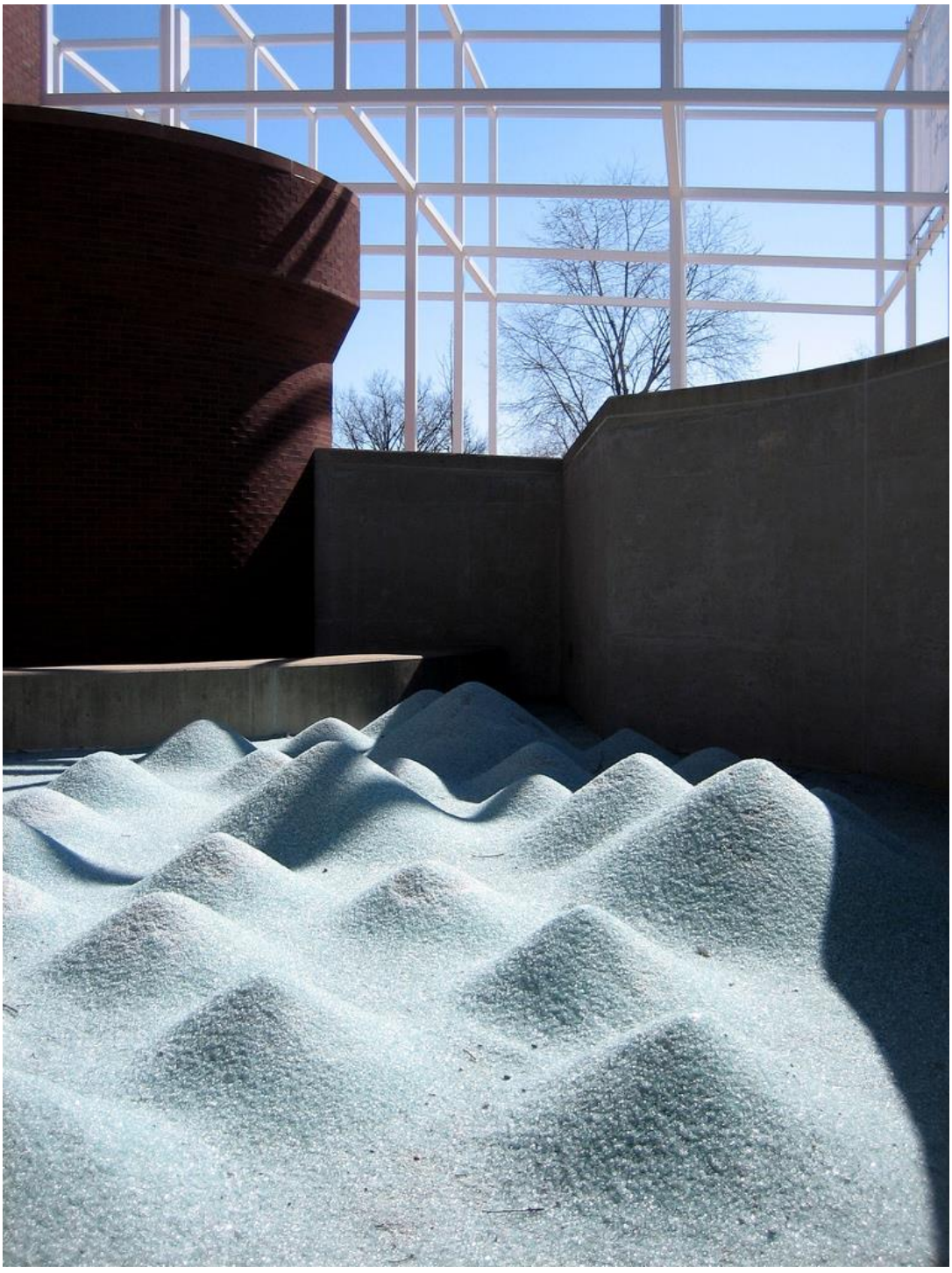
“I immediately envisioned a sculpture in two parts—to create two types of ‘gathering’ places, a public place and a private one. I designed a 40-foot diameter stone circle embedded in the top of the hill and a 4-foot diameter circle cut from solid stone that would be embedded in the moss at the top of the ridge.”

Groundswell, Wexner Center for the Arts, (1992-1993) (Three Slides)

First permanent sculpture for the Wexner. It is also an exploration of landscape, albeit within a much more confined space.

Peter Eisenman’s design for the Wex “created many unplanned and very irregular spaces both inside and outside the building, which I referred to as residual spaces. Three of these spaces, highly visible from inside the museum, were of great interest to me.”





She had been working on smaller, studio sculptures and Sarah Rogers, director of exhibitions, suggested she incorporate some of this work at a larger scale. She was also interested in transferring some of the aspects of the process of making the studio works, the private works, to the public realm. So save for a few very preliminary sketches, she deliberately did not try to plan what the piece would look like. Instead she gave herself one week to make the piece on site when the 43 tons of glass arrived.

"I see the piece as a landscape or a waterscape. Its title, Groundswell, which means a slight undulation or swale in the ocean, refers to the watery color of the glass and the shaping of the mounds. The piece is a conscious effort on my part to combine my eastern and western cultural heritage—namely, mixing my affinity for the southeastern Ohio terrain and its regional burial mounds with my love for the raked-sand gardens of Japan."

Wave Field, Engineering Building, University of Michigan, (1993-1995)

“Perhaps it is my academic background that makes me want to take advantage of a project to study a new subject. Not that I become an expert; I think my curiosity leads me to a very generalized study, one that barely touches the surface of a subject.”

“In learning about the nature of flight, [this is for the engineering building] I discovered that turbulence resistance and the study of fluid dynamics were fundamental aspects of the field, that images of fluid dynamics were powerful and intriguing. Responding to a request for more images dealing with turbulence study, one professor sent me a book entitled *An Album of Fluid Motion*…and one of the images was of a naturally occurring water wave called a stokes wave.”

“the landscape architects had to design a special soil mix that would maintain its shape indefinitely, yet be able to manage equally water seepage in its depressions as well as on its steepest parts.”

“The work as viewed from the classrooms above acts somewhat like an Escher painting, appearing to change its shape as the sun’s angle changes the light that passes over the piece trough the course of the day.”

Storm King Wave Field (Storm King Art Center, Mountainville , New York, 2009)

This work is an environmental reclamation project, the reworking of a former brownfield site, and “comprises seven rows of undulating waves of earth and grass. The waves range in height from ten to eighteen feet, with a trough-to-trough distance of approximately forty feet. The work at Storm King marks a culmination in my series dedicated to the exploration of water-wave formations that are translated into large-scale, site-specific earthworks.”

Topographic Landscape Columbus Museum of Art (1997)

Lin brings the landscape waves into the more human-level scale of the museum.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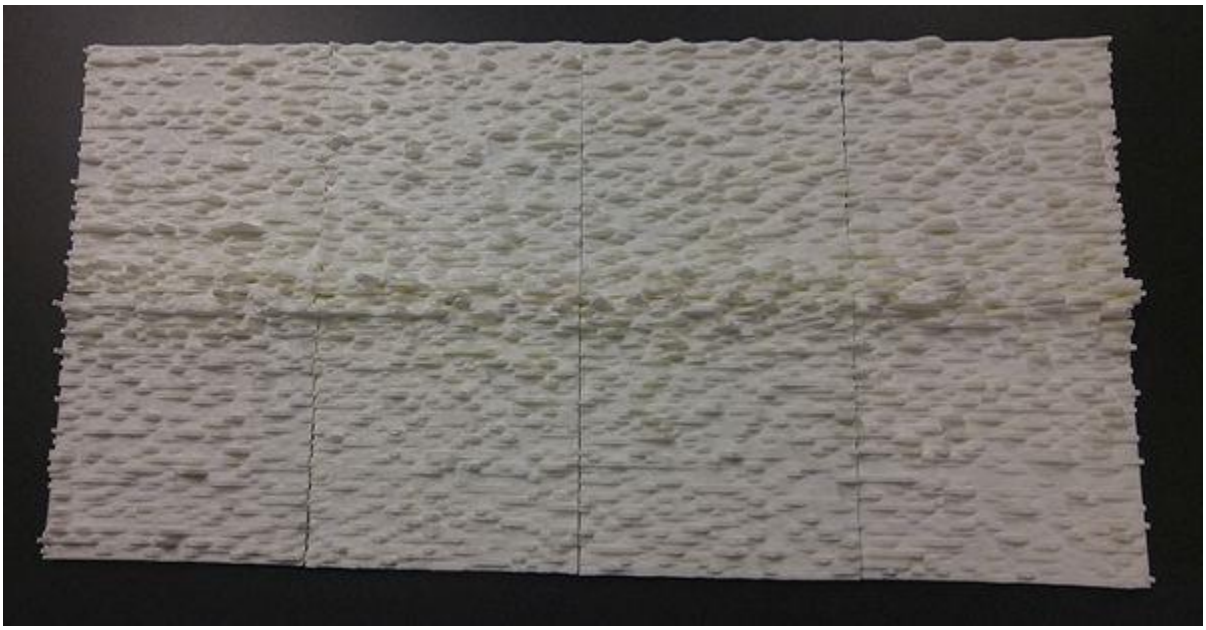
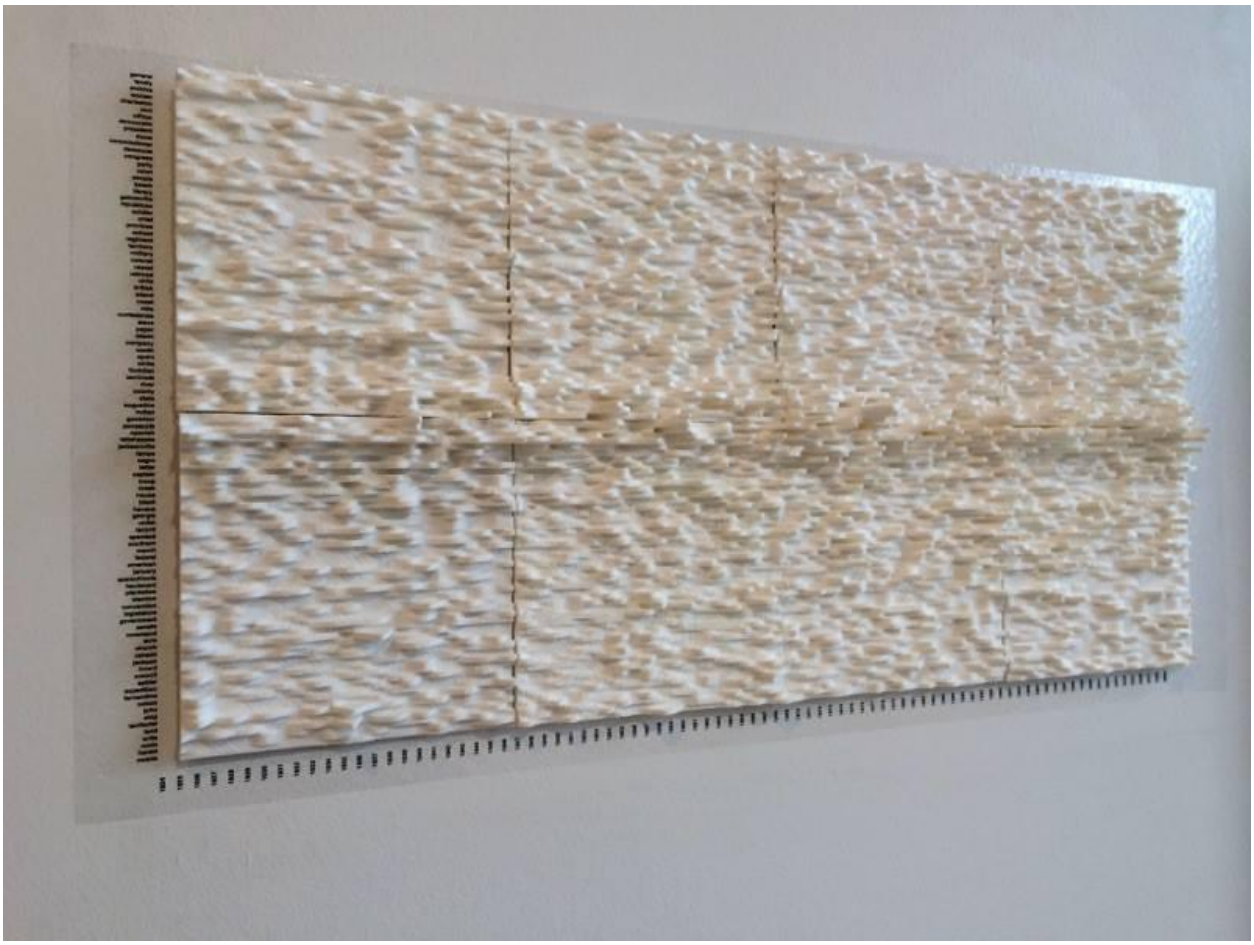
Note: I don’t think these wave forms directly influenced my work (I learned of these only after I completed mine), but I think because of my 3-D printed data sculpture titled *FHQ III* I found myself especially drawn to these topographies.





Lin remarks about how the landscape in southeastern Ohio has influenced her work, especially the burial mounds and serpent mounds.

Nowhere is this more in evidence than in:

Eleven Minute Line (The Wanas Foundation, Knislinge, Sweden, 2004)

“The Earth Drawings is a series of earthwork installations in which I explored the experiential and gestural presence of the drawn line: how much personality a single line drawing has, why one line can look modern, another historical. With each drawing I was fascinated by how much a single mark can become so expressive of certain time or character. Also, I was interested in expressing drawings in three-dimensional space and experiencing each as a walk. These drawings were equally inspired by the ancient burial mounds in the southeastern Ohio region where I grew up.”

I hope it is clear that I am a great admirer of Maya Lin's work. Her interweaving of word and image, analysis and creativity…sculpture at the scale of architecture…