

color formats of the tattered tulle skirt of Degas' *La Petite Danseuse de Quatorze Ans*, the subtlety of color in books falls a little short of the perfection of a unique photographic print. The appendix includes a comprehensive list of solo exhibitions since 1984, a bibliography,

## Patricia Johanson and the Re-Invention of Public Environmental Art, 1958-2010

By Xin Wu  
Ashgate, 2013

Reviewed by Erin Devine

The title of the volume states clearly that Patricia Johanson (b. 1940) creates public environmental art, although other terminology by which to frame the artist's output circulates throughout (including garden art, garden design, landscape architecture) as well as outside the text (eco-art, earth art). And yet Johanson is not a name that consistently surfaces among the well-known voices of the Land Art movement of the 1970s. An American artist who showed promise quite early in her career within the New York Minimalist circle of the 1960s, Johanson's "breakthrough" moment, as it is often referred to by the author, came in 1969, when she was commissioned by the editor of *House & Garden* magazine to introduce new garden design concepts for its readership. It seems the editor was most interested in what Johanson, as a minimalist painter and sculptor, could produce in terms of a radically unique design that would fuse contemporary visual art practice with the outdoor experience. While some of Johanson's Minimalist contemporaries—some of whom she knew, such as Robert Smithson—moved away from the constraints of the white cube to the natural environment, she moved in a similar and yet entirely different direction, creating designs for quite functional spaces as opposed to visual and visceral interruptions of an open, unpopulated landscape.

and information about every image. This is an engaging record of a show (which did not travel) and a significant resource for anyone interested in Lawler.

**Robin Rice** is a much-published art writer, educator, and curator. Her recent

curatorial projects include solo shows for sculptor Susan Hagen (2013) and David Stephens (2014) and "GLASS!" (2014) for the Huntingdon Museum in Clinton, NJ. She is currently organizing a Braille-based garden project with Aaron Levy for Slough Foundation.



Fig.1. Patricia Johanson, *Sagittaria Platyphylla* (detail), gunite. 235' x175' x 12'. From *Fair Park Lagoon* (1982–86), Dallas, TX. Photo: © Xin Wu.

This would be of appropriate interest to Xin Wu, whose scholarship is primarily invested in landscape architecture, garden design, and representations of nature in Chinese art. Through Johanson, Wu transitions into the realm of environmental design within a U.S.-based, contemporary context (her previous book is *Patricia Johanson's House & Garden Commission: Reconstruction of Modernity* [2008]). In this new volume, Wu offers that the original 1969 commission of 150 unrealized garden design proposals was the continuing catalyst to and inspiration for much of Johanson's later realized work. Wu further contends that they are important for understanding her creative evolution from painting and sculpting to landscape and environmental design (Johanson returned to school to take a degree in architecture in the late 1970s).

Wu uses much of the first half of the book to recount that evolution, to trace Johanson's later finished works back to the *House & Garden* commission, and to lay theoretical groundwork that contextualizes Johanson within both

garden design and modernist debates on visual and structural form among her contemporaries. Wu treats Johanson's garden drawings and models as works of art in themselves, and they do in fact account for a considerable amount of the artist's oeuvre. For Johanson, as perhaps for many artists working to such scale, many of her proposals are left unrealized. However, Wu does not give sufficient attention to the public projects Johanson was able to bring to fruition after the 1980s, the most well-known of which are *Fair Park Lagoon* (1981–86; Fig. 1), Dallas; *Endangered Garden* (1987–89), San Francisco; and *Petaluma Wetlands Park* (1998–2009), Sonoma County, CA. cursory summaries in the fifth chapter on functionality and the public space fail to lend each project its due recognition as a complex work that goes beyond garden design to engage site-specificity, the changing landscape, the rigors of large-scale urban project planning, and the use of art and design in ecological and environmental support functions.

This monograph offers artists, scholars, and urban planners a sound

basis for the study of Johanson's work. Although the bibliography is far from exhaustive, leaving out seminal authors on contemporary site-specific art such as Miwon Kwon, there are many rich illustrations (over 100 total) to which Wu lends careful analysis. However, much is left unaddressed. Rather than expand upon her previous research on the *House & Garden* commission (a text that included two volumes), Wu would have better served the artist with fuller analyses of her completed commissions, which are also surprising proto-examples of repurposed spaces as well as conceptually astounding fusions of

landscape, art, and architecture. Wu's focus on the artist's creative evolution is admirable, though laborious, but perhaps more impressive was Johanson's prescient attunement to the relationship between art and environment. Upon completion of her 1975 sculpture commission, *Nostoc II*, for the Storm King Art Center in New York, Johanson wrote in a letter to the landscape architect: "I want it to be left exactly as it is: no trees taken out or planted; no landscaping of any kind; no paths, no benches, no signs, no other sculpture.... If the site is tampered with I will no longer consider it my work" (87). Johanson's early

understanding of and dedication to site-specificity and environmental art—a decade before the controversy of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*—are emblematic of the need to unravel her overall exclusion from that canon.

**Erin Devine** is an artist and independent scholar in Washington, DC. She curated "Positive ID: Bodies & Subjectivities in Photography," for the Gallery at Northern Virginia Community College, Aug. 26 – Sept. 26, 2014, and is curating "Reference" for the Workhouse Arts Center, Spring 2015.

## Barbara Chase-Riboud: The Malcolm X Steles

Edited by Carlos Basualdo, with essays by Barbara Chase-Riboud, Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, and Ellen Handler Spitz Philadelphia Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2013

### Reviewed by Jennifer Wingate

In her essay for this catalogue that accompanied an exhibition of works by Barbara Chase-Riboud (b. 1939), Ellen Handler Spitz calls the artist "pro-tean," an apt characterization of the multi-talented expatriate novelist, poet, and sculptor. The term is equally appropriate when used to describe the art world's framing of Chase-Riboud's visual work. The inconsistencies in the literature highlight problems with the discipline of art history, and how certain label-defying artists slip through the cracks of its tidy narratives. This catalogue does not untangle those contradictions, though the essays make some fresh insights into a productive career and a striking body of work, the Malcolm X steles, which spans almost four decades (1969–2008). It also considers, and lavishly illustrates, examples of Chase-Riboud's drawings, to shed light on the artist's creative process, reconsider the relationship between figuration and abstraction in the Malcolm X series, and help tease out overarching themes of personal and public memory.

The catalogue includes four essays: by the editor Carlos Basualdo (the Keith L. and Katherine Sachs Curator of Contemporary Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art [PMA]), the art historian Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, Chase-Riboud herself (a reprint of a lecture given at the PMA), and Ellen Handler Spitz (a philosopher who writes on topics ranging from aesthetics to psychology). In addition to 42 color plates and 32 supporting illustrations, there is an illustrated chronology and checklist of the thirteen sculptures in the series (compiled by John Vick). Chase-Riboud's Malcolm X sculptures, most over six feet tall, have a formidable presence, and the amply sized plates do them justice by capturing their subtle textural and tonal variations.

Shaw's is the most accessible and readable of the three interpretive essays in the catalogue. She acknowledges the art historical pitfalls raised by Chase-Riboud's art and sets out to consider why her body of work has been "so challenging for scholars" (22). She notes that Chase-Riboud "has rarely been examined in the context of larger artistic movements in America" (22), though art historian Kellie Jones has elucidated the sculptor's career in the milieu of black abstraction in the United States (and Casualdo importantly speaks here of the postwar European context).<sup>1</sup> Shaw observes that critics and art historians instead have focused on Chase-Riboud's interest in art through the ages and from

around the world. Jones, too, has stressed that the sculptor herself is "adamant about the fully global inspirations for her work"<sup>2</sup>—and not just its connections with African art, though these were especially easy to see in the 2014 Brooklyn Museum exhibition, "Witness: Art and Civil Rights of the Sixties," installed in galleries adjacent to Brooklyn's African ones. In her essay for that show, Jones highlights African masquerade arts as an influence for *Malcolm X #2* (1969; Fig. 1).<sup>3</sup> It is true that the sculpture's black patina makes its folded bronze forms look like supple leather or malleable wood, something light enough to be carried. The cords and ropes that form a skirt around the bronze also show potential for movement, and transform the work into "no longer a piece of sculpture, but a personage, an object of ritual and magic."<sup>4</sup>

As for the American art with which *Malcolm X #2* shared space in the Brooklyn exhibition, however, Chase-Riboud never expressed much affinity: "I had a violent allergy and negative reaction to Pop Art, Protest Art, and hyper-realism."<sup>5</sup> Her "focus on the aesthetic and the beautiful," in her bronze, silk, and wool pieces, Jones explains, "can be seen as diametrically opposed" to those non-aesthetic objects.<sup>6</sup> It is useful nonetheless to acknowledge the influence of the fiber art movement, if only to convey the fuller significance of the sculptor's friendship with Yale