

“The State of the Planet: Two Projects by Maya Lin”

by Susan Platt

“What is Missing?”

Maya Lin’s “last monument,” sounds an alarm for the planet in the midst of escalating mass extinction of species and their habitats. She refers to this as the sixth mass extinction in geologic time, but the only one triggered by a single species, the human race, rather than a natural disaster. As competition grows for the last fossil fuels, resource extraction has become even more aggressive in such places as Alberta, Canada where the entire surface of the land, what is called the “overburden,” by energy companies, but which is, in fact, a crucial Boreal forest and carbon storehouse, is removed in pursuit of tar sands. In Pennsylvania and New York State natural gas extraction by fracking poisons ground water, mountain top removal in Appalachia blows up entire mountains, overfishing in the seas is leading to mass declines, and ocean acidification from carbon dioxide is destroying many organisms. Sound is also a major reference point for destruction of species as massive ships disrupt the sonar wavelengths that whales and other sea creatures require to communicate. ¹ According to one article, planned new dams in Quebec will destroy the habitat of 97,000 pairs of songbirds. ²

What is Missing? speaks to absence, like the sounds of those songbirds and all the other species lost, or about to be lost, by habitat destruction. Collaborating with scientists and environmental groups from around the world.,Maya Lin honors the already lost and wants to inspire us to take action to prevent future losses. With vivid video and sound archives from the Cornell Ornithology Lab and imagery from BBC World and the

¹ See *Science* vol 328, June 18, 2010, pp. 1437 – 1598 for a conservative scientific account of the “Changing Oceans.”

² Alexis Lathern, “Hydro-Quebec Seeks New U.S. Markets” *Z Magazine* October 2010, p. 40.

National Geographic *What is Missing?* makes it possible for us to see giant fish and turtle swimming in the sea, and the extraordinary sounds of threatened frogs, birds and crickets.

What is Missing? includes multiple formats: a website, a Listening Cone, seventy videos, and the Empty Room, a space with projectors in the floor that let visitors “catch” a projected image of a species. Other formats are a sound ring with embedded speakers, a print book, a downloadable digital book and an interactive website; in addition to the current connections to troubled sites all over the world it will have links to environmental groups who are trying to counter the damage as well as allow the public to contribute their own stories. Lin is redefining the idea of a monument from a single fixed work, to a constantly changing, multi sited, multi media event. That sense of change parallels the constant losses in biodiversity ongoing throughout the planet.

In 2009 the California Academy of Sciences in collaboration with the San Francisco Arts Commission unveiled the first permanent Listening Cone - a megaphone-shaped sculpture large enough for people to walk inside. In its narrow end a video screen projects twenty minutes of video and sound recordings of extinct, threatened and endangered species and their habitats. The exterior of the cone is bronze, the interior is a highly polished recycled redwood. People are asked to take off their shoes in order to go inside. Once inside, the curved inner space forces awareness of your footing, and the space narrows quickly. The physical dynamic of the Cone echoes the condition of the earth: we are increasingly treading on unstable ground and our planet’s options narrow as species and habitat loss escalates. Slightly de-stabilizing our footing is part of Maya Lin’s strategy to stimulate the public to think more about what the current crisis means now, and for the near future.

Changing contexts for the videos also destabilizes our expectations, as in the Earth Day 2010 project in Times Square, sponsored by Creative Time. *Maya Lin AT 44 1/2* projected videos onto a billboard in the midst of one of the loudest cacophonies of manmade sounds and aggressive advertising imagery in the world. Three five minute videos played every hour for two weeks: an image of a giant blue stingray or sea turtle swimming in the sea was paired with Lin's succinct texts "What is Missing? Sea Turtles" The final text was "With human alterations of their habitat the single biggest cause." As seen on the "What is Missing?" website, the sounds of birds, crickets and frogs can be heard over the sounds of traffic. The visual impact of juxtaposing these images of magnificent endangered species like the stingray to the commercial promotions of Times Square makes the dialectical point (which Lin herself never states) that our commodity-based economy and thirst for energy is the major drive for the destruction of habitats. Capitalization of nature by corporations is of course the force that must be countered. As one CEO stated "the largest corporation in the world is not Ford or Walmart. The largest corporation in the world is nature."³

The Confluence Project (2002- ongoing)

As it marks the lost and endangered species, ecosystems, and peoples along the Columbia River, based on a comparison to the present with the meticulous journals of the 1804-05 Lewis and Clark "Corps or Discovery," Maya Lin's *Confluence Project* is also a manifestation of "What is Missing?" Spread over 450 miles at seven sites, the project documents losses marks survival, and initiates ecological restoration. Native groups mourn massive cultural losses since the Expedition opened the door to fraudulent treaties,

³ This comment was by Ahmed Djoghlaif, Executive Director of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) as quoted in Anne Petermann, "Biodiversity Convention Hijacked" Z Magazine Decmeber 2010, p. 30.

massive devastation of natural resources, and widespread illness of both people and the environment.

As Lewis and Clark went west from St. Louis, they mapped, counted, identified, and enumerated everything that they saw. They documented flora, fauna, Native villages and tribes, weather and daily life. They called their record “a summary statement of the rivers, creeks, and most remarkable places from the mouth of the Missouri as high up the river as was explored in the year 1804 by Captain’s Lewis and Clark.”

Near the place where the Columbia River joins the Pacific Ocean, the end of their journey, and the first site of the *Confluence Project* to be completed, a walkway lays out their summary on cast concrete planks. Our relationship to those planks is quite different from that of the Vietnam Memorial, where the surfaces are vertical and we can easily approach them and touch them. At Cape Disappointment, we have to bend over to read them, reading the texts interrupt our progress toward the beach and the sea.⁴ That physical sense of interruption, as in the destabilizing of our footing in the *Listening Cone*, parallels the point Lin is making: as white explorers charted these lands they interrupted the course of history and nature.

At the Sandy River Delta in Troutdale, Oregon, Lewis and Clark thought the intersection of the Sandy River with the Columbia River was a major passageway and spent several days exploring it. Today that main channel of the river is blocked by a dam that was installed in the 1930s supposedly to improve fish flow, severely altering the ecosystem. This *Confluence* site has collaborated with the Forest Service efforts to restore ecological balance with Native planning as well as plans to remove the dam.

⁴ Susan Platt “Maya Lin ‘s *Confluence Project*,” *Sculpture* , November 2006 discusses this site in more detail and provides an overview of the project in its early stages.

The *Bird Blind*, as Maya Lin calls the structure here, is set in a large tract of land, what will be at the Confluence of the Sandy River and the Columbia River, once the original delta of the river is restored. *The Bird Blind* is the opposite of its name. Rather than a site to enable us to look at birds without being seen, Lin has designed it so that we can barely see out between the almost twelve foot high wooden slats because they are too close together. Instead we are confronted by texts on the slats: precise observations from entries in the Lewis and Clark journal name species, and the date and place where they were sighted. Maya Lin has added whether the same species today is currently endangered, threatened or extinct. This is a tribute to lost species and birds, as well as a marking of survival.

The Vancouver *Land Bridge* speaks of a different confluence: it spans a six lane highway and train tracks in order to recreate the connection of the Klickitat Trail and the Columbia River. The trail was used by inland tribal groups to trade with Columbia River tribes for thousands of years. The *Land Bridge* was realized by Jones and Jones, Seattle-based Architects and Landscape Architects. Native American architect, Johnpaul Jones worked in collaboration with ideas from Maya Lin. The overall profile of the Land Bridge is an implied circle, a form important to both plateau and coastal tribes, evoking a circle of life, gathering, communication, and exchanging.⁵ On the bridge the wide borders of native plants refer to both the plants in Lewis and Clark's notes and those used by Indians: Oregon grape, camas, nootka rose, salmonberry, huckleberry, white oak, red cedar, and red alder.

⁵ There are plans for a "Treaty Table" on the Columbia River funded by percent for art on a planned bridge for I-5. The Treaty Table will reference the Isaac Smith treaties of 1854 which "legalized" the taking of indigenous lands.

Native American artist Lillian Pitt created a Welcome Gate composed of two cedar paddles, crossed at the top, supported by cedar columns asymmetrically flanked by basalt columns. On the bridge, two seating areas with cutouts of abstracted petroglyphs, also by Pitt, refer to the 12,000-year-old cultures of the Columbia Gorge.

The *Story Circles* at Sacajawea State Park set at the confluence of the Snake and the Columbia River includes seven basalt circles incised with texts and images. A major gathering site for Native tribes for thousands of years, the circles mark species of salmon, plant and animals, and goods traded by the Indians, a tribal long house, and the dams that destroyed the natural abundance on which the cultures had thrived. Finally, one circle marks the mythic history and future of the cultures with a Coyote myth about the return of the salmon. As we randomly access the circles rather than follow a fixed path, we move beyond linear thinking and open our minds to multiple dimensions of history, language, nature, and time.

The not yet completed *Confluence* site Celilo (Wyam) “Place of Echoing Water upon Rocks” or “Sound of Water upon the Rocks,” commemorates a collision rather than a confluence. Prior to the arrival of settlers, Wyam Indians lived here for over twelve thousand years, perhaps the longest continuously inhabited community in North America. Indians caught salmon in nets from complex platforms suspended over the falls. As nineteen hydroelectric dams, nuclear, agricultural and industrial pollution, and clear cut mountainsides have devastated the Columbia River, the salmon harvest has declined precipitously from fourteen million in 1855, to fewer than one hundred thousand today. The John Day Dam, built between 1959 and 1968 turned the thundering falls into a silent lake.

On the weekend before the dedication of this site of *The Confluence Project*, hundreds of Indians from all over the Northwest converged to grieve the loss of this cultural confluence. At the dedication itself, Maya Lin played a minor role, as spiritual leaders, dancers and singers invoked the sad history of the place. Lin humbly accepted the burden of their expectations. Her model for the Celilo Falls site is a cantilevered ramp. The steel ramp will rise 300 feet, and hang twenty feet above the surface of the lake, where the falls used to be. The railings of woven wood evoke traditional basket weaving. Narratives texts on the ramp will tell the geological, historical, mythical, and political history of the site. Sounds will also be part of the experience, including descriptions of the sound of the falls and the silence that followed. Wyam Indians, who have never left the site, today live in what is called Celilo Village, declared that the “falls have never left . . . they still echo in our heart.”⁶

This spring the site at Chief Timothy Park near the confluence of the Clearwater and the Snake Rivers, will be dedicated with a Listening Circle. Also made of basalt incised with texts, it will be integrated with the dramatic, unspoiled landscape of the site. The final site will be an environmental research center at the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge in Washington State sponsored by Washington State University and the Port of Ridgefield.

The Confluence Project and *What is Missing?* are both testimonials to Maya Lin’s deep concern for the state of the planet. Spanning from ancient myths and rituals to

⁶ The Wyam never joined a tribal reservation and therefore have the status of an independent nation today. Recently, and in collaboration with efforts by nearby tribal groups, they have finally gotten new housing, sewage, streets, and a long house, promised many years ago. Their fishing rights have never changed. Their leaders personally invited Maya Lin to talk with them about what texts will be inscribed on the Celilo ramp.

the intimate imagery and sounds of digital technology, these projects are not only intended to be memorials; they are asking us to take action to save what is left.