

## Maya Lin's Environmental Installations: Bringing the Outside In

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### Abstract

This paper explores some of the highlights of artist and architect Maya Lin's gallery exhibits, *Topologies* and *Systematic Landscapes*. Some of the works surveyed include: *Avalanche*, *2x4 Landscape*, *Water Line*, and *Atlas Landscape*. While exploring the visual characteristics and construction methods of the sculptures, special attention is given to the experience that Maya Lin creates for the viewers of her work. These unique sculptures not only connect the landscape with the gallery but also attempt to connect the viewer to the environment outside of the museum by creating an awareness of environmental issues and by examining the ways the viewer perceives and interacts with nature.

From earthworks to monuments, Maya Lin's contributions to the worlds of architecture and art have been both controversial and lauded.<sup>3</sup> Occupying the space between the two disciplines has given Lin the opportunity to develop a diverse body of work that forges technology, history, community, and the land in the form of memorials, sculpture, and architecture.<sup>4</sup> But "whether it's art, architecture, or memorials, I realize now that all my work is intrinsically tied to the natural landscape around us" (Maya Lin qtd. in Kino 4).

In her most recent gallery exhibits, *Topologies* (1997) and *Systematic Landscapes* (2006), Lin brings the land into the confines of interior space. By using minimal forms and sensual materials and by manipulation of scale, Lin has managed to refine the landscape into something that can be experienced indoors (Figs. 1 and 2).

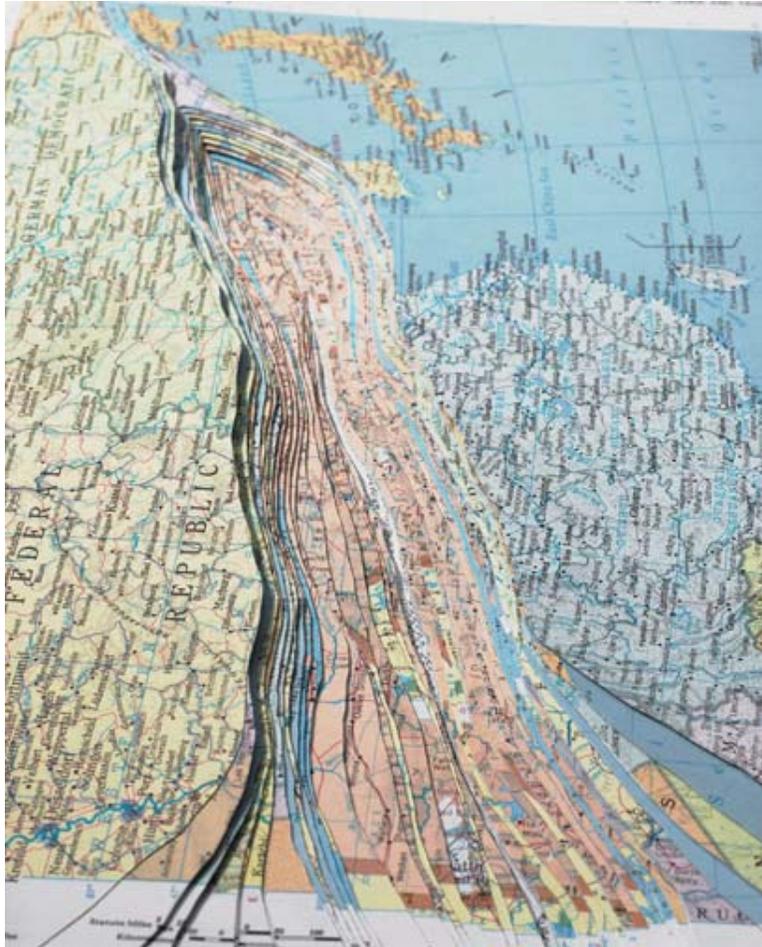
Lin's work may appear conceptually straightforward and purely formal but when you look past the surface, there is surprising depth and complexity (Parfit 101). This complexity strives to not only recreate the sensation of interacting with the land but also interweaves the viewer's own memories and perceptions into the experience. In her book *Boundaries*, Maya Lin says, "All my work starts with the impulse to feel something, to experience something . . . to make people aware of their surroundings, not just the physical world, but also the psychological world we live in" (Lin 2:03). By examining some of the highlights of *Topologies* and *Systematic Landscapes*, this paper will



**Figure 1: Maya Lin**  
***Red Sea (Bodies of Water series), 2006***  
 Baltic birch plywood  
 21" x 92-1/2" x 17" (53.3 cm x 235 cm x 43.2 cm), sculpture  
 31" x 30" x 18" (78.7 cm x 76.2 cm x 45.7 cm), base  
 Photo by: Kerry Ryan McFate/ Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York  
 © Maya Lin Studio, Inc., courtesyT PaceWildenstein, New York

examine the ways in which Lin connects the viewer to the landscape. (Highlights from the *Topologies* series include: *Avalanche*, *Rockfield*, *Flatlands*, and *Topographic Landscape*. The pieces from *Systematic Landscapes* will include: *2x4 Landscape*, *Water Line*, *Blue Lake Pass*, *Bodies of Water*, and *Atlas Landscape*).

Before examining the individual artworks, it may be helpful to gain an understanding of some of the major influences on Lin's work and the major themes that come into play. The *Topologies* and *Systematic Landscapes* exhibits display many of the same influences and goals of Lin's other work, but unlike the latter they are designed to be movable and are not site-specific.<sup>5</sup> In his essay, "Outside In: Maya Lin's Systematic Landscapes," Richard Andrews identified two major historical influences on Lin's artwork. The first is the influence of Japanese Zen gardens and Asian design. Like the serene gardens of raked gravel, Lin's sculptures often play with scale and invented landscape and seek to provoke contemplation in the viewer (Andrews 74). The second is the connection between Lin and American and European land artists like Robert Smithson and Andy Goldsworthy. Similarly, Lin has created large-scale outdoor earthworks and is concerned with exploring natural processes like erosion and gravity



**Figure 2: Maya Lin**

**Detail of *Atlas Landscape***

*Rand McNally Cosmopolitan World Atlas, 1987, 2006*

recycled atlas

1" x 22-7/8" x 14-3/4" (2.5 cm x 58.1 cm x 37.5 cm), open

1-3/8" x 11-1/4" x 14-3/4" (3.5 cm x 28.6 cm x 37.5 cm), closed

Photo by: G.R. Christmas/ Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

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(Andrews 73-74). However, Lin's work is distinct from land art, because it tries to address the viewer by entering the urban places, where the public is easily found (Deitsch 8). In his exploration of Lin's monuments, Daniel Abramson links Lin's works to the minimalist sculptors of the 1960's. In some ways, Lin's more recent work has more ties to the minimalists because of her use of industrial and depersonalized materials, but Abramson points out that her work has a "rhetoric of inclusion and healing" and seeks to "work with the land and not dominate it" (Abramson 704). Eleanor Heartney even compares Lin to the turn-of-the-century architect Frank Lloyd Wright:

While Lin also draws on the heritage of the Earth Art movement of the 1970's . . . [Lin's] esthetic remains closer to Wright's notion of 'conventionalized

nature.’ Given the beauty and purity running through Lin’s varied projects, it may be that, like Wright, she, too, is seeking the soul of nature. (Heartney 86)

After looking at some of the historical movements influencing Lin’s work, it is not surprising that natural materials like wood, glass, and metal are the predominant media of choice. It is also unsurprising that bright, saturated colors are avoided in favor of highlighting the inherent qualities of the natural materials. Although color and motion tend to take subordinate roles, Lin seems to rely on mass, scale, line, space, and time to give impact to her work. As Lin’s work develops over time, her preferences seem to shift. Her earlier works in the *Topologies* series seem to favor mass and texture to engage the viewer. As her sculptures develop, Lin starts to offer the viewer increasingly unique vantage points, from which to view the artworks, so that they begin to be less about objects frozen in time and space and more about a journey through and into them. “In these works I seek to create an intimate dialogue with the viewer, to allow a place of contemplation, sometimes an incorporation of history, always a reliance on time, memory, a passage or journey” (Lin 2:03). There is a subtle progression from playing with a viewer’s memory and initial reaction towards a piece to building a more complex experience. Lin controls the way a viewer passes through or under a work, and the viewer actually has to be in or travel through the artwork to grasp its underlying meaning. This creation of a journey becomes obvious as the individual works, and the interplay of the visual elements in each of them, are analyzed.

The major works from the *Topologies* series focus mainly on a single natural phenomenon and have been skewed in scale and material to fit into a gallery setting. These large-scale installations exult in the sensuality of materials and encourage the viewer to pay “attention to the articulations of the earth.” (Maya Lin qtd. in Rowan). However, behind the immediate sensory feast lay some subtle paradoxes that inspire further contemplation.

*Avalanche*, from the *Topologies* series, is a fourteen-ton sculpture of broken glass that appears to be pouring from the corner of the gallery wall. The sheer mass of the piece and the way the pile of glass seems to be materializing from the corner of the wall keep the viewer’s attention focused on the work. The light sparkles off the glass in the same way that snow sparkles in the sun, but this particular avalanche will never melt. The viewer is dwarfed by the ten-foot high sculpture but can appreciate the beauty of the phenomenon without the danger of being physically engulfed. Lin cultivates these contradictions in her work in order to create a “strangeness” that pulls the viewer into the experience (Heartney 88).

Exhibiting similar uncanny juxtapositions as *Avalanche*, the hand-blown glass forms of *Rockfield*, from the *Topologies* series, directly reference the Zen rock gardens of Japan. As the light passes through the “rocks” and creates intriguing reflections and shadows on the gallery floor, the vessels begin to resemble giant drops of dew. This contrast between liquid and solid, transparent and opaque, strength and fragility is another example of the meeting of opposites that constantly surface in Lin’s work.

Although not as immediately attention-grabbing as the large-scale *Topologies* series pieces, the series of prints *Flatlands* are no less rich in meaning. The pieces themselves are monochromatic prints on paper that appear to be images of satellite maps or cracks in the ground. Lin has taken sheets of inked glass and shattered them before making a print. This process of taking manufactured natural elements and breaking them to create a new imaginary landscape seems to embody the environmentalist ideal of taking something that has been marginalized and making it into something whole; at the same time, it calls our attention to the brokenness of land's current state.

*Topographic Landscape*, from the *Topologies* series, is the place that the gallery meets Lin's earthworks.<sup>6</sup> The sinuous lines cut into layers of particleboard create an undulating field of waves that allude to sand dunes and snowdrifts. While this large-scale sculpture shares the same visual properties as its outdoor cousins—they are all “inspired by the textures made in sand and the action of waves”—*Topographic Landscape* is much farther removed from nature (Cotter 8). Despite the further minimizing and abstracting, it is amazing that the use of materials so far removed from their natural form by the manufacturing process can so adeptly mimic the essence of the landscape from which they came.



**Figure 3: Maya Lin**  
***Storm King Wavefield*, 2008**

4 acres

Installed at Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, New York

Photo by: Jerry L. Thompson

© Maya Lin Studio, Inc., courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

While talking about the earthwork *Storm King Wavefield*<sup>7</sup> (Fig. 3), Lin said that she is not necessarily interested in recreating nature, but rather giving the viewer an “unexpected lens” in which to view the natural world (Howe 5). She does the same thing with *Topographic Landscape* and the series *Systematic Landscapes*, but instead of looking at land through the lens of water waves she shows us the land through the lens of technology. The reference to pixels and to digital renderings of maps emphasizes our own culture’s inclination to interact with our world through a mechanical auxiliary. Although not necessarily chiding our reliance, it is interesting to note how detailed the land can be drawn but to also see how much detail is omitted. This may be reading into the work too much; perhaps the artist wants to point out how close and yet how far we are from the earth.

The series *Systematic Landscapes* continues the theme of bringing the land into an interior space, but the pieces seem to emphasize the scientific approach vital to their creation and to possess a stronger activist element than the *Topologies* pieces. The installation pieces of both series were meticulously modeled and then plotted by computer during the design process. However, the three large-scale pieces belonging to the series *Systematic Landscapes* reveal their methods of creation in the visible grid structures of the pieces. In a conversation with Susan Hines, Lin explains the premise behind the series:

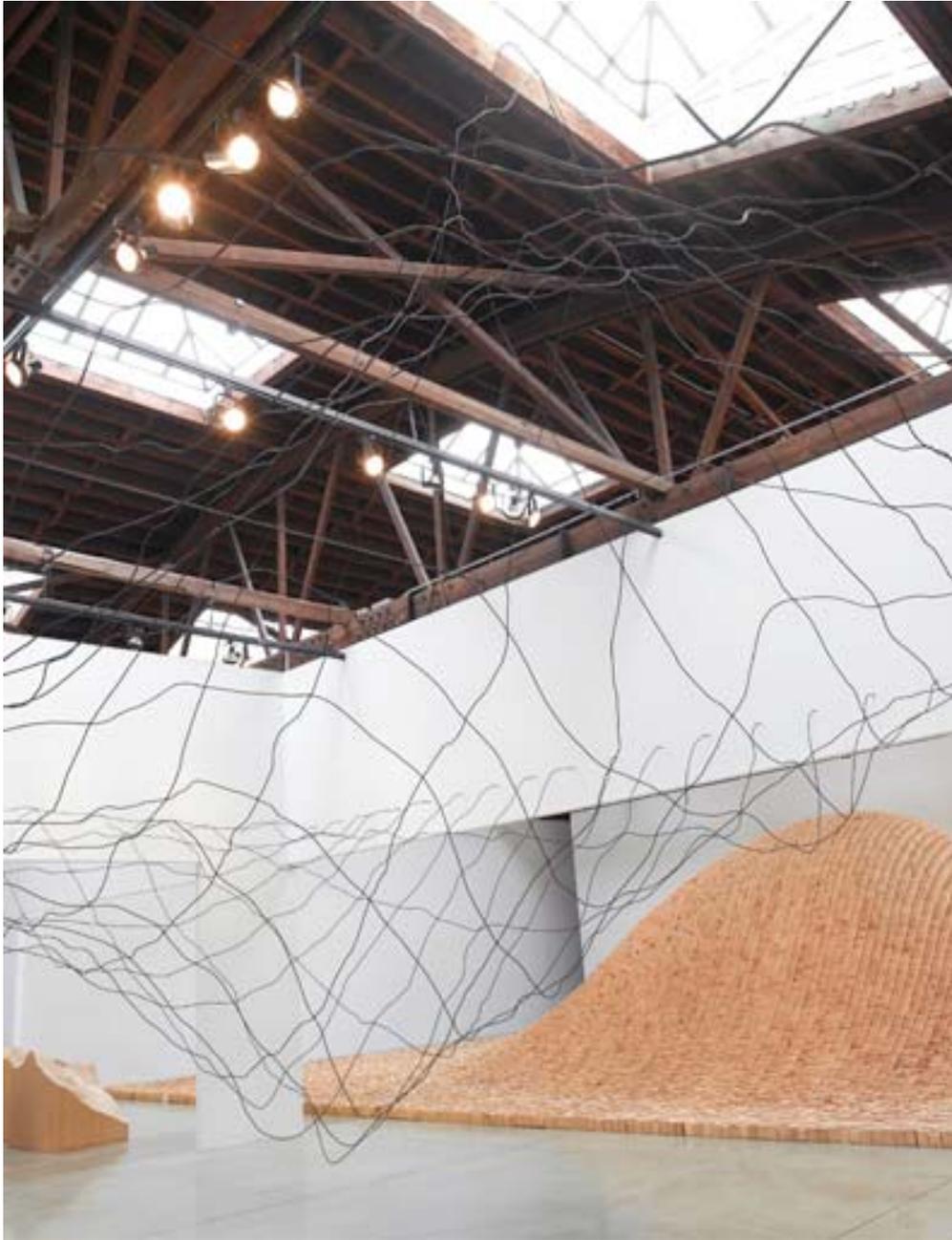
*Systematic Landscapes* is really about science and technology and how tools today allow us to get glimpses of the earth. We have the capacity to see our world differently through the lens of technology. I would say that I’m no different than an eighteenth century landscape painter, but I have more than my eyes to take a look at nature. (Maya Lin qtd. in Hines 113)

*2x4 Landscape* (Fig. 4) is a huge installation piece made of over 50,000 pieces of wood. It was inspired by Lin’s desire to bring the experience of her *Storm King Wavefield* indoors (Kino 4). Even though it does not reference a specific place, *2x4 Landscape* creates an actual hill that can be experienced in much the same way that a grassy knoll can be experienced outside.<sup>8</sup> “My automatic idea was: What would it be like to make a hill you can walk on and feel like you’re touching the sky?” (Lin qtd. in Sokol 38). The same playfulness with seemingly opposing ideas that is a major theme of the earlier *Topologies* sculptures is still present in *2x4 Landscape*. It is hard to imagine a greater conundrum than an indoor earthwork. In the same way that Lin melds together an experience that is normally exclusive to the outdoors with the interior of architecture, she also brings into reality objects that we may never have expected to encounter in three-dimensional space. The 2x4s are intentionally varied in height to create an effect of pixels: and it appears as if our physical space has merged with the virtual or digital space that we are increasingly occupying.



**Figure 4: Maya Lin**  
***2 x 4 Landscape*, 2006**  
 SFI certified wood 2 x 4s  
 10' x 53' 4" x 35' (304.8 cm x 1,625.6 cm x 1,066.8 cm)  
 Photo by: G.R. Christmas/ Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York  
 © Maya Lin Studio, Inc., courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

When compared with *2x4 Landscape*, the installation *Water Line* (Fig. 5, in the foreground), from the *Systematic Landscapes* series seems more like a drawing in space. Its aluminum tube frame traces out the forms of an underwater mountain range and Bouvet Island near Antarctica. Although the changing patterns made by the contour lines of the mountains are enough to interest a casual observer, the underwater environment that is available for perusal might challenge someone to imagine the unseen in our immediate environments (Beardsley 86). The sculpture is suspended from the walls of the gallery, and the viewer walks below the surface of the ocean floor. Although the title of the piece is *Water Line*, there is an ambiguity as to where the actual boundary between water and sky is located. By erasing this boundary, Lin challenges us to connect what we might normally see as two separate environments (Lebowitz 156).



**Figure 5: Maya Lin**

***Water Line, 2006***

aluminum tubing and paint  
19' x 30' x 34' 9" (579.1 cm x 914.4 cm x  
1,059.2 cm)

Photo by: G.R. Christmas / Courtesy  
PaceWildenstein, New York  
© Maya Lin Studio, Inc.,  
courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

**Maya Lin**

***Blue Lake Pass, 2006***

Duraflake particleboard  
installation dimensions variable  
overall installed: 5' 8" x 22' 5" x 17' 6"  
(172.7 cm x 683.3 cm x 533.4 cm)  
20 block, each from 30" x 36" x 36" (76.2  
cm x 91.4 cm x 91.4 cm) to 68" x 36" x  
36" (172.7 cm x 91.4 cm x 91.4 cm)

Photo by: G.R. Christmas / Courtesy  
PaceWildenstein, New York  
© Maya Lin Studio, Inc.,  
courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

**Maya Lin**

***2 x 4 Landscape, 2006***

SFI certified wood 2 x 4s  
120" x 53' 4" x 35' (304.8 cm x 1,625.6  
cm x 1,066.8 cm)

Photo by: G.R. Christmas / Courtesy  
PaceWildenstein, New York  
© Maya Lin Studio, Inc.,  
courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York



**Figure 6: Maya Lin**  
***Blue Lake Pass*, 2006**  
 Duraflake particleboard  
 installation dimensions variable  
 overall installed: 5' 8" x 22' 5" x 17' 6" (172.7 cm x 683.3 cm x 533.4 cm)  
 20 block, each from 30" x 36" x 36" (76.2 cm x 91.4 cm x 91.4 cm)  
 to 68" x 36" x 36" (172.7 cm x 91.4 cm x 91.4 cm)  
 Photo by: G.R. Christmas / Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York  
 © Maya Lin Studio, Inc., courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

**Maya Lin**  
***Water Line*, 2006**  
 aluminum tubing and paint  
 19' x 30' x 34' 9" (579.1 cm x 914.4 cm x 1,059.2 cm)  
 Photo by: G.R. Christmas / Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York  
 © Maya Lin Studio, Inc., courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

In the same way that *Water Line* makes the hidden parts of the landscape visible, *Bodies of Water* and *Blue Lake Pass*, from the *Systematic Landscapes* series, attempt to do the same. *Blue Lake Pass* (Fig. 6, in the foreground) is a topographical representation of a mountain range; Lin uses a grid pattern to dissect the landscape into sections that the viewer can pass through (Beardsley 85). The artist's fascination with geological forces is made evident in the references to the earth's strata and by making the viewer come as close to wading through the earth's crust as is possible in a gallery setting.



**Figure 7: Maya Lin**

***Caspian Sea (Bodies of Water series), 2006***

Baltic birch plywood

19" x 58-1/2" x 32-7/8" (48.3 cm x 148.6 cm x 83.5 cm), sculpture

36-1/2" x 20" x 16" (92.7 cm x 50.8 cm x 40.6 cm), base

Photo courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

© Maya Lin Studio, Inc., courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

The *Caspian Sea* (Fig. 7), *Black Sea* (Figs. 8 and 9), and *Red Sea* (Fig. 1) form a group of sculptures also called *Bodies of Water*.<sup>9</sup> This group from the *Systematic Landscapes* series is based upon the contours of the inland seas. In each piece, the surface of the sea is represented by using a smooth, flat plane. The depth of the sea has been exaggerated, in order to call attention to the unseen ecosystems that are concealed beneath the waves of the sea (Beardsley 86). *Blue Lake Pass* is considerably larger in scale than each individual sculpture of a sea, but when both are compared to the real site that they reference, this difference seems rather minute. By making the scale of a mountain range the size of a room or by making a sea the size of table, Maya Lin has given the viewer a novel perspective. This perspective might be humorous in light of how small a mountain or sea now seems, but it might more accurately describe the true balance of power in nature; indeed, we may appear small standing next to a real mountain, but the consequences of our actions can have devastating effects on our surroundings.



**Figure 8: Maya Lin**

***Black Sea (Bodies of Water series), 2006***

Baltic birch plywood

18-3/8" x 59-3/4" x 33-3/8" (46.7 cm x 151.8 cm x 84.8 cm), sculpture

33-1/4" x 24" x 16" (84.5 cm x 61 cm x 40.6 cm), base

Photo by: Kerry Ryan McFate/ Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

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By making direct references to actual places, Lin creates a nostalgic connection between the viewer and the specific physical space. Although talking about some ocean landscapes, Lin admits, "Maybe I'm naive . . . [the ocean terrains] are something we've forgotten, and therefore we pollute because we've forgotten. If you look at it, I think you'll take care of it" (Lin qtd. in Hines 114). Lin is not only bringing these spaces into the limited room of the gallery but also creating a space within the viewer's psyche for these endangered places. This connection helps the viewers to experience the landscape by proxy; however, induced to imagine the omitted details of the landscape, the audience is actively involved in shaping the environment—and from here, it seems an easy step to become concerned about the actual physical location itself.



**Figure 9: Maya Lin**  
**Detail of *Black Sea* (*Bodies of Water* series), 2006**  
 Baltic birch plywood  
 18-3/8" x 59-3/4" x 33-3/8" (46.7 cm x 151.8 cm x 84.8 cm), sculpture  
 33-1/4" x 24" x 16" (84.5 cm x 61 cm x 40.6 cm), base  
 Photo by: Kerry Ryan McFate/ Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York  
 © Maya Lin Studio, Inc., courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

As mentioned before, the *Systematic Landscapes* have a more overtly political nature than some of Lin's earlier works. The series of altered books *Atlas Landscapes* (Figs. 10, entire and 11, detail) is probably the most subtly subversive work in the whole exhibit. Lin has carved imaginary topographical lines into the pages of old atlases. "Maps are inherently political—how we choose to present the world graphically will inevitably alter our perception of it" (Lin 6:27).

In her review of Lin's recent work, Cathy Lebowitz remarks on the strange juxtapositions in these altered books. "Germany and Southeast Asia are neighbors, separated only by Lin's handmade canyon. These reconfigurations of the geopolitical landscape are like cartographic equivalents of concrete poetry" (Lebowitz 154). By slicing through the borders of nations to create these new topologies, Lin is destroying our concepts of isolation, thus emphasizing the global nature and interconnectedness of environmental concerns.



**Figure 10: Maya Lin**

***Atlas Landscape***

*The University Atlas, 1984, 2006*

recycled atlas

1" x 19" x 12-1/4" (2.5 cm x 48.3 cm x 31.1 cm), open

1-3/8" x 9-3/8" x 12-1/4" (3.5 cm x 23.8 cm x 31.1 cm), closed

Photo by: G.R. Christmas/ Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

© Maya Lin Studio, Inc., courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

The Washington Post critic, Phillip Kennecot, has accused Lin of not actively engaging real environmental issues. He argues that the gallery pieces are a form of retreat and that her subjective inquiries into these natural phenomena are irrelevant (Kennecot 144). In her review of *Systematic Landscapes*, Suzette Min asserts that the gallery works have less power to move people than her memorials and earthworks (Min 210). Perhaps they do not share the same initial impact of the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial or earthworks, because of their lack of shared cultural history or their limited scale, but the way that Lin creates artwork to enhance and remind us of the beauty and fragility of the landscape still inspires. The way that some of the pieces appear to invade or overwhelm the gallery also mimic the way we have overwhelmed and dominated our environment. Lin's sculptures resonate with the viewer, whether it is by sparking a memory, or by challenging our ideas of global responsibility, or by revealing previously overlooked or unseen aspects of the landscape. In her own quiet way, Maya Lin encourages us to leave the gallery setting and to look at the land around us with a critical eye towards our impact on the environment. Rather than pushing us towards environmental activism with a sense of guilt, she only encourages us to experience and truly enjoy our world.



**Figure 11: Maya Lin**

**Detail of *Atlas Landscape***

*The University Atlas, 1984, 2006*

recycled atlas

1" x 19" x 12-1/4" (2.5 cm x 48.3 cm x 31.1 cm), open

1-3/8" x 9-3/8" x 12-1/4" (3.5 cm x 23.8 cm x 31.1 cm), closed

Photo by: Richard Marx Tremblay/ Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

© Maya Lin Studio, Inc., courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

### Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> Marisa TenBrink is an Honors Senior student at SDSU. This paper, which combines an acute formal analysis with the presentation of a complex art theory debate, represents her outstanding research contribution to the ARTH 100 Art Appreciation course.
- <sup>2</sup> We feel truly honored by Maya Lin's and Pace Wildenstein's contribution of all the illustrations for completion of this essay. Indeed, the images play a key-role in the understanding of this powerful and complex debate, as reconstructed by Marisa Tenbrink, author of this essay. Our appreciation goes to Lauren Staub, for having extensively assisted us through the process.
- <sup>3</sup> Most of the controversy surrounding Maya Lin's career occurred during the construction of the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial. The unconventional design of the

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memorial was a point of contention between the veterans: one veteran went so far as to call the design “a black gash of shame” (Menand 59). However, since the memorial’s dedication, it has been considered a success and has become one of the most visited monuments in Washington, D.C. (Howe 90).

- <sup>4</sup> Maya Lin is mostly known for her design of the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial in Washington, D.C. Her other works have included commissions for other memorials, such as the *Women’s Table* for Yale University and the *Civil Rights Memorial* in Montgomery, AL. Her architecture encompasses a wide range of projects, from designs for museums, to parks, and even personal residences. She has also produced a number of earthworks around the world. Among her current projects: a memorial dedicated to the extinction of species entitled *What is Missing?* and the *Confluence Project* along the Columbia River.
- <sup>5</sup> The series *Topologies* and *Systematic Landscapes* are certainly not the only works that Lin has completed in the last decade. Many other works are directly related, either visually or conceptually, to those presented in these gallery shows; however, they have been excluded, because they have been designed for a specific site and are not transported along with the exhibition. Maya Lin’s website has fantastic pictures and a complete chronology for anyone interested in gaining a better grasp of her whole body of work ([www.mayalin.com](http://www.mayalin.com)).
- <sup>6</sup> Throughout her career, Lin has created several earthworks. Three of them form a series that share similar visual characteristics among themselves and with the installations *Topographical Landscape* and *2x4 Landscape*. The first earthwork is entitled *The Wave Field* and was completed in 1995 at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. *Flutter* is the second in this series—it was finished in 2005 for the Wilkie D. Ferguson, Jr. Federal Courthouse in Miami, Florida. *Storm King Wavefield* is the third and largest of the three; it was completed in 2009 (Cotter 8).
- <sup>7</sup> The *Storm King Wavefield* is a large earthwork that occupies a reclaimed portion of the Storm King sculpture garden in New York. The earthwork itself is a series of rolling hills based on scientific drawings of waves. Although the Storm King Wavefield was completed after the *Topologies* and *Systematic Landscapes* installations, it was the third in a series of earthworks that were being completed concurrently with the studio works shown in the gallery.
- <sup>8</sup> Lin had originally intended for the viewer to be able to climb up the sculpture to fully experience the piece. According to Sokol, the viewer could “sign a waiver, don [put on] special footwear, and climb the giant form” (Sokol 38). However, Susan Hines mentioned in her article “Outsider Artist” that the museum or gallery had restricted the viewer’s ability to interact with the artwork, due to safety considerations.
- <sup>9</sup> *Bodies of Water* forms a smaller series within the *Systematic Landscapes* series. Recently, Lin has exhibited another group of work entitled *Bodies of Water* at the Storm King Art Center in New York. To eliminate possible confusion, *Bodies of Water* in this paper refers to the three sculptures of the inland seas (*Caspian Sea*, *Black Sea*, and *Red Sea*) that were part of the original *Systematic Landscapes* exhibit curated by Richard Andrews, director of the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle, WA.

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