Closing the Circle: Time, Form, and Material in the Work of Ruth Hardinger

By Eleanor Heartney

In the West, our sense of time is linear, conditioned both by Christianity's arc from creation to apocalypse and by the secular Enlightenment's narrative of progress. This conception facilitated the triumphs of scientific reason and industrial technology that shaped the world we live in, but it also separated humanity from nature and past from present. Today, in the post-industrial age, we can see more clearly the costs of this concept of time.

But what if we were to posit another model? Can we rethink a reality in which the past, present, and future coexist, dualities are exposed as fictions, and creation and destruction are virtually interchangeable? Robert Smithson, that great prophet of the apocalypse, maintained that artists "must go into the places where remote futures meet remote pasts." The work of Ruth Hardinger does that, but without the inevitability of extinction that haunts Smithson's thinking. Instead, Hardinger closes the circle of past and future with work that speaks simultaneously of primordial histories, ancient cosmologies, postmodern aesthetics, and contemporary fears about environmental destruction.

A protean artist who has worked in sculpture, painting, printmaking, and installation, Hardinger refuses to be bound by conventional categories of material, theme, organization, or form. Initially influenced by her classical studies (including fluency in Greek) and trips to Greece and Italy, she has since created a body of work that draws on post-minimalism, process art, arte povera, surrealism, archeology, tectonics, environmentalism, and multiculturalism. Her works contain echoes of fossils, archeological finds, tombs, Pre-Columbian artifacts, bones, and prehistoric fertility figures but also of Georgio Morandi's mysteriously quiet still lifes, Eva Hesse's quirky anti-grids, the ethereal luminosity of Mark Rothko's paintings, and the neo-primitivism of Ana Mendieta's Rupestrian sculptures.

Hardinger's works take many forms. She has created totemic objects that resemble contemporary relics. Working with a Zapotec artisan, she has produced textiles that synthesize references to Aztec codices with her own contemporary sculpture.
She has combined concrete and cardboard in sculptures that become essays in the interdependence of fragility and strength. She has constructed ephemeral installations that offer models of the elemental interconnections of natural forces threatened by climate change. The thread that ties all this work together is an absolute refusal of boundaries. Hardinger destablilizes the conceptual and physical structures that give us a false sense of certainty in an uncertain world. In doing so, she opens up new possibilities by encouraging us to rethink the histories, relationships, and social dynamics we think we know.

A pivotal experience was her study of Mesoamerican art and culture during the year she spent in Oaxaca under the auspices of a Fulbright Fellowship in 1991-92. There she developed a vocabulary that incorporated elements of pre-Columbian art and mythology and fully refined the kind of temporal overlays that characterize all her work. One of the most striking aspects of the work she began in Mexico is her respectful attitude toward cultures so unlike her own. During her fellowship, Hardinger immersed herself in the histories of Aztec, Mixtec, Maya, Zapotec and other preconquest civilizations. She also explored the traditions of their contemporary descendants. Her studies allowed her to think about Mesoamerican culture and history from the inside. But she remained aware of her status as an outsider. She spoke to critic Lucy Lippard about the contradictions of having an "esthetic/cultural identity and a national identity that do not share the same borders."

Reflecting on her early time in Mexico, which was followed by many subsequent visits, Hardinger notes, "During that year, I proceeded to construct all my work of materials indigenous to Mexico such as cochineal [a red dye derived from the crushed bodies of tiny insects] . . ., adobe, bones . . ., copal, beeswax, and traditional

Chontal huipil textiles. I slaked my own hot lime, ground my own dried gnats, searched on hillsides for animal bones, developed on-going working relationships with Indian (Chontal and Zapotec) weavers, and sought out anthropological information about religion and customs."

Among the works that came out of this intense immersion were nine sculptures in a series she titled "Ballgame" (1988-92). These were named for a Mesoamerican ritual game believed to have rules similar to racquetball. These matches apparently served as a proxy for warfare and in some locales may have involved human sacrifice. Hardinger's sculptures in this series make visual reference to the game's ceremonial role in maintaining the cycles of life. They feature large donut shaped forms composed of concrete and hand-troweled hot lime that may appear singly or stacked. These forms incorporate rocks from excavations in the former Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, thus creating a physical link between past and present. Some, like *5 Count* and *Long Red Count,* are covered in cochineal derived from insects that feed on the nopal cactus. This was a reference to the Aztec belief that the souls of deceased warriors migrated to the nopal cactus. In Hardinger's sculptures the red becomes a stand-in for their blood, shed in ritual warfare to protect the rest of the community. The soft molding of the forms and the red tint of the cochineal give these works a meaty quality, anticipating the body references that seep into so much of her subsequent work.

One of these sculptures, *Suerte de Animales* (Lucky Animals, 1992), is encircled by a woven band, the result of Hardinger's collaboration with Eufrocina Vásquez, a local weaver from Oaxaca who works with the techniques and patterns unique to her village. In her desire to honor the work of artisans working in traditions that stretch back for centuries, Hardinger has collaborated with a number of local craftspeople, always offering full credit for their partnership. Among the most striking of these collaborations is her work with the late Alberto Vásquez, a weaver who worked with a traditional upright loom and used ancient dying techniques. Vásquez created textile versions of drawings by Hardinger that mix contemporary forms with symbols found in Aztec and Mixtec codices. The *Woven Codex*, created in collaboration with Vásquez in 1995, offers a brilliant overlay of past and present. The central image is a tree taken from a Mixtec codex. This is surrounded by references to the Ballgame, including a diagram of the playing field, balls, and rings. The tapestry also features an image of one of Hardinger's sculptural reinterpretations of the ritual. Further mixing old and new, Hardinger later recreated this image as an Iris ink-jet print.

From her experience in Mexico, Hardinger learned important lessons about the meshing of past and present and the power of art that stirs memories of ancient mytho-poetic cosmologies. Increasingly, however, she has looked toward the future, in particular the future of an earth endangered by human-induced climate change.

But even with that greater focus on environmental concerns, Hardinger has continued to couch her work in the language of material and totemic form. From 2001 to 2003 she created a series of "Plasters," works that employed plaster of Paris and related industrial materials like structolite, hydrocal, and hydrostone. As with her work in Mexico, Hardinger played with and against the functional properties of materials more commonly used in building construction or casting of decorative objects. She emphasized the material's organic possibilities, impressing finger and trowel marks on soft plaster as it was removed from molds. Hardinger notes, "Plaster's uncanny fluidity [and] fragility are essential elements in this group of works." These humorous sculptures have the feel of experiments in imbalance. They comprise segmented rods cast from ordinary objects like styrofoam cups or food cartons that lean against the wall or weave and wobble from tilting platforms like spindly limbs or whitewashed bones. Their precarity is intentional. Hardinger says, "I stop stacking at the last point where stability is still maintained." It is almost impossible not to anthropomorphize the Plasters and invest their instability with a sense of tenderness and pathos.

Hardinger followed these works with experiments in other industrial materials. Among her most sustained material explorations are her marriages of concrete and cardboard. She was struck by the contrast between these two materials, and by the metaphoric power of their everyday uses. She says, “The word names of these materials intrigued me: Concrete = fact, truth, and substantiality. Cardboard = something without substance.” She paired the materials in a variety of ways. In some of these works, cardboard is captured within the concrete or partially covers it like a carapace. In others, sheets of cardboard are layered over the concrete, like strata of the earth. In yet others, the cardboard is just a trace impression left behind when the concrete is removed from the mold. The interactions of the two materials are deliberately contradictory. There is an interplay between soft and hard, vulnerability and strength, flesh-like malleability and stone-like immobility. For *52 Conundrums* (2016), for instance, she placed amorphous blobs of concrete on bases of corrugated cardboard. Displayed on the floor in grids, the pairings suggest the presentation of artifacts in an anthropological museum. In the "Conundrums" series, created between 2008 and 2014, she clustered together forms cast from objects like plastic beverage glasses or water and soda bottles, nestling them close to each other in what she describes as a Russian doll approach to construction. Once again, the emphasis is on a sense of imbalance, asymmetry, and precarity. Placed together, groups of Conundrums bear an uncanny resemblance to the equally tremulous vases and bottles in the still lifes painted by Giorgio Morandi.

The *Extrusions* (2007), meanwhile, have been described by critic Stephen Westfall as invocations of “cockeyed Northwest Coast Indian masks.” They are made by pushing material through a slab of concrete, creating cylindrical protrusions cast from cups and bottles that suggest rudimentary faces. The *Extensions* (2006) are similar, tipped so that the cylinders become ungainly columns rising from a platform slab. The "Envoys" (2007-present), which Hardinger describes as messengers from the past to the future, are unmistakably figural. Hand built or cast from cardboard boxes whose imprint is still visible, these concrete totems have an imposing presence quite distinct from the humorous pathos of the plasters. At the same time, they seem fractured, not really complete—a quality that stems from the pieced-together nature of their construction. The seams between sections remain visible, undermining a sense of unified power.

Hardinger has also paired plaster and cardboard, two more flexible and mutable materials. These wall works are relief "paintings" whose brushstrokes are composed of chunks of plaster and the parallel lines of pieces of corrugated cardboard. The works have an expressionistic quality, bringing to mind both the white paintings of Robert Ryman and the material-based paintings of postwar European artists like Antoni Tapies and Alberto Burri.

Other two-dimensional works show a similar engagement with the nature of materials. Her "Envelope/Envelop" drawings (2004) consist of gestural pours of dry, powdered graphite mixed with milk. These components create rich black skins that overlap like tectonic plates. Other two-dimensional works include rubbings from a Zapotec palace wall. There are also drawings in which fractured linear compositions are created through folds in the paper. The latter works led Hardinger to experiments with three-dimensional installations in which lines become knotted ropes and strings that divide space and hold elements in place through the force of gravity. Hardinger has dubbed such drawings and installations "Pathways" (2012-14), directing attention to their resemblance to energy fields and neural networks as well as geologic formations and tectonic shifts. The works reflect her vision of patterns of force that create an essential but fragile unity. Again, forms and materials serve as a larger metaphor. She says, "The cracks of the paper, the forces interacting with each other still form unity, a stable whole—a metaphor for our society, in which the cracks are deep but the hope to heal and move forward still allows a certain balance."

The essence of Hardinger's work is a provocative layering of time and place. Smithson's remote pasts and remote futures meet in works that seem to exist simultaneously in multiple time frames. Critics have recognized the unique nature of this approach. Liz Ferrer remarks, “The artist’s strategy of borrowing, altering, and referencing (both from herself and from ancient history) generates a non-linear sense of time, one in which the past and the here and now mirror and parallel each other in unexpected but powerfully evocative ways.” G. Roger Denson acknowledges that Hardinger has a kinship with post-minimalist artists like Gordon Matta Clark and Eva Hesse, while she simultaneously taps into ancient cultural memories. He says, “Hardinger works much like the Paleolithic or Neolithic artist who re-presents the world surrounding her in artifacts brought into the temple or home.” Writing about the "Conundrums," Charlotta Kotik says, “While transforming their forms into segments of her piece, she distorts the original shapes through the subjective processes of her memory into entities hovering within the past and present.”

But it is not only through form that Hardinger creates this complex temporal dance. Her materials also convey multiple meanings, many of them directed at her profound concern with the fate of the earth. At times, materials serve as metaphors for environmental concerns. At other times, Hardinger uses their physical properties to underscore the threats posed by extractive technologies. Thus, for instance, she relates the skeins of lines and ropes in her "Pathway" works to a map of gas leaks in New York City and to carbon sequesters that capture and return carbon dioxide to the soil. Her pairing of concrete and cardboard combines one of the largest contributors to greenhouse gases with one of the most successfully recycled materials. She has also employed stone wool insulation in a work titled *Conundrum / Consideration* (2015). This energy efficient material has the potential to reduce energy use in building construction by 80 – 90%. Her *Envelope/Envelop* drawings are made with graphite, which she points out, is a pure carbon, an element required for all life. And, as Charlotta Kotik observes, “the implied fragility and the use of graphite, a pure carbon, bring to mind the fragility and vitality of earth layers and the organic life’s compounded interactions.”

"The Basement Rocks," a 2015 exhibition at Long Island University in Brooklyn, New York, made these connections explicit, while also underscoring the mytho-poetic basis of her thinking. Basement Rocks is a term for the oldest and deepest layer of rock in the earth's crust. Hardinger paid tribute to this indispensable stratum with a selection of sculptures arranged in the gallery in a way that suggested, as critic Elena Berriolo noted, "a post-industrial zen garden." Hardinger accompanied the show with a sound collage by musician Andy Chase, thus creating an immersive environment designed to lead the viewer into another world. She also provided factual information from scientists on the implications of human interventions below the earth's surface. In one such text, she prefaced a scientific discussion of the effects of fracking with an account of a Maya creation legend that stresses the importance of a correct relationship between the worlds above and below ground. The installation itself emphasized the totemic nature of the sculptures, while underscoring the point that what happens below the earth is of profound importance to our lives above ground.

Reflecting on her approach to materials, Hardinger told G. Roger Denson, "I like materials that come from basic origins and have teeth with sources and definitions. . . . These favored materials include powdered graphite, milk, concrete, cardboard and stone wool. Because the procedures I use encase concrete in a cardboard box or cover the graphite with milk, I don't see a final stage of the work until it dries or cures into the resultant forms they become. I don't modify these formations then. These procedures give a sense (or spirit) of being in collaboration with the materials. Ultimately, graphite, rock, concrete and other materials have a living life whose vitality draws my interest, even though their time frame and elements are millions of years longer than those of humans."

By challenging Western culture's definitions of time and categories of existence, Ruth Hardinger destabilizes the principles that have lead to our current environmental crisis. She rejects the progress narrative that valorizes scientific discovery and technological innovation at the expense of an organic conception of the interrelationship between humanity and nature. In place of a mechanistic, patriarchal order organized around the exploitation of natural resources, she encourages us to think cooperatively, to look back to earlier, non-Western cosmologies that stressed the values of ecological harmony and balance and to consider the earth and the materials that comprise it as living things. Enfolding remote pasts into remote futures, Hardinger explores a kind of multi-layered thinking that may be our only hope in the years to come.