



Mary Ann Unger, *The Well*, Wards Island, New York, 1979. Photo: Geoffrey Biddle.

# Mary Ann Unger's Microcosmic Monuments to Life

By Jess Wilcox

A postcard features Mary Ann Unger's first public artwork, *The Well* (1979), installed in a lush green lawn on Wards Island, New York, east of Manhattan. Bottom-heavy, rust-red ovoids join in a ring comprising the cast fiberglass iron-coated sculpture. It emits what a critic describes as a "dusty radiance of terra cotta," in the most literal sense reminiscent of baked earth.<sup>1</sup> Verdant trees in full summer glory fill the ground, partially obscuring the span of the Triborough Bridge. The sense of scale is indistinct and belies its diameter of nearly fifteen feet. One of over a hundred sculptures presented in an outdoor exhibition organized by the OIA (the Organization of Independent Artists) at the Manhattan Psychiatric Center, located on the island, Unger's sculpture plays with the site's relationship to ideas of health through the double entendre of its title. Wellness is a condition humans are inclined to seek by sustenance of the body and mind. Also central to Unger's practice, *The Well* addresses the concept of "nature" through its radial composition, suggestive of botanical growth patterns of leaves and seeds. Unger's statement on the work speaks to her process and influences:

*"I drew it [a flat white squash], and the drawing hung where I saw it for many months. I did a wax model, and by then it had become a sphincter muscle, the guardian of all things that go in and out. On the floor, the model began to look like a miniature scene of animals coming to a drinking hole in the desert. And then it grew, the central space becoming deep and inaccessible, like a well."<sup>2</sup>*

Unger describes *The Well* almost as if it was a living, evolving being. In her telling the work shifts among vegetal, animal, human, and architectural realms and various sizes, zooming in, out, and under the skin, undermining taxonomic classifications. The form travels from the public outdoors environment into the intimate live/workspace. *The Well* (1978/2022, Plate 5) is a bronze cast from the described wax model. At around 18 inches in diameter, the bronze is no more sphincter size than *The Well* is water-trough-size but shares a pluri-potent open-endedness. Unger encourages the viewer's mind to shrink or amplify the forms as she does both in her works on paper, writing, and material ranging from fiberglass and bonded iron, Hydrocal, bronze and painted plywood and aluminum.



Mary Ann Unger with *The Well*, Wards Island, New York, 1979. Photo: Geoffrey Biddle.

While unconditionally dedicated to sculptural practice, Unger was clearly influenced by scientific ideas and imagery, namely micro- and telescopic views of the biological or “natural” world. The work has been variously described as primordial, organic, bodily, and environmental. Biomorph is perhaps the most succinct description. In interviews the artist proposes that her family of engineers and her aborted college study of biochemistry impacted her art. The remnants of these are visible in her uncanny scale shifts; modular, cellular, and radial compositions; and her dual drawing/sculpture practice. These influences are also evident in preparatory sketches, technical drawings, and her journal entries which range from references to DNA and cancer to theories of evolution and universal metaphysical inquiries.

Two amber bonded iron works similar to *The Well*, *Untitled*, 1976, and *Carbon Swell, Kekulé’s Dream, Hexagonal Ring* (c. 1978–1980), more directly draw on Unger’s biochemical perspective. The latter references August Kekulé, one of the founders of modern-day organic chemistry (a fundamental to biochemistry), who is heralded for his theory of a six-carbon atom ring structure of benzene. Unger’s tubular swells resemble Kekulé’s “sausage” system for molecular diagramming, in which curved lobes represent valences, its capacity for bonding with other atoms. While the six individual units comprising the

work, reconfigurable as either a six jointed circle or a single knobby chain play on carbon’s atomic number, Unger’s work does not attempt to represent Kekulé’s graphic depiction. Rather, the bulbous, repeatable form potentially appealed to Unger for its abstract and elemental character and expansive connotations. Here is a system of “permutations, aleatory inversions and mathematically based algorithms”<sup>3</sup> that she later consciously adopted and articulated via her interaction with the artists affiliated with the pattern-loving Criss Cross Cooperative. Although intended to merge chemistry, physics, and biology into an overarching system, Kekulé’s sausage system was widely criticized. The sausage analogy, which stuck, was meant as a derision. These bodily evocations of ground meat and limp phalluses, ridiculed as distractions from the scientific pursuit of truth, may have resonated with Unger’s corporeal sensibility.<sup>4</sup> She certainly would have encountered him through her study of biochemistry. Despite the failed diagram, Kekulé still looms large in the history of chemistry, likely due not only to visionary powers and the mythical power of his visions. Kekulé’s 1890 attribution of his carbon ring structure to dream of an ouroboros (a serpent devouring its tail) is often cited in discussions of scientific creativity. Such a dazzling description must have struck Unger as generative:

“There I sat, writing in my textbook; but it wasn’t going right; my mind was on other things. I turned the chair to face the fireplace and slipped into a languorous state. Again, atoms fluttered before my eyes... My mental eye, rendered more acute by repeated visions of the kind, could now distinguish larger figures of manifold shapes: long rows, frequently linked more densely; everything in motion, winding and turning like snakes. And, lo what was that? One of the snakes had grabbed its own tail, and the image whirled mockingly before my eyes.”<sup>5</sup>

An avid journaler of her dreams and a follower of mythic archetypes, Unger likely relished Kekulé’s story, which may even be apocryphal.<sup>6</sup> Long associated with alchemy, the ouroboros can be traced to ancient Egypt, and symbolizes the union of opposites, the cycle of life and death, and thus an eternal wholeness. The ouroboros of *Untitled* (*Carbon Swell, Kekulé’s Dream, Hexagonal Ring*) exhibits Unger’s early inclination for myth, spirit, and ritual—qualities critics typically associated with “private,” “personal,” and “expressive” studio work of the late ‘80s and ‘90s. This provides evidence opposing/undermining the much-repeated narrative of the dual or split nature in her work, which critics frequently mapped onto her public art and “private” or studio practice to differentiate the two. Though an admirer, George Melrod, writing on her public art noted: “Unger’s artwork spans such polar extremes that it’s sometimes difficult to imagine it all comes from the same creative fount.”<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, the *New York Times* sculpture critic Michael Brenson noted “two sides of her sculpture. The cool and architectural side...” and the expressive.<sup>8</sup> This repeated narrative describes a sculptor who achieved success in systematically playful, architectural public artwork through the 1980s. *Temple*



Figure 1. Left: Mary Ann Unger, *The Well*, Wards Island, New York, 1979. Center: Mary Ann Unger, *The Well*, Wards Island, New York, 1980. Right: Imprint of *The Well*, Wards Island, New York, 1980. Photo: Geoffrey Biddle.



Figure 2. Two arrangements of Mary Ann Unger, *Carbon Swell, Kekulé’s Dream, Hexagonal Ring*, 1978–1980, bonded iron, 6 units (each 32 x 21 x 19 inches) (81.3 x 53.3 x 48.3 cm). Private Collection.



Figure 3. Mary Ann Unger, *Temple*, 1986, painted aluminum, 162 inches diameter (411.5 cm diameter). Collection of the Philip and Muriel Berman Museum of Art, Ursinus College of Pennsylvania. Photo: George Widman.



Eve Biddle and Mary Ann Unger, New York City, 1986. Photo: Geoffrey Biddle.

(1986, Figure 3), a billowing, mushroom-like dome supported by columns constructed in a vermilion planar skeleton, is the iconic work conjured in this telling. In response to her battle with cancer, she created dark, heavy, expressive, and figurative work that developed in the mature and more critically received work of the late '80s and '90s. By then Unger's cancer struggle was well known and ascribed as generative to the emotive, ritualistic, even macabre elements. *Deposition/Nature Mourned* (1991) is emblematic of this so-called latter tendency, consummately described as a "ritual release of innards...that seem dragged from a conventional body to be redesigned in favor of viscera."<sup>9</sup>

The narrative of Unger's dichotomous public and private art practice suggests the deep-seatedness of binary thinking dividing the realms of social (private and public), spatial (inside and outside), consciousness (emotion and reasoning), academia (arts and science), and anthropologic (nature and culture) all overlaid on gendered bodies (man and woman). As noted in Stephanie Sparling Williams' interpretation of *The Well* as an orifice, Unger's interest in mortality and the body's inevitable end preceded her cancer diagnosis (in 1984). *The Well* represents not only a long-standing concern with the existential stakes of sculpture making for Unger, but a nexus of dualistic tensions characteristic of her approach. Indeed, there are remarkable similarities in the public and studio artworks: modular organic forms based on biological knowledge that imply "universal structures of alignment and affinity."<sup>10</sup>

Following *The Well*, Unger's public art trajectory veered indoors with two major projects, both centered on the idea of the garden, occupying buildings with distinct architectural styles and social functions. *Paradise as a Garden* (1981, Figure 4) the site-specific installation at the Graduate Center, City University of New York, was based on the idea of a "formal Baroque garden," intended to be a place for "contemplation, relaxation and refreshment" and

an "oasis" in the "spiritual desert" of Midtown Manhattan.<sup>11</sup> Though circular in footprint, Unger organized the installation around a central void, punctuated by five tree-like structures constructed of interlocking plywood ribs and spines. In a vivid spectrum, planes of arches radiated out from the core, conjuring hedge walls and pathways of a garden design. Spanning forty feet in diameter, the installation filled the otherwise dark, drab, lifeless institutional space, called the Mall, which linked the 42nd and 43rd Street building entrances. Unger amplified the threshold aspect of the space by titrating emotional tone through its many modular parts in "a progression of warm and jarring colors on the outside to cooler, more contemplative colors on the inside."<sup>12</sup> Architectural blueprints in plan and elevation (Figure 5) reveal Unger's laborious, blossom-like composition of the hundreds of individual elements—a garden as mandala. The circular efflorescing form is a microcosm of the garden experience.

*Tweed Garden* (1985, Figure 6) similarly employed a skeletal structure of plywood planes, color gradation to elicit emotion, and abstracted botanical form. The rotunda of the Tweed Courthouse was also a liminal, underutilized space, which Unger likely encountered listed in a City of New York Department of Cultural Affairs guide to exhibition spaces. Declared a New York City Landmark only the previous year, the building is an architectural mash-up. Begun in 1861 under the design of New York architect John Kellum in a neoclassical American Victorian style, it was completed after his death by German architect Leopold Eidlitz, who made significant contributions including many Romanesque elements. A contact sheet (Figure 7) reveals Unger's keen eye for environmental details in the architecture: foliate leaves on column capitals, the bulbous curves of adjacent archways, the octagonal balcony railing, and radial skylight aperture.<sup>13</sup> Like Kekulé's benzene ring and many of Unger's drawings, *Tweed Garden's* elemental unit was the hexagon. Its root in the biological world was noted: "The columns taper



Figure 4. Mary Ann Unger, *Paradise as a Garden*, 1981, painted wood, 72 x 480 x 480 inches (182.9 x 1219.2 x 1219.2 cm), CUNY Graduate Center Mall, New York.

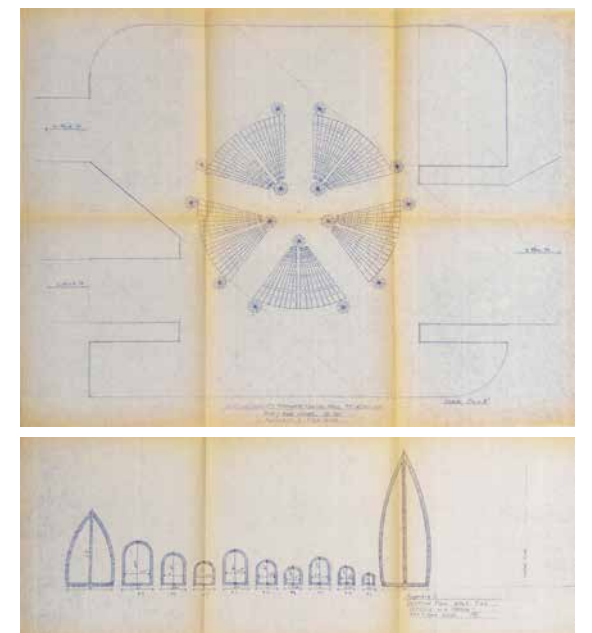


Figure 5. Mary Ann Unger, *Paradise as a Garden*, Floor and Elevation Plans, 1981.



Figure 6. Mary Ann Unger, *Tweed Garden*, 1985, painted wood, 108 x 144 x 180 inches (274.3 x 365.8 x 457.2 cm), Tweed Courthouse, New York.

from bottom to top like flowers or trees—a reminder, perhaps, that columns evolved from trees.<sup>14</sup> The tonal and volumetric shift leads the eye upwards as in Gothic architecture. Likewise, the structure's ample negative space allowed the light through oculus, symbolically uniting the viewers with the heavens, architecturally bridging interior and exterior, and psychically marrying the spiritual and material worlds.

The garden archetype is notable in its inherent boundary-blurring mixing of interior/exterior and nature/culture, brimming with Unger's inclination for "consequential clash." Gardens celebrate the natural botanical world of outdoors, yet connote privacy and interiority. Unger's proposal states the "root of paradise refers to the idea of the garden as separateness—paria (around) and daeza (wall)."<sup>15</sup> Persian garden design in the Zoroastrian tradition conceives of the garden as a microcosm of the universe

and a bridge to the spiritual realm. The highly cultivated Baroque gardens of Western Europe exude the impulse to tame wilderness and impose order on chaos. The coexistence of distinct cultural and cosmological perspectives is evident in Unger's journals where a magazine clipping lives beside an astrological chart. Unger's hands-on, embodied experience planning perennial and annual plantings at her rural retreat in Wallkill, New York, complemented these garden designs a metaphysical exercise. Her personal experience of the natural world likely also informed the public artwork both indoors and outside.

If Kekulé's molecular ideas germinated into Unger's earthy ferrous sculptures, and botanical structures informed her garden works, then Watson and Crick's double helix DNA model presented a pragmatic engineered model for the jointed lattice works that became her signature style for public art. A series of related sketches from 1980 on the challenge of designing a monument to Vladimir Tatlin illustrate Unger's biochemical thinking. Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* (1920) in provisional foreshortened and aerial views are followed by a sketch of the DNA double spiral diagram, which developed into a prototype for public monument-making method (Figures 8, 9). Unger's musings in a typewritten artist statement titled, *Modules*, reinforces the DNA model of the lattice work: "In nature the cell is the basic building block, the Cell is a module and the mold for the cell is DNA. But the mold, in this case, is contained within the form. Matter is not poured into the mold, but the mold, DNA, via RNA, collects its own matter and builds the form around itself."<sup>16</sup> The indoor public works *Paradise is a Garden*, *Tweed Garden*, as well as the outdoor *Temple*, *Beehive Temple* (1987), and later permanent large-scale public artworks *Wave* (1989) in Tampa, Florida, and *Ode to Tatlin* (1991) at the Aaron Copland School of Music in Queens, New York, all employ this method. While similar in their basic methodology, these evolved in materials as her experience and reputation expanded: the gardens were in

plywood, *Temple* and *Beehive* in aluminum, and the permanent works in steel.

Unger's movement among materials is ascribable to her lived experience as a woman sculptor, a marginalized position in the art world. Easy to disassemble, pack flat, and produce herself, the planar lattice was a solution to scale up with limited resources. Unger's invention of the bonded iron process was similarly a pragmatic and thrifty solution rooted in the gendered inequality. She cast molds in lightweight fiberglass mixed with iron, which she then soaked in acid to produce the gravitas of weathered steel without the weight. This allowed her to achieve sinuous curves in Corten-steel-color in her studio long before Richard Serra produced his first *Torqued Ellipses* (1998), which he did with the support of computer programming and industrial steel manufacturers. Gender also perhaps explains why Unger pursued public art and university projects. In the '70s and '80s, they afforded women sculptors opportunities that were otherwise limited.<sup>17</sup> Bonded iron's vulnerability to environmental corrosion, exemplified by *The Well's* decay on Wards Island (Figure 1), suggests another motivation for the shift towards lattice work in the public works.<sup>18</sup>

Unger was aware of the potential illegibility and non-traditional narrative arc of her artistic practice. In journals, she lamented what she perceived as her unfulfilled attempts at triumphal, heroic images. In her struggles,

Unger returns to biology to probe the relationship between artistic conceptualization, vision, and creation:

*"To Play God! Here I sit in my studio thinking about natural selection—'natural' evolution. [George Gaylord] Simpson says: Nature is an opportunist, if it works then it is good, i.e. it will survive. Sitting in my studio trying one 'mutant' after another. Still haven't hit the one that works. Wondering if 'it' has a mind of its own that somehow speeds up the process of creativity like sleeping or divine intuition."<sup>19</sup>*

Unger's dual appeal to spiritual metaphor and biological ideas was more readily recognized in some of the studio work of the '90s than in the public artworks. Critics correctly identified whiffs of ancient cultures and traditions, from Stonehenge to Greek myth, that preceded the calcification of binary thinking that emerged from Descartes and has dominated Western European philosophy since the Enlightenment.<sup>20</sup> Regeneration is conveyed not by the round, radial forms of the public works, but through invocations of the biological cycles of motherhood and Earth. In her *Dark Icons*, Robert Taplin noted Unger's parallel "between bearing the dead and bearing a child or seed,"<sup>21</sup> which Arlene Raven also praised as "perpetual compost for the never-ending renewal and residue shaped for the pod of the next flowering."<sup>22</sup> In championing *Black Heart*, one of the ovular convex wall works that Horace D. Ballard has dubbed the *Engagements*



Figure 7. Details from contact sheet of *Tweed Garden*, 1985.

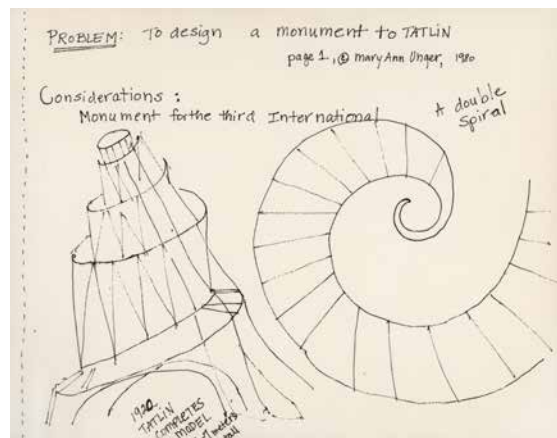


Figure 8. Mary Ann Unger, Tatlin Monument Journal drawings, 1978.

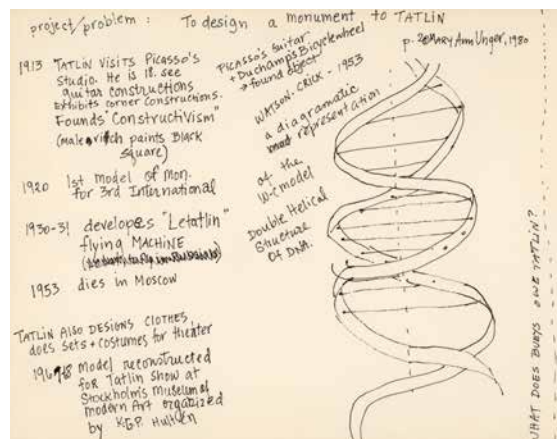


Figure 9. Mary Ann Unger, Tatlin Monument Journal drawings, 1978.

series, Jonathan Goodman contended that while it originates in biology, “its true meaning is rooted in its ability to suggest life processes that are as metaphysical as they are scientific.”<sup>23</sup>

The impulse to condense the potency of the universe into fundamental forms is evident in studio work that

signals its architectural support. From roughly the same period as *Black Heart, Basket Piece* (1997–1998, Plate 22) reprises the radial symmetry and columnar aspect of many of the public projects. Made with Hydrocal over steel with pigment, while the sculpture lacks a uniform surface of the public works, it retains a dynamic play among void and mass. Though suggestive of the capacity to carry, at the magnified height of seven and a half feet, this porous vessel with bulging ribs postures as an abject body. Like much of Unger’s work, it leverages a simple elegance in form as a container for multiple open-ended meanings: from ritual totem to chitinozoan microfossils.

Rather than inhabiting the blankness of the gallery, the *Wishing Stones* (1996, Plates 18, 19, 21) protrude outwards from the walls, nonetheless playing with volume and space. According to folklore in Maine, where Unger summered with family, rocks with an unbroken ring around their circumference were good luck. Tumbled smooth by the ocean, the stones encompass the deep time of Earth’s lifespan. In deep mineral colors, Unger’s lines are reminiscent of quivering horizons: ground meeting ocean, reaching mountain range, kissing cloud shelf. *Maine Wishing Stone No. 3* (1996, Plate 18) could be read as a reflection of the sunset landscape over a dark body of water. Such stones literally compress Earth into a microcosm. They hold the atoms of geological events from the origin of the solar system in the Big Bang through the evolution and extinction of various species, many familiar only through a microscope. Rhyming with an egg, their size echoes a pregnant belly. Seen in this way, the *Wishing Stones* are swollen with potential energy, akin to the *Zygote* (1996) with its titular reference to reproduction.

In the bonded-iron *Misericordia* (1989, Figure 11), originally presented at Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens, New York, Mary Ann Unger’s public art development loops around to its beginning. At the monumental size of 8 x 11 x 11 feet, this biomorphic work invites viewers to enter inside and encounter sculpture’s full capacity as analogue

for the body. Due to its aperture, the architectural scale is more immediate than in *The Well*, as illustrated by photographs of Unger and others inside the work. Like Louise Bourgeois’ *Femme Maison* series and Simone Leigh’s depictions of black women’s bodies in, for example, *Brick House* (2019), Unger mines the trope of women sculptors exploring the female body as architecture:

*This piece is a kind of earth mother gathering her children like the Renaissance image of the Virgin Mary gathering all the orphans under her skirts (Misericordia, Figure 10). It creates a protective and sheltering space that is meant to be healing and regenerative. It is like fingers rising out of the ground, or a seed pod unfolding. It is also related to Stonehenge’s circle of boulders which makes a ritualistic and ceremonial space. The ceremony is personal and refers to no particular religion or ritual. It is at once ancient and modern. The interior is dark and mute, encompassing some mysterious process of transformation.*

The piece resonated with the site’s history: a parcel of land that only a few decades prior was a neglected illegal dumping site, rehabilitated and revitalized by transformation into a public sculpture park.<sup>24</sup> An assembly of eight modules, as if huddled for protection against a harsh environment, *Misericordia* bleeds red from the iron’s slow deterioration. Microbiologically, these shapes are most associated with bacteria, which are even classified by the rod-shape as bacillus. Here Unger celebrates bacteria’s decompositional powers as inevitable and awe inspiring as the patina on memorials that humans have made since ancient times, to say nothing of Christianity’s associations with resurrection. A vital life force is acknowledged equally in the human and “natural” (non-human) world via the mythic Mother Earth. While only temporarily installed at Socrates, Unger made *Misericordia* as a monument to endure beyond her lifetime. It’s located at Art Omi sculpture park in Ghent,



Figure 10. Piero della Francesca, *Polptych of the Misericordia*, 1445–1462, oil and tempera on panel, 107.5 x 130 inches (273 x 330 cm). Collection of Museo Civico Sansepolcro, Arezzo, Italy.



Figure 11. Mary Ann Unger, *Misericordia/Congregation*, 1989, bonded iron, 96 x 132 x 132 inches (243.8 x 335.3 x 335.3 cm), Socrates Sculpture Park, Astoria, Queens, New York.

New York, nestled among a grove of trees, a natural home for this cosmic sculpture.

This cyclical weaving of Mary Unger's public work, which is deeply intimate, organic, and emotive, with her studio work, which is also architectural, geometric, and environmental, aims to temper accounts of dichotomy and rupture in her oeuvre. An examination of public art output is germane to any artist making large-scale sculpture for its long entanglement with the idea of the monument, but all the more so with Unger because of her long-standing fascination with the natural environment—from tended gardens to inconspicuous beach stones. An emphasis on Unger's journals should not reinforce the primacy of an artist's intentions over the critical and popular reception,<sup>25</sup> which would amount to a rehashing of the personal versus public binary. Instead, the journals and sketches offer focused specimens, prototypes, and case studies in Unger's artistic evolution, from conceptualization, to the working through real world material constraints, to affective responses elicited by completed work. The conflicts and negotiations among political officials, community stakeholders, commercial interests, and legal constraints that are inherent in public art generate project transformations that may obscure and overshadow the subtitles of Unger's biomorphic sensibility and logic. Thus, the public art only fully reveals itself through the interior studio work—as a synthesis of primordial yet post-apocalyptic bioforms. The ouroboros' eternal cycle of self-consumption and recreation broadly pervades Unger's creations, in sculpture and on paper, through spiraling shapes, rhythmic repetition of structures and symbols, and resonance with biological systems. This potent alchemical symbol for the ordering of the chaotic energy of the world's prima materia harmonizes with Unger's all-encompassing sculptural ambition. She created her own microcosms of life, with the matter of life: the planet in the pebble, mother earth in the egg, decay and regeneration in the garden, and the bios (life) in art.

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Alloway, "Art," *The Nation*, July 17, 1979, 28.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Ann Unger, *The Well: Artist Statement*, Mary Ann Unger Archives, New York.

<sup>3</sup> Horace D. Ballard, "Mary Ann Unger: Influences and Arrangements," in *To Shape a Moon From Bone*, ed. Horace D. Ballard (Williamstown, MA: Williams College Museum of Art, 2022), 27.

<sup>4</sup> Not unlike Kekulé's detractors, critic Kay Larson likened Unger's sculpture to "flopping sausages" in a review of the "Dark Icons" show Klarfeld Perry Gallery. See Kay Larson, "Small Wonders" *New York Magazine*, March 30, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> David Theodore, "Was Kekulé's Mind Brainbound? The Historiography of Chemistry and the Philosophy of Extended Cognition," *Spontaneous Generations: A Journal for the History and Philosophy of Science* 3, no. 1 (2009): 162.

<sup>6</sup> Theodore, "Was Kekulé's Mind Brainbound?" 162.

<sup>7</sup> George Melrod, "Bridging Extremities" *Public Art Review*, Fall Winter 1993: 24.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Brenson, *The New York Times*, May 23, 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/05/23/arts/art-jasper-johns-prints-on-shows-at-the-modern.html>

<sup>9</sup> Arlene Raven, "Nothing Stays Still," *The Village Voice*, April 7, 1992, 96.

<sup>10</sup> Ballard, "Influences and Arrangements," 37.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Ann Unger, *Paradise is a Garden: An Installation for CUNY Grad Center at 42nd Street, New York* (Proposal), Mary Ann Unger Archives, New York.

<sup>12</sup> Unger, *Paradise is a Garden* Proposal, Mary Ann Unger Archives, unpaginated.

<sup>13</sup> While Geoffrey Biddle, Unger's partner took the photographs, Mary Ann directed the process as part of her proposal research.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Brenson, "Weekend Arts," *The New York Times*, December 6, 1985.

<sup>15</sup> Unger, *Paradise is a Garden* Proposal, Mary Ann Unger Archives, unpaginated.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Ann Unger, "Modules," Mary Ann Unger Archives, New York, 2.

<sup>17</sup> While Sorkin's traces avenues of support for women working in land art to universities, residencies and sculpture parks in the absence of institutional and gallery support, the argument serves equally for women artists working in public art. While not congruent, the practices share a great deal in common. See Jenni Sorkin, "Structured Power" in *Groundswell Women of Land Art*, Ed. Leigh A. Arnold (Nasher Sculpture Center, 2023), 72.

<sup>18</sup> Unger photographed the bonded iron *Untitled (Carbon Swell, Kekule's Dream, Hexagonal Ring)* both indoors and outdoors, which again suggests a blurring of the public and studio work designations. See images at the Mary Ann Unger Archives, New York.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Ann Unger, Black sketchbook labeled June 21, 1977. Mary Ann Unger Archives, New York, unpaginated.

<sup>20</sup> For a reading of Unger's engagement with and appropriation of non-Western culture see Horace D. Ballard "Power Objects: Forms to Rival the Moon" in *To Shape a Moon From Bone*. (Williams College Museum of Art, 2022), 71–85.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Taplin, "Mary Ann Unger at Klarfeld-Perry," *Art in America*, June 1992, 106.

<sup>22</sup> Arlene Raven, "Nothing Stays Still," *The Village Voice*, April 7, 1992.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Goodman, "Mary Ann Unger at Trans Hudson," *Art in America*, October 1997.

<sup>24</sup> It is worth mentioning that decades later, I served as curator at Socrates Sculpture Park from 2016 to 2021.

<sup>25</sup> There is interesting work to be done on the public reception of some of Unger's university projects including *Paradise is a Garden* at CUNY Grad Center, New York, (which was mistaken for Christmas decorations by some); *Temple* at Ursinus College, Collegetown, Pennsylvania, (the location became a subject of debate in the student newspaper) and *Ode to Tatlin* at the Aaron Copland School of Music at Queens College, Queens, New York.