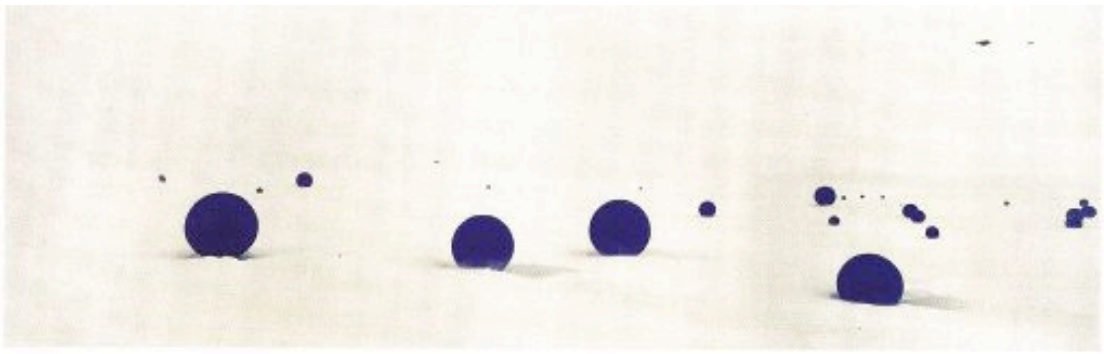
BY COLLETTE CHATTOPADHYAY

As a child, Lita Albuquerque was mesmerized by the vault of nighttime stars visible from the Catholic convent that was her home in Carthage. Occasionally she would visit her mother in a small seaside village, where the Mediterranean lapped the Tunisian shore. Frequently she would cast glances toward the sea's horizon, scanning for her French father's appearance on a ship that never arrived. The vagaries of seeking the visible in the invisible, to paraphrase Yves Klein, inform Albuquerque's life and work. Moving to Los Angeles to complete high school, she emerged on the L.A. art scene in the 1970s, combining California Light & Space concepts with those of Land Art. While she has created numerous permanent installations for national and international clients, including the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles, the California Golden State Capitol project in Sacramento, the Evo de Concini Federal Courthouse in Tucson, and the Tochigi Prefecture Health Center in Japan to name a few, she remains most renowned for her ephemeral site projects.

In 1978, she created *Malibu Line*, a trench dug in a Malibu cliff and filled with cobalt pigment. That same year, she also developed *Rock and Pigment Installation*, her first reflection of the constellations, presented in a dry lake bed in the Mojave Desert. In 1980, her *Washington Monument Project* transformed the famous obelisk into a giant sundial. In 1996, she represented the U.S. at the Cairo Biennale, mapping the constellations in the sand at the foot of the Giza pyramids and winning the Cairo Biennial Prize. She completed her most recent project, *Stellar Axis*, last December in Antarctica, with funding from the National Science Foundation; the project physically existed for only two weeks, its ephemeral nature reflecting humanity's place in the cosmos.

PETER BLAKE, COURTESY THE ARTIST



Previous spread, opposite, and this page: six views of *Stellar Axis: Antarctica*, 2006. 99 blue spheres placed on the Ross Ice Shelf, temporary site-specific work.

Collette Chattopadhyay: *In recent years, you've been "mapping" the correspondence of the earth to the cosmos. Washington Monument Project, the Mojave Desert earthwork, and your site work at the Giza pyramids all serve as conceptual precursors to your recent* Stellar Axis *in Antarctica. In all of these works, the issue of our alignment in time-space to the cosmos is a central theme. Why is cosmic alignment relevant in our time?*

Lita Albuquerque: Cosmic alignment is relevant because we have lost touch with our relationship to the cosmos. Ancient and indigenous cultures held that understanding, and it is crucial to our continued existence. Most of those cultures are gone, and with their disappearance, we are losing that primal connection. The loss is as serious for our survival as the problem of global warming. It's as if our face is down in the mud and we need to look up and see that we exist within an interconnected universe. In aligning ourselves to the cosmos, the space-time continuum is understood viscerally in our bodies. People ask me about Yves Klein and my use of blue. The connection exists in terms of the material and in terms of what he meant when he said, "Blue is the invisible becoming visible." It seems we're at that time now where the invisible is becoming visible.

CC: *Your site works link the earth to the stars' positions and/or movements in time-space. When you determine you're going to do a work—whether in the Mojave Desert or Antarctica—how much is serendipitous versus intentional in relation to the seasons or solstice?*

LA: It's important that it's a specific time. I definitely wanted to do *Stellar Axis* at the solstice in Antarctica. That was important because it had to do with the light at the solstice.

CC: *Was* Stellar Axis *the first solstice work you've done?*

LA: That's an interesting question because I think a lot about the solstice. Yes, it's the first piece I have done at the solstice. But, I was going to recap the pyramids (in Giza) at the solstice. I was going to start at the winter solstice and have an 11-day performance culminating on December 31, 1999, the birth of the millennium.

CC: *But you didn't get the chance to do it because of political turmoil.*

LA: Yes. In fact, I was collaborating with Tarek Naga, an Egyptian architect, three years beforehand. Astronomically that particular solstice had an unusual lunar occurrence, a double moon that's called a blue moon. I think a lot about the winter solstice because it is the beginning of the light.

CC: *Did you see the stars during the summer solstice in Antarctica?*

LA: No. I was doing a piece about the stars, but we couldn't see them because there was no night—it was daylight 24 hours. Talk about "making the invisible visible." I'm interested in quantum physics, in the idea that light is information. In fact, we live off a star—our sun, which is only eight light minutes away. I'm interested in what happens when light hits from greater distances, from distant stars: What kind of information would we get? How would it affect our DNA since the light from the sun works on our DNA the way it does on plants through photosynthesis? If I drew an imaginary line from star point to star point on the ice at the North and South Poles, it would be as if a shaft of light were coming through the center of the earth. That was the original concept. That's why I wanted to do the piece. Then, I started thinking, "That's static, like taking a picture," and there is no such thing as stasis.

CC: *Things are constantly in motion.*

LA: Yes, but only to our perception. At the North Pole, our perception is that the stars themselves move in concentric, spiraling circles counter-clockwise. At the South Pole, they move in concentric, spiraling circles clockwise. If you were to extend this motion through the center of the earth you would get the double helix of DNA. The image is powerful because this symbol is of our own DNA being connected to the light of the stars at both poles.

CC: *At different terrestrial locations, the stars are in different positions. So, at the Mojave Desert you had a different center star to anchor the site work than you had in Egypt, or in Antarctica?*

LA: Yes, but not so quintessentially different in the Northern Hemisphere because you pretty much see the same stars.

CC: *Astronomically, then, how was the Mojave Desert work different from* Stellar Axis *in terms of the mapping on the ground?*

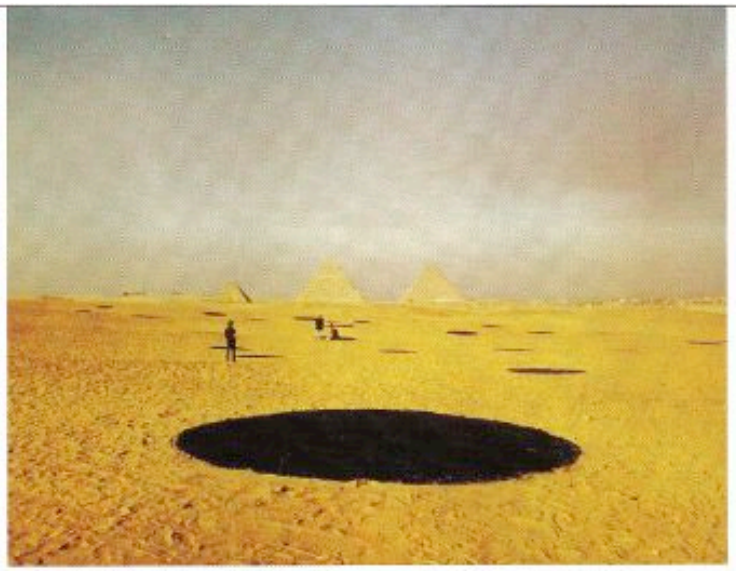
LA: Very different, the constellations in the Southern Hemisphere are completely different from the constellations in the Northern Hemisphere.

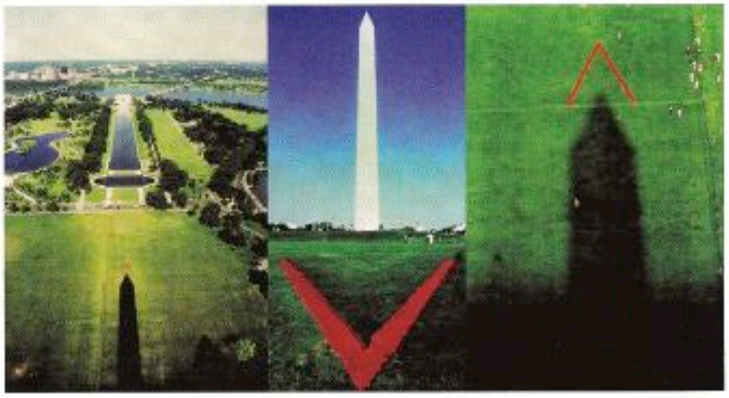
CC: *On the blog you created while installing* Stellar Axis, *you wrote, "On that spectacular night which was day, the light... of night is exquisite and ever changing... The first order of things is... to find the center of the site around which the entire map will be created." How did you do that in a field of whiteness?*

LA: It's like looking at art. That's what my work is all about—knowing where you are in space—and it's empirical. It has to do with the body. It's an experience. It was a field of whiteness. Sometimes it was just a horizon, other times it was surrounded by mountain ranges in the distance.

CC: *What was your response to this landscape when you got there?*

LA: I was transported into another place that I had never experienced before. You land on sea ice. It's like landing on the





Clockwise from above: *Star Alignment* (photo montage), 2006. Powdered pigment, entire area approx. 300 x 500 ft. *Sol Star*, 1996. Powdered pigment, entire area approx. 800 x 1,200 ft. *Washington Monument Project*, 1980. Powdered pigment, three views.

ocean, but it's hard, frozen, and white, an expanse of white surrounded by white mountains. It's exhilarating.

CC: *So, you placed your first orb in an expanse of whiteness. Was Sirius at the center?*

LA: No, it wasn't. The center of the star-map is pre-determined: it's what's called the Celestial Center in the Southern Hemisphere. In the Northern Hemisphere, it's Polaris. [Shows constellation diagrams.] See this cross? There are no stars there. We put a flag there to mark the center. I like to do the idea of appearance and disappearance in terms of what was there. Then, I decided to place the largest star, which was Sirius, first.

CC: *What diameter did you establish?*

LA: I wanted to do it really huge, but it wouldn't have read and I wanted it to look cohesive. Plus, it was freezing, and we had to carry really heavy things across the terrain. So, it's 400 feet, which was plenty large because the work was difficult. We located the site, got the GPS, and figured out where each star was going to go.

CC: *There's a comment on your blog about your feet sinking into the ice-slush about a foot as you tried to walk. How did you get 99 orbs positioned over 400 feet, and did you have help?*

LA: We had very little help. We weren't allowed to tax the National Science Foundation and the people there (associated with McMurdo Base). The NSF team included astronomer Simon Balm, documentary filmmaker Sophie Pegrum, photographer Jean de Pomereu, and filmmaker Lionel Cousin. The weather really shifted at times. It was about minus 40; then at other times, it was completely different. We didn't get a major storm, but it got nasty—luckily after we were done installing. We had to move six huge crates, and the NSF gave us vehicles to work with. We had a Piston Bully, which is a tractor that runs about four miles an hour.

CC: *How many miles was it between the base station and the site of the work?*

LA: Back and forth about 30 miles, traveling at four miles an hour. We took one crate at a time because that's all we could fit into the Piston Bully—it really set us back. And then, the last day we were there, we saw all of our crates loaded up on a kind of sled and thought, "What? They had that all along?" Every sphere was in a box inside the crates. We had to take them out of the box, unpack them, and put them on the snow. The small spheres were whole; the others were in halves. Sirius was in half, and we had already gone to its position (in the snow) and drilled by hand until we realized that was too low tech. The next day, we got an electric drill and assembled it with four people.

After we put in all the large ones, we began on the smaller ones. We did a total of 99 spheres, and it took us about 12 days. It was really arduous. Then the NSF person in charge of safety skied by, excited to see all the spheres. She was doing somersaults

TOP RIGHT: TAREK NASR / ALL COURTESY THE ARTIST

Rock and Pigment installation, 1978. Rocks and powdered pigment, entire area approx. 400 x 600 ft. Ephemeral work in the Mojave Desert.

around the piece, really having fun with it. The spheres were stabilized by aluminum posts, but she decided that wasn't safe enough. She said, "Well, it's fine if the wind comes that way; but the wind never comes that way. What if the wind comes this way?" She made us dig four holes for each sphere. It's called "dead man bolting," and I was ready to have a fit, but they were kind enough to get us help, and it was a good thing since a storm came in. We worked in the storm, but luckily it hid all the marks made by digging four huge holes per sphere, nearly 400 holes altogether.

CC: *Had you originally planned a performance?*

LA: It was important to me to get the pattern of the stars, to locate it in time. But, it was equally important to show the spiraling clockwise motion. So, I decided to do it as a performance. Getting volunteers was not an easy thing, though we eventually got 51 people from the McMurdo Base. The area is remote, and McMurdo is the most inhabited place. There's a lot of important scientific research being conducted there, funded by the NSF. I decided to do the Archimedean Spiral. Then, I thought, there's no way everyone will know where to go. So, Simon and I went in the morning and stomped on the snow over and over again to define the path. They had to start at the center. I had them come off the bus at a starting line and walk into the spiral counter-clockwise. Once we got to the center, the 51 people knotted around each other. I had been number two, but I ended up being next-to-last. As we unknotted, I told them to go every five paces and then they walked (out of the center in a spiral motion). The performance lasted about eight minutes. Sophie was in the helicopter and took aerial photos. One observer said, "Oh, an homage to Smithson," though of course this is totally different. I was interested in the motion of the stars or the perceived motion of the stars in time-space.

CC: *You've always been interested in scientific issues, and in this project, you worked closely with scientists. Your collaborative team even included a scientist. Did working with scientists influence your artistic concepts or did your artistic work influence their scientific concepts?*

LA: Simon, who was interviewed by Sophie, says, "I'm an astronomer, but I never look at the stars. This made me see what I'm doing." It is a privilege to work closely with scientists because I have access to information that I normally would not have. It was interesting to be with them and get their responses to and questions about the work. There was real excitement. I could hear the brain bank with various people focused on various projects. There's a project called IceCube. Do you know about that? It looked like Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field*, but they're measuring neutrinos, which can tell us the age of the earth. There's another one, called Anita, measuring light. A lot of the research being done in Antarctica has a relation to my work.

CC: *Some scientists talk about deep time, considering time planes beyond the human scale that are connected with the age of the cosmos. You're creating works that relate to deep time because they're linked to the stars, and yet your pieces are ephemeral. How does the fragility of your works relate to this immensity, and what does that say about our postmodern era or mindset?*

LA: I feel that thoughts are permanent, that the only thing we take with us, once we die, is consciousness. The gift of life is consciousness and that's what we take. I truly believe that's a permanence. There are certain things you just never forget, certain things that affect you. Through visual images, through this intense blue against the white, through these connected patterns, I'm doing things that work on our physiology, on our perceptual system—in a way that creates pathways of remembrance.

CC: *What's next?*

LA: As you know, originally I wanted to be exactly at the South Pole to do the axis at the North and the South. After they said "yes," they weren't able to accommodate us. I was initially upset, but Simon said, "Let's try other areas...it's the whole idea of the axis." Then I realized that being 800 miles from the South Pole is better than not doing it at all—and McMurdo is along the axis that falls right off Greenland—in the water. So, I'm going to go for it. I'm going to the North Pole in July.

Collette Chattopadhyay is a Contributing Editor to Sculpture.