



Lise Haller Baggesen

The Mothernist's Audio Guide to Laguna Gloria

Presented in conjunction with the exhibition *Motherism*, on view in the Gatehouse Gallery through May 22, 2016.

The Mothernist's Audio Guide to Laguna Gloria is a newly commissioned work of art by Lise Haller Baggesen.

Go on an intimate walk with the artist, who ,through her own musings, provides new ways to see, hear and think about the sculptures, gardens, and history of Laguna Gloria.

The Contemporary Austin
BETTY AND EDWARD MARCUS SCULPTURE PARK

IMAGE: Lise Haller Baggesen, *Motherism*, 2013-ongoing. Audio-installation. Installation view (in action), Lise Haller Baggesen : *Motherism*, The Contemporary Austin - Gatehouse Gallery at the Betty and Edward Marcus Sculpture Park at Laguna Gloria, 2016. Artwork © Lise Haller Baggesen. Image courtesy The Contemporary Austin. Photograph by Brian Fitzsimmons.

The Mothernist's Audio Guide to Laguna Gloria

Track 1: Intro (Villa and Wishing Well)

Dear,

Let's go for a walk.

*Walk with me
Like lovers do
Talk with me
Like lovers do*¹

Pretend for a moment that we can walk together, like lovers do, or like a mother and her child—who are also lovers, but of a different kind.

Or even, like walking a little old lady across the street—I'll let you decide who is who—a loving gesture of yet another order; the kindness of strangers.

What more could we wish for? Let's think about that, while we walk toward the Wishing Well.

Exit through the front door and turn right. Turn right again around the corner of the villa past the gated archway and onto the flagstone path. The wishing well is tucked away between the trees on your left, overlooking the lagoon.

It bears a dedication "In honor of our daughters Mary Allen, Lizzie and Kate." I don't know who put this plaque here, but since this is *The Mothernist's Audio Guide to Laguna Gloria*, and the wishes of mothers and daughters will be a recurring theme, I thought I'd mention it.

The Wishing Well marks the division between the upper garden—the beautiful one—and the lower garden, the picturesque.

¹ Eurythmics, "Here Comes the Rain Again," *Touch* (RCA, 1984).

According to the “Cultural Landscape Report” for Laguna Gloria,

In 1757, British philosopher Edmund Burke introduced the concept of the ‘beautiful’ in landscape painting and gardens. For Burke, the ‘beautiful’ embodied classical balance and order and its effect was smoothness, restfulness, harmony and rationality.²

These principles, we might call them “Apollonian,” are typical of the upper garden at Laguna Gloria, with its smooth lawns, symmetrical flowerbeds, and Italianate ornamentation.

In contrast, the lower garden is guided by rather more “Dionysian” impulses. We will hear more about that, as we move along, but first, let’s make a wish, for our walk:

That we may let ourselves be guided by Apollonian and Dionysian principles both, and that we will engage with our senses and intellect alike: sentient beings, being sentient.

Since that is what we are, and since we are, for the purpose of this walk, Garden Lovers, let us now walk toward the Temple of Love.

Stay on the flagstone path and walk toward the low balustrade overlooking the lower garden, a little further on. From there we will continue our tour.

² Catherine O’Connor and Julie Levin, *Cultural Landscape Report for Austin Museum of Art – Laguna Gloria* (unpublished, commissioned internal report, Austin, TX: Land Design Studio, 1999), 19.

Track 2 Gravel Path:

Now walk down the stairs to your left and continue listening, as you walk along the gravel path, meandering between the trees underneath a string of party lights.

While walking toward the Temple of Love, consider the idea of love as a deity one can worship. How to worship in the Temple of Love?

The Temple of Love now mainly functions as a site for wedding ceremonies, but matrimony is only one way of worshipping, of course. Some may say that matrimony is the end of love, and others may say it is only the beginning; and I will say with Kierkegaard—another great lover of walking and thinking—that you may regret it either way.

Rock musician Nick Cave is a pious man who worships a great deal in the temple of love, in- and outside of matrimony.

A family man, he is also an adulterer, a junkie, and a poet (a Dionysian by any other name).

I think it would be fair to say, that Nick Cave has had his share of regrets in this life, but also that his experience of love extends beyond matrimony, into the expanded field between Eros, Caritas, and Thanatos. When you lay yourself down in that field with somebody, they may walk all over you, but they may also walk with you till the end of the world.

So, when Nick Cave sings:

Thank you Girl
Tha-ank you Girl
*I'll love you till the end of the world...*⁶

Which end of the world does he mean?

Keep walking till you arrive at the Temple of Love. Take a seat, and make yourself comfortable and we will take it from there.

⁶ Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, "(I'll Love You) Till the End of the World," *Until the End of the World* film soundtrack (Warner Brothers, 1991).

Track 3: Temple of Love and Texas Gates

The Temple of Love overlooks the glorious lagoon, after which Clara Driscoll named her beloved property, Laguna Gloria. Sitting here, you could almost imagine yourself being at the end of the world.

At another end of the world from here is another Laguna Gloria; within it lies the city of Venice.

In Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice* his protagonist Herr von Aschenbach trips head over heels in a snare of the eye—as incarnated in the young boy Tadzio.

Unable (or unwilling) to avert his gaze from the graceful youngster, he decides to linger a little longer. Around him the city empties as rumors spread of impending disaster; a poignant smell—at first brushed aside as precautions against the hazards of tropical tempest the “Sirocco”—turns out to be a malodorous disinfectant, used to mask the pungent stink of cholera.

In Mann's description the disease becomes an almost sentient being:

*Its source was the hot, moist swamps of the delta of the Ganges, where it bred in the mephitic air of that primeval island-jungle, among whose bamboo thickets the tiger crouches, where life of every sort flourishes in rankest abundance, and only man avoids the spot.*⁷

From here, the disease carried westward onboard Syrian merchant ships to Mediterranean ports of a Europe trembling with fear.

⁷ Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice* [1912], *24grammata.com*: http://www.24grammata.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Mann-death-in-venice-24grammata.com_.pdf (accessed 20 December 2015), 35.

Reading this story today, a hundred years later, it is hard not to draw parallels to the way fear and loathing are cultivated across Europe, portraying a “plague” of refugees, washed ashore on Mediterranean coasts.

As far north as my motherland Denmark, politicians quiver at the thought. In response to the humanitarian crisis, the Danish minister of immigration placed adverts in international papers, warning potential asylum seekers to expect to be greeted not with an outreached hand, but with a clenched fist. Since then, a law was passed allowing Danish authorities to seize valuables carried by refugees entering the country.

In protest, international art star Ai Weiwei withdrew his work from a major exhibition in Denmark and instead released a self-portrait in which he poses as a drowned Syrian toddler. His misguided attempt at solidarity looked more like a misguided attempt at self-promotion, but perhaps underscored the strained relationship between the art world and the real, and the universality of our shared predicament.

Universally, the defense of ever tightening fists is that “we cannot save the whole world.” Alas. If *we* cannot save the whole world, the whole world cannot be saved.

The rhetoric of European neoliberals does not differ much from that of their American counterparts, Donald Trump amongst them. His presidential campaign includes plans to cleanse the U.S. of immigrants, and a plot to force American Muslim citizens to carry identity cards. If this all sounds uncannily similar to legislations passed on Jews in interbellum Europe, it is because it is.

But, as Nick Cave points out:

*Some things we plan
We sit and we invent and we plot and cook up
Others are work of inspiration, of poetry⁸*

Migration can be simultaneously inspired and invented, plotted and poetic. Cooked up, consumed, and all consuming.

⁸ Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, “(I’ll Love You) Till the End of the World,” *Until the End of the World* film soundtrack (Warner Brothers, 1991).

Similarly, matrimony can be a fortress, a gated community or a golden skyscraper—or a passport to travel together till the end of the world.

At this end of the world, Clara Driscoll's Temple of Love is guarded by (a replica of) the Capitol Gates of Texas, but that doesn't mean she did not let love in.

A photograph from the museum's archive shows a small group of people posing in front of these very gates: an elderly gentleman and a young woman holding an infant. Who are those people?

They belong to the Galvan family, who resided on the premises between the 1920s and the 1940s. Nazario Galvan is the name of Clara Driscoll's gardener, who helped her implement every detail of her grand plans for landscaping the estate. He and his wife Benita served as guardians of Laguna Gloria and oversaw the property in Driscoll's absence, while raising their eight children on the grounds.

Their family album—from which some photos are on view, in the Art School offices—is testimony to lives lived, and the loving care and pride they put into their work on this land.

Walk through the Texas gates—a symbolic border of sorts—and imagine, as you continue down the stairs and along the path, a border crosser with a song in his heart:

*And with the horses prancing the field
With the knife in my jeans and the rain on the shield
I sang a song for the glory of the beauty of you
Waiting for me in your dress of blue*

*Thank you Girl
Tha-ank you Girl
I'll love you till The End of the World
With your eyes black as coal
And your long, dark curls.*

Follow the path to the tip of the peninsula.

Nancy Holt's *Time Span* will be our next stop.

Track 4: Nancy Holt, *Time Span*

As close to the water's edge as possible, without actually being *in* the water, stands Nancy Holt's *Time Span*, dressed in heavy metal shackles, like long, dark curls. According to the artist, these "*loosely draped chains that reach out into the water [respond] to Austin's 'lassitude.'*"⁹

If this sounds like a wholly negative connotation, could the anchoring implied also be comforting? The piece seems engaged in a tug of war of opposite desires and impulses, of wanderlust and homesickness. The main structure resembles the corner of a small shed, a homely ruin, into which two circular steel sundials are set—one atop the wall, the other half buried in the ground.

*(The setting sun is set in stone.)*¹⁰

Once a year, on April 5 at 2PM, the top sundial casts its shadow *just so* as to frame a small, circular plaque on the ground. The inscription "4-5-81 2:00" marks the ceremonial completion of the piece, but also the artist's forty-third birthday. This begs the question: which "time span" is being measured here?

Is the piece a metaphor of how our lives must succumb to the greater scheme of things, in a constant, cosmic flux; or is it a gentle, annual reminder of pause and reflection, on the necessity of self love and self care; of being at home within yourself?

(You are here, now.)

In her essay "Operating in the Shadows: History's Pilgrims," Ann Reynolds compares Holt's piece to another famous sundial: Stonehenge.

To this end she quotes George Kubler, art historian of a previous generation, who likened the contemporary influence of ancient artworks to the faint light from distant stars. He says:

⁹ Attributed to Nancy Holt by Annette Carlozzi, in personal communication with Heather Pesanti, June 27, 2014, in Heather Pesanti, "Strange Pilgrims," *Strange Pilgrims* (Austin: The Contemporary Austin/University of Texas Press, 2015), 10.

¹⁰ Moloko, "Statues" *Statues* (Echo Records, 2003).

However fragmentary its condition, any work of art is actually a portion of arrested happening, or an emanation of past time [....] When an important work of art has utterly disappeared by demolition and dispersal, we still can detect its perturbations upon other bodies in the field of influence.¹¹

Stonehenge, to our modern life, is a distant memory, but through Nancy Holt's body of work *we still can detect its perturbations upon other bodies in the field of influence.*

But, if we tune ourselves into it, this "field of influence" stretches even further into our everyday, urban, existence.

Like many American cities, my "Sweet Home Chicago" is aligned with the four compass points.

According to the *Chicago Tribune*:

Twice a year, during the spring and fall equinoxes, the rising and setting sun lines up with Chicago's east-west street grid, creating spectacular photo opportunities as the sun is framed within Chicago's skyline. Early risers and those out and about before sunset will be able to see the phenomenon [known as Chicagohenge], weather permitting.¹²

Tomorrow may rain, so we'll follow the sun.

Walk back toward the villa, through the meadowland. In the thicket to your left, you will find Marianne Vitale's *Common Crossings*.

¹¹ George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962), 19, qtd in. Ann Reynolds, "Operating in the Shadows: History's Pilgrims," *Strange Pilgrims*, (Austin: The Contemporary Austin/ University of Texas Press, 2015), 36.

¹² Kyle Bente, "Viewing 'Chicagohenge': when it happens and how it works," *Chicago Tribune*, 23 September 2015, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-viewing-chicagohenge-when-and-how-it-works-20150922s-htmlstory.html> (accessed 7 November 2015).

Track 5: Marianne Vitale, *Common Crossings* and “the picturesque garden”:

Look around you: this group of standing figures may resemble “totems,” primitive fetishes, or crude mannequins, but are in fact railroad “frogs”—switches used to alter the trajectories of speedily traveling trains at railroad junctions. These unassuming characters played an important role in the “American Dream” of many a settler, determined to follow his, or her, personal manifest destiny: keep on moving.

Which is what we will do. Our next stop is Monika Sosnowska’s *The stairs*, located near the foot of the stairs leading back up toward the villa.

From here there are various paths, which you can explore on your way there, and I will encourage you to do so.

We are now in the lower part of the garden, which, as I mentioned earlier, is guided by more Dionysian impulses. With its abundant varieties of foliage, low-hanging canopies, and dense undergrowth, its uneven paths may lure us deeper and deeper still into what in garden terminology is called “the Picturesque.”¹³ This type of garden is designed to reveal itself to its visitor in a series of panoramas, like three-dimensional paintings.

But, as I read in preparation for our tour:

*[...] a garden visit is also meant to be a temporal and physical experience. When touring a garden, one must move through its spaces in order to view its various parts. In order to interpret the overall experience one must engage senses beyond the sense of sight.*¹⁴

Clara Driscoll designed her garden to provide an abundance of sensory stimulation to the eye, ear, nose, and touch. In

¹³ O’Connor and Levin elaborate: “Also with landscape paintings and gardens in mind, English landscape theorists Uvedale Price, William Gilpin, and Richard Payne Knight, among others formulated the concept of the ‘Picturesque’ in opposition to Burke’s notion of the ‘beautiful.’ For these authors, the chief attributes of the ‘picturesque’ were variety, roughness, and irregularity, as well as the appearance of decay, as evidenced in ruins.” See *Cultural Landscape Report*, 19.

¹⁴ O’Connor and Levin, *Cultural Landscape Report*, 26.

her ambitious mixture of the beautiful and the picturesque she was perhaps inspired by Edith Wharton, who writes, in the introduction to her book *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*:

*The Garden Lover who longs to transfer something of the old garden magic to his own patch at home will ask himself in wandering under the umbrella pines of the Villa Borghese... 'What can I bring away from here?' And the more he studies and compares, the more inevitable the answer will be: not this or that amputated statue, or broken bas relief, or fragmentary effect of any sort, but a sense of the informing spirit and understanding of the garden's purpose and of the uses to which he meant for his garden to be put.*¹⁵

The lower part of the garden is home to many recent acquisitions of The Contemporary Austin's growing sculpture collection. These are our modern-day equivalent of the Roman garden's statues and bas-reliefs. As you stroll around the grounds to admire some of them, try also to search, to find, a sense of the informing *spirit* of this place and the purpose to which it might be put.

I will meet you at Monika Sosnowska's black steel sculpture *The stairs*, where our tour will continue.

¹⁵ Edith Wharton, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* [1904], qtd. in O'Connor and Levin, 21.

Track 6: Monika Sosnowska, *The stairs*

*There's a lady who's sure
All that glitters is gold
And she's buying a Stairway to Heaven
When she gets there she knows
If the stores are all closed
With a word she can get what she came for
And she's buying a Stairway to Heaven...*¹⁶

What was once a spiral staircase now resembles a brain puzzle, twisted into the formal language of Bauhaus constructivism and discarded in a corner of the garden by a disenchanted giant. Stripped of its functionality, it becomes another novelty item. A toy.

The stairs, as is the title of the piece, originates from Monika Sosnowska's 2011 solo exhibition *El Jardín* (The Garden), in Mexico City, and is inspired by the city's "spontaneous, accidental, organic" urbanism.¹⁷

Despite its upfront association with midcentury modernism, there is something very *heavy*, or even *classic rock*, about this piece. A black hole sun.

Wherever she goes, be it to the fire escapes of Mexico City or the Mies van der Rohe skyscrapers on Chicago's Lake Shore Drive, Sosnowska connects with the signifiers of modernity in an ever-changing urban landscape, perpetually repeating the circle of renewal and decay.

Born and raised in Poland, she now resides in its capital, Warsaw. Although she has been around the world and also lived abroad, this is where she chose to return. In her lifetime, Poland has transitioned from a Communist regime to a free-market capitalist democracy, a move that has been described by Frances Fukuyama (after the fall of the Berlin Wall) as "the end of history."¹⁸

To me, Sosnowska's body of work suggests that we are not there yet. That empires may rise and fall, their structural

¹⁶ Led Zepplin, "Stairway to Heaven," *Led Zeppelin IV* (Atlantic, 1971).

¹⁷ Heather Pesanti, "Monika Sosnowska: *The stairs*," *Exhibition Guide: Summer 2015* (Austin: The Contemporary Austin, 2015), 14.

¹⁸ Frances Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest*, Summer 1989.

supports erect and crumble; utopias will change depending on the vantage point from which they are perceived.

Monika Sosnowska's stairway to heaven may be toppled over and rolled up on a clunky coil. But, look; through the infinite loop of this Möbius strip you can see the whole world. With this change in perspective, the steps of the ladder still suggesting upward motion, is Sosnowska similarly suggesting that, "*Heaven is a place on earth*"?¹⁹

Modern cities, at nighttime, look celestial from above: the electric grid lights up the darkness in sparkly constellations. Seen from the moon, Earth hovers on the horizon like a heavenly blue marble. It is all just a matter of perspective.

Your own perspectives may change, as you continue down the path and climb the stairs toward the villa, a little further on, to your right.

¹⁹ Belinda Carlisle, "Heaven Is a Place on Earth," *Heaven on Earth* (MCA Records, 1987).

Track 7: Four Seasons,

As you arrive at the top of the stairs, please take a look in the gardens to your left. See the stone statues standing here. Classic female beauties represent the four seasons: Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall—passing time embodied.

Clara Driscoll wrote about them in the local magazine *Gossip* in 1926:

*I have placed in what I consider a proper setting a number of really beautiful and graceful statues which I was fortunate enough to obtain from one of the oldest and finest gardens of old Italy; this to give an Old World touch to an incomparably beautiful Texas landscape and to contribute a little dignity and formality to the riotous caprices of this violet-crowned vale.*²⁰

Her three-months-long honeymoon with Hal Sevier, which brought the couple to the enchanted shores of Lake Como, is often mentioned as inspiration for the garden, but this was not Driscoll's first tour of Europe.

At age seventeen, the young socialite was sent to private schools in San Antonio, New York, and Paris to study French, German, literature, and the arts. While she vacationed in Spain, the Spanish-American war broke out.

Fluent in Spanish, Driscoll assumed a Spanish identity and remained in the country for six months. In May of 1899, by then eighteen, she returned to France to finish her formal education.

Upon graduation, she was joined by her mother. Together the two toured the world, including a prolonged stay on a houseboat in India. While traveling, Clara Driscoll corresponded with newspapers in San Antonio and Corpus Christi, who published her letters under the pseudonym "A Texas Girl."

²⁰ Clara Driscoll, "Mrs. Henry Hulme Sevier In Her Flower Garden at Laguna Gloria: Mrs. Sevier, President of Austin's Garden Club, Writes Special Article for *Gossip*," *Gossip* vol. 16: no. 1 (February 24, 1926): 1. See the R. Niles Graham-Pease collection papers at the Austin History Center for the run of the Austin monthly periodical *Gossip*.

During their return journey, on a stopover in London, her mother suddenly fell ill and died. Shocked and bereft, Clara Driscoll returned to the United States, alone.

*If all the statues in the world
Would turn to flesh with teeth of Pearl
Would they be kind enough to comfort me?*

*The setting sun is set in stone
And it remains for me alone
To carve my own and set it free.²¹*

²¹ Moloko, "Statues," *Statues* (Echo Records, 2003).

Track 8: Rose Garden, and Paul McCarthy, *White Snow #3*

Just beyond the Four Seasons you will find the sunken Rose Garden, which Driscoll dedicated to “Mothers and Daughters.” It seems to me, this part of her garden was most dear to her. She tells *Gossip* magazine:

*The joy of a rose garden—the joy of roses everywhere, the Queen of flowers, cannot be exaggerated. Everyone should plant roses. They are easy of cultivation and so beautiful to behold. Any rose is lovely.*²²

But before her roses could blossom, an intense, almost cathartic process of excavating and cultivating the rocky land had to take place. Driscoll recalls:

In order that I might realize the best possible results with my shrubs and that the roots should have an abundance of good rich soil to thrive in instead of lime dust, I had the holes dynamited. [...] For several months there was such a bombarding that there seemed as though a prolonged war was in progress. In fact, my zeal in regards to the plants almost cost me the house.

*It was frequently in danger of being shaken from its foundation by concussion, and from showers of rocks thrown so high that they landed on the roof. The effect was much the same as a raid by a fleet of booming planes.*²³

Let’s walk to the middle of Driscoll’s Rose Garden, where, after its transformation a century prior, from the described “war zone” into a sea of petaled tranquility, now stands Paul McCarthy’s *White Snow #3*.

The figure is an adaptation of Disney’s princess, herself the heroine of a Grimm fairy tale. As in all of Disney’s movies, the mother must die, so that our protagonist can enter the world to find her own legs, and then, the steady bedrock of matrimony.

Disney’s classic motion picture premiered in 1937, about a decade after Driscoll planted her rosebushes. McCarthy’s parody of sculptural gesture now brutally distorts such antiquated notions of beauty and harmony. His blackened and

²² Driscoll, *Gossip* 16:1.

²³ Ibid.

tarlike Snow White has been scorched and scarred by her stepmother's white-hot fury. An emotional ground zero.²⁴

The original fairy tale has been interpreted as a hysterical Freudian drama of mother/daughter rivalry. Because, we are told, what could be worse for a mother than to see her own beauty outshone by her offspring?

I could name, off the top of my head: a throwaway baby so ugly that only a mother could love her. A child who never leaves home. Or, perhaps the dreams of a daughter, thwarted by the relentless progress of time and life lived.

Karen Blixen—another great teller of fairy tales, who began her writing career under the male pseudonym Isak Dinesen—once mused: “man and woman are two locked caskets, of which each contains the key to the other.”²⁵

I wonder if the mother/daughter relationship could be described along the same lines?

Blixen, like Driscoll, had no daughters herself, but writes in a letter to her sister:

*There is hardly any other sphere in which prejudice and superstition of the most horrific kind have been retained so long as in that of women, and just as it must have been an inexpressible relief for humanity when it shook off the burden of religious prejudice and superstition, I think it will be truly glorious when women become real people and have the whole world open before them.*²⁶

²⁴ McCarthy's graphic sketches for the series, recently on view at The Renaissance Society in Chicago, don't leave much to the imagination: a cartoonish drama, in which the artist—an eternal teenager dressed up as seven naughty dwarfs—gets to live out his Oedipal fantasy of castrating the father (the Prince) and fucking the young mother (Snow White).

²⁵In this quote, a truism beloved by the Danish, Blixen was probably paraphrasing her own story “A Consolatory Tale,” in which she writes: “‘My master,’ said Fath, ‘you and I, the rich and the poor of this world, are two locked caskets, of which each contains the key to the other.’” See Isak Dinesen, “A Consolatory Tale,” in *Winter's Tales* (New York: Random House, 1942), 312.

²⁶ Letter from Karen Blixen to her sister Ellen Dahl from 1923, later published in *Isak Dinesen: Letters from Africa, 1914-1931*, ed. Frans Lassen, trans. Anne Born (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 163.

To me, it seems like McCarthy is stuck in some fairy tale, where women are not “real people,” but only projections of the prejudice and superstition of a male fantasy.

I wonder what Clara Driscoll might have thought of this monstrous daughter, inhabiting her garden today?

Come to Mama...maybe?

We will leave that question hanging in the air as we walk round to the front of the villa. Wave hallo to Tom Friedman's big friendly giant as you walk past him toward the far end of the lawn. Take a seat near the fountain, where you have a good view of Ursula von Rydingsvard's *Luna*. You may continue listening as you walk over, but take care as you cross the road.

Track 9: Ursula von Rydingsvard, *Luna*

*Hey, Hey, Hey,
The end is near
On a good day you can see the end from here,
But I won't go back now though the way is clear
I will stay for the remainder.*²⁷

On the ovular front lawn of the upper garden—the beautiful one—stands a rugged beacon. It looks almost like a relic or a prehistoric fossil: as if it were always here, waiting for everything around it to peel away and reveal manicured lawns, parking lots, gravel paths, flowerbeds, benches, pergolas, pagodas, gazebos.

In much the same way, Devils Tower was there, out in Wyoming, waiting (if we dig this kind of animism) to cool down from hot mess to hard rock, for the volcano containing it to rain away, like a mold revealing the sculpture within. Waiting for dinosaurs to be replaced by mammals, for nature to be replaced by culture, for civilization to roll in, first in the shape of Lakota Indians worshipping at the site, and then: settlers moving west, on horseback, by wagon, by train, plane, and automobile, cattle truck and helicopter—what is known as progress.

Ursula von Rydingsvard and her family moved west themselves, in the wake of a catastrophe at first advertised as progress—Volkswagen, Autobahn und Lebensraum—the World War II.

Born in 1942 in a refugee camp in Deensen, Germany, little Ursula spent her early childhood in the wooden barracks of eight different camps across the country. In 1950, her Ukrainian father and Polish mother brought their seven children to the United States.

Adverse to (self) pity, von Rydingsvard is not one to delve on these early memories.

*'I don't want people to think it is the key to understanding my work,' she says. 'I think there's more to the work than that.'*²⁹

²⁷ Joanna Newsom, "On a Good Day," *Have One On Me* (Drag City Records, 2010).

Insofar as the key to her work is to be found in her biography, a formative moment would have been her move to New York—newly divorced and accompanied by her infant daughter Ursula Anne—to study sculpture at Columbia University.

Like any artist arriving in New York City in the early 1970s, she had to measure herself against the dominant style of the time: Minimalism. Pioneered by artists like Dan Flavin and Donald Judd, it had an almost industrial look, employing materials like Corten steel and fluorescent lights.

Von Rydingsvard says of her encounter:

*I thought the Minimalists were interesting, but I would get pissed at them for washing themselves of all emotion, including sexuality. They were so even and almost inhuman.*³⁰

In contrast, her own sculptures are created organically: through a labor-intensive process of stacking and carving cedar blocks, swirling and bulging forms are created, destroyed, and reconfigured, until settling, like sediment of sorts, in a stable, fixed, form. Around such a form a flexible, soft mold is built and within it, the sculpture is cast. For this, von Rydingsvard often uses bronze, or in this case polyurethane resin.

The sculpture has an internal light source and glows in the dark with a lunar luminescence. I guess this is where it got its name: *Luna*, Latin for moon, both the heavenly body itself and the goddess who personifies it.

Like her namesake, the piece also acquires its glow from the rays of the sun. Although a polymer resin, the way the material breaks the light is reminiscent of a large crystal, like Devils Tower.

Did you know that Devils Tower is made of phonolite porphyry?

²⁹ Julia Halperin, "Last Artist Standing," *BKLYNR* Issue 8, 18 July 2013, <http://bklynr.com/ursula-von-rydingsvard-will-be-the-last-artist-in-bushwick/> (accessed 10 November 2015)

³⁰ Ibid.

*Porphyry refers to its texture, large crystals of feldspar embedded in a mass of smaller crystals. Phonolite refers to the ringing of the rock when a small slab is struck, and its ability to reflect sound.*³¹

Phonolite? I like the ring of that. It makes me wonder if some distant echo of the sound of times passing still resonates within the rock?

Like you can hear the ocean when you put a conch shell to your ear.

You cannot, in fact—what you hear is the sound of your blood rushing through your veins, amplified in the echo chamber created by the combined cavities of your inner ear and the conch shell—but then again: I wonder if that is one and the same? Time passing.

In the microcosm that is the garden, von Rydingsvard's sculpture is the nocturnal pendant to the two suns—Monika Sosnowska's rising and Nancy Holt's setting—measuring the passing time in discrete intervals and demarcations.

A human life is just one such interval.

Our time together is nearly over, please walk over to the gatehouse, for the final part of *The Mothernist's Audio Guide to Laguna Gloria*.

³¹ See the National Park Service's information on Devils Tower, <http://www.nps.gov/deto/learn/index.htm> (accessed 4 January 2016).

Track 10: Lise Haller Baggesen's *Mothernism*:

*I saw a life and I called it mine
I saw it drawn so clear and fine
And I had begun to fill in all the lines
Right down to what we'd name her.*³²

I named her *Leeba*, and I figured she would be some kind of warrior queen, so I made that “Queen Leeba.” I filled in all the lines to make her a mix between a disco diva and a Scandinavian proto-feminist, with some Venus of Willendorf sex magik thrown in for good measure. I willed her to be fierce, hysterical, and voluptuous, in all the right places. I figured she would be braver than I; that she would speak of things I did not dare.

Things like, why is “Mother” such a persona non grata in the art world, and why is motherhood–still–feminism’s unfinished business?

I invented Queen Leeba to speak on my behalf—or perhaps more accurately, to give me the courage to speak on my own behalf—of my experience, in and out of the world of art and academia, of mothering in the twenty-first century. The result is a compilation of letters from one mother to her dear daughter, sister, and mother, mapping out divergent paths of an emotional journey, traversing contested territories where art, feminism, and motherhood overlap and, sometimes, collide.

As is often the case the myth and the corporeality of the experience diverge at crucial points in the road.

As long as (Western) feminism skirts around an issue, which in one way or another affects most (if not all) the world’s female population, by cutting it down to a question of “destiny” vs. “choice,” we may have come a long way, baby, but we are not there yet.

The pushback I experienced while enrolled in the Master’s program for Visual and Critical Studies at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago inspired me to write my thesis, followed by a book, on the subject of *Mothernism*.

³² Joanna Newsom, “On a Good Day,” *Have One On Me* (Drag City Records, 2010).

It aimed to stake out “the mother-shaped hole in contemporary art discourse,” to define and redefine “mother’s place” within the larger cultural territory.

On a personal level, it was my wish to hand down a feminist legacy to future generations, beginning with my son’s and daughter’s generation. I believe a mother’s place is in the whole world. And, in my opinion, nothing has really happened in the world until it has happened in the art world, which is why I decided that the art world would be the place where Queen Leeba would pitch her tent and camp out until the battle is won.

If motherhood, feminism, or art is something you are interested in, I invite you to come in and camp out with Queen Leeba. Take a look, and a listen, inside the Gatehouse, where *Motherism* is on view through May 22, 2016.

As Julia Hendrickson, who invited me to show my work here at Laguna Gloria, poignantly describes it: “*as audio-installation, epistolary manifesto, and party-as-form, Motherism is one twenty-first-century feminist’s affectionate call to arms.*”

Enjoy!

Love,

Lise

P.S.

I would like to thank everybody at The Contemporary Austin, who helped with the research and production of this audio guide.

I want to thank Eurythmics, Nick Cave, Led Zeppelin, Moloko, and Joanna Newsom for writing beautiful songs that make me want to sing.

And I want to thank you for listening.

Thank You Thank You Thank You!

When you are done with the audio guide please return it to the villa.