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An Open Letter from Director Kelly Baum

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Over the last two weeks, we have received several heartfelt notes expressing concern at the forthcoming deinstallation of Mary Miss's *Greenwood Pond: Double Site* (1989-1996). The matter is deeply distressing for the artist, the City, and the Art Center. As director, I too am pained about the actions we have had and still have to take. I have supported women artists and studied land and environmental art as a curator and director for a quarter century. To be pursuing the deinstallation of *Greenwood Pond: Double Site* now, just as Mary Miss is enjoying a burst of much-deserved and long-overdue critical interest, is most unfortunate. The Art Center is extremely proud to have collaborated on bringing Mary Miss's incredible project to fruition at a moment when few museums were taking these kinds of creative risks and when even fewer were directing substantial resources towards women artists.

Since caring for the art in its collection is a core responsibility of any museum, and in the interest of full transparency, I write to describe the facts and events that led to the Art Center's recent actions, which have been consistently guided by our legal and ethical responsibilities to the City and people of Des Moines. Twenty-eight years ago, the Art Center forged an unprecedented partnership between Mary Miss, the City, visionary funders, and community leaders, among them the Science Center and Des Moines Founders Garden Club, to bring *Greenwood Pond: Double Site* to fruition. This large-scale environment, nestled in and around Greenwood Pond, resulted in the revitalization of a wetlands area and brought great joy to the citizens of Des Moines. It was a major achievement on the part of Mary Miss. However, from its earliest days, there have been documented problems with the work's structural integrity. Concerns were raised about the life expectancy of the wood used for its design while it was still in process. The sunken trough, a core element of *Greenwood Pond: Double Site*, has struggled to function as it should. Exposure to both water and extreme weather, floods included, have hastened the work's decline. After catastrophic damage in 2011, Mary Miss and the Art Center engaged in candid, undoubtedly difficult conversations about the structural, material, and financial challenges associated with keeping *Greenwood Pond: Double Site* open. Together, they acknowledged that a moment would likely come when it would have to be removed from Greenwood Park. Indeed, Mary Miss recommended in a letter from July 2012 to the Art Center's then-director that they agree to deinstall the work if it was not feasible to repair it. Instead, stopgap measures supported by a partially successful fundraising campaign launched by the Art Center were taken to extend its life as much as possible.

In October 2023, the Art Center commissioned a report from a structural engineer, one of seven contracted over the last 28 years from conservators, structural engineers, and landscape architects. This new report documented severe structural deterioration in key areas of *Greenwood Pond: Double Site*. To protect the public and ensure human safety, it was strongly recommended we close all of the targeted areas immediately, which we did after informing Mary Miss, our Board President, and the City of Des Moines. Shortly thereafter, we deinstalled the most unstable of the three sections. We will deinstall the remaining two, which are still enclosed by fencing, later this year. Unfortunately, many of the remaining areas of *Greenwood Pond: Double Site* are made from the same ephemeral materials as those already down or coming down. These materials have surpassed their lifespan by many years and have been eroded by the water in which they have been immersed, likewise by their exposure to Iowa's severe weather. Ultimately, a substantial portion of the overall work is currently in need of or will soon be in need of major intervention. Reasonable maintenance is no longer sufficient. Now, with large areas of *Greenwood Pond: Double Site* both unsalvageable and dangerous, it is necessary to take the step both the artist and the Art Center anticipated twelve years ago.

The Art Center has devoted its capable staff and considerable resources towards caring for *Greenwood Pond: Double Site* for 28 years. Besides the initial investment of nearly \$1.5 million dollars, the Art Center has directed approximately \$1,000,000 to the repair and maintenance of *Greenwood Pond: Double Site* since it opened, some of those dollars secured through the 2014-2015 campaign, others allocated through its annual operating budget. Unfortunately, the work has been battered by the environment. Age and climate have finally won. What many envisioned to be permanent has proven to be ephemeral. Now *Greenwood Pond: Double Site* can only survive if it is re-designed, re-engineered, and re-made and if additional staff are hired and an endowment for its perpetual maintenance is established. This is not remotely feasible for a modestly resourced museum like the Art Center.

I appreciate the desire to see Mary's work exist in perpetuity. For some, *Greenwood Pond: Double Site* is a site of refuge and recreation. For others, it is a special place into which care and labor has been poured, as is the case for the Des Moines Founders Garden Club and the Des Moines Parks and Recreation Department, whose members have tended to the landscape around the work since 1996. For many, *Greenwood Pond: Double Site* also exemplifies the very best of land and environmental art, a movement of great consequence to art history. Paradoxically, precarity is and has been foundational to land and environmental art. By its very definition, land art exists in delicate tension with the outdoor environment—in the case of *Greenwood Pond: Double Site*, with Iowa's unpredictable, extreme environment. The very context from which *Greenwood Pond: Double Site* derives its meaning and sustenance is also what imperils it. That fact, though, does not make the Art Center's decision any easier, either for us, the City, or the artist.

With sincere regret but strong resolve, we will continue to partner with the City of Des Moines and other stakeholders to safely dismantle *Greenwood Pond: Double Site*, beginning with the most hazardous areas, and to restore the impacted section of Greenwood Park. What lies ahead is both an end and a beginning. We look forward to honoring the legacy of Mary Miss and the lasting impact of *Greenwood Pond: Double Site*. We will continue to support and empower women artists through our acquisitions, programs, and exhibitions, as we have for decades. Finally, we believe there is much to be learned about art, climate, and collaborative, publicly sited commissions from this experience, and we are eager to pursue these conversations.

Our museum was built by and for our community—thus our unique name, the Des Moines Art Center. Today we have great reason to be proud of our collections, exhibitions, educational programming, art school, and, most importantly, the road ahead. All institutions learn as they grow, and this has indeed been a learning experience for the Art Center, as we enter the last quarter of our centennial. I greatly appreciate the support we have received from our staff, community partners, and Board of Trustees as we navigate these difficult decisions and balance our many overlapping responsibilities. I and the entire team at the Art Center are dedicated to continuing our mission to connect people and art by promoting curiosity and critical thinking and by offering opportunities to both imagine and create.

Kelly Baum
John and Mary Pappajohn Director
Des Moines Art Center

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