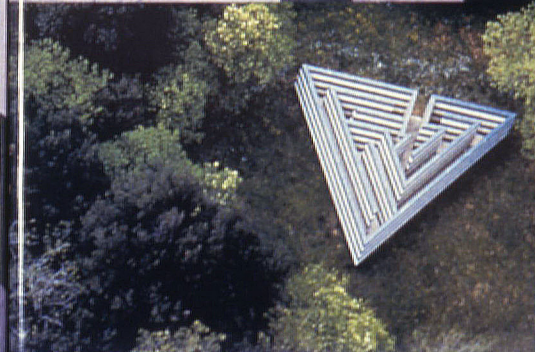
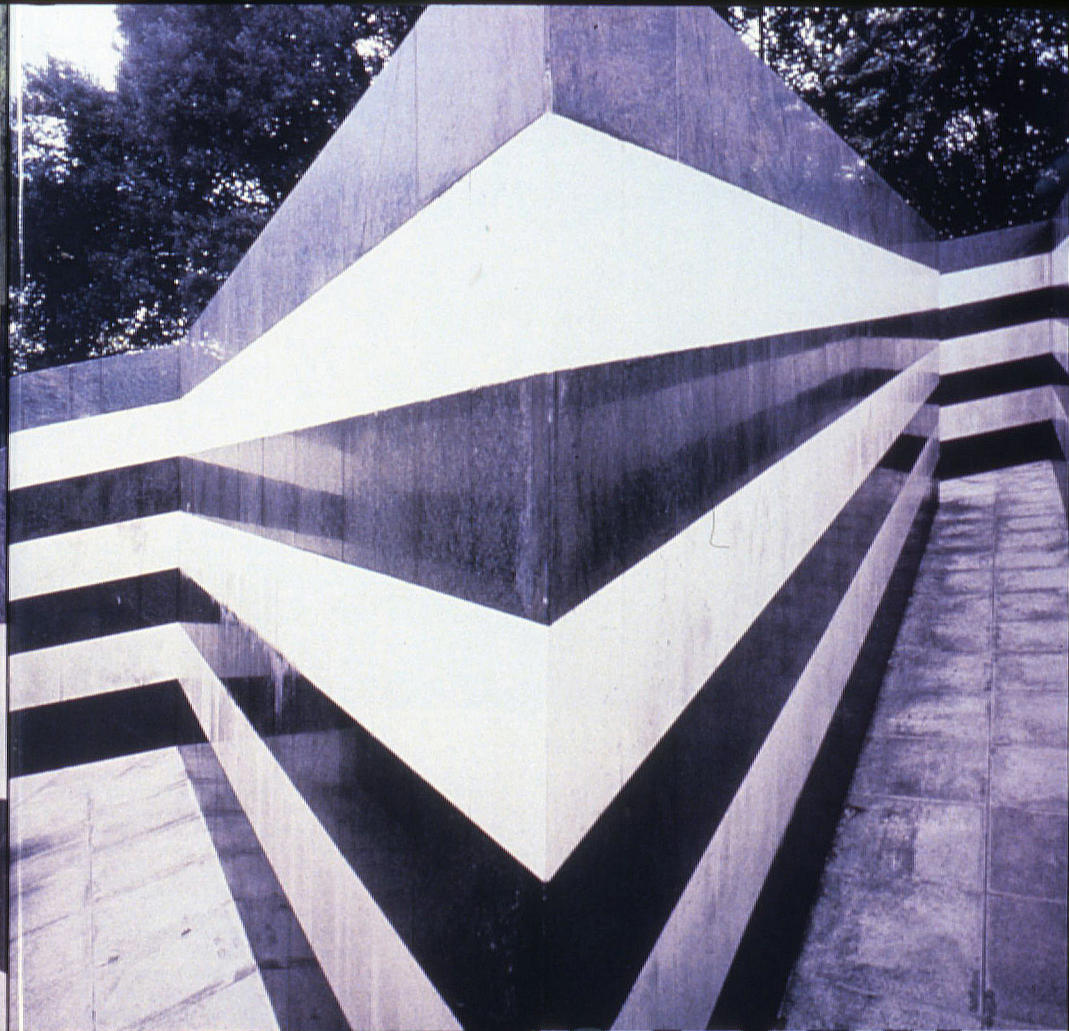
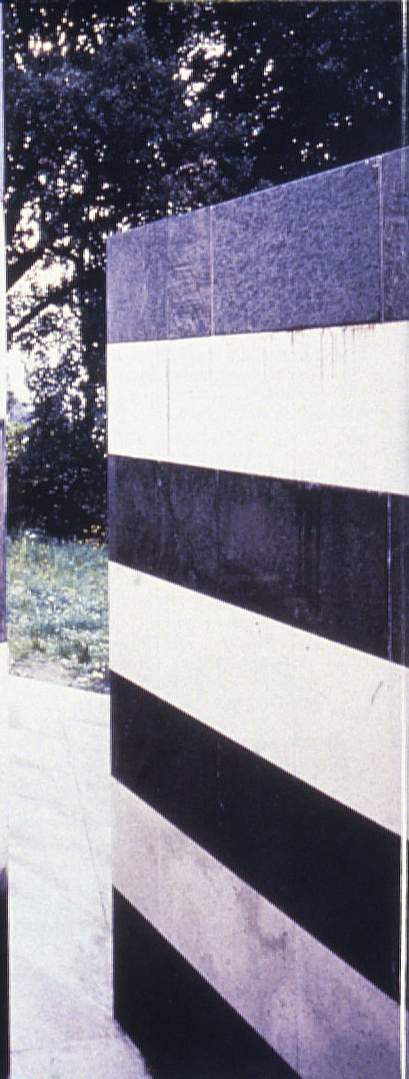
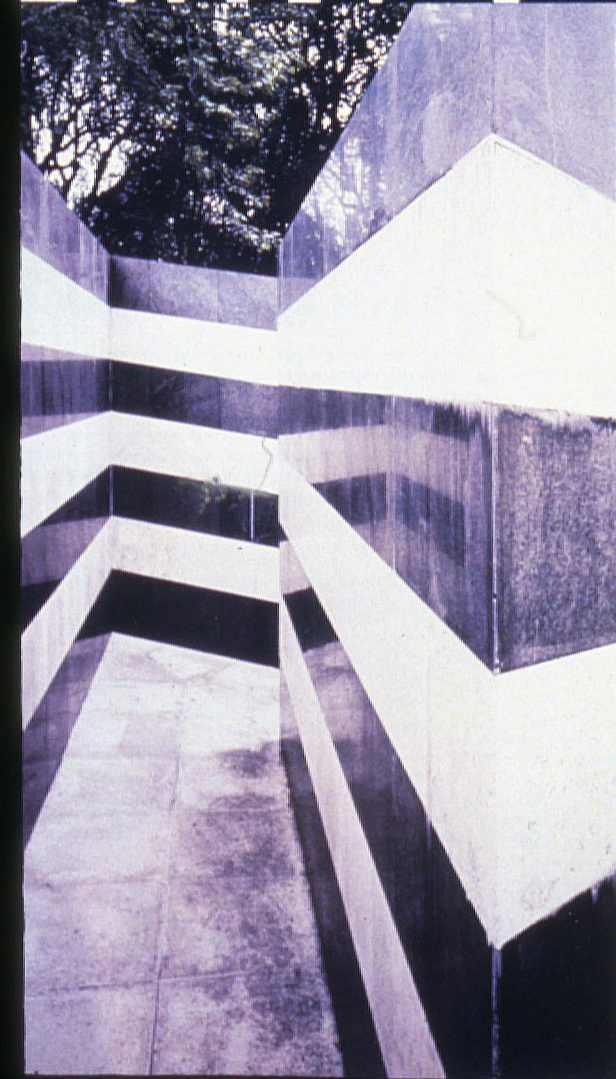
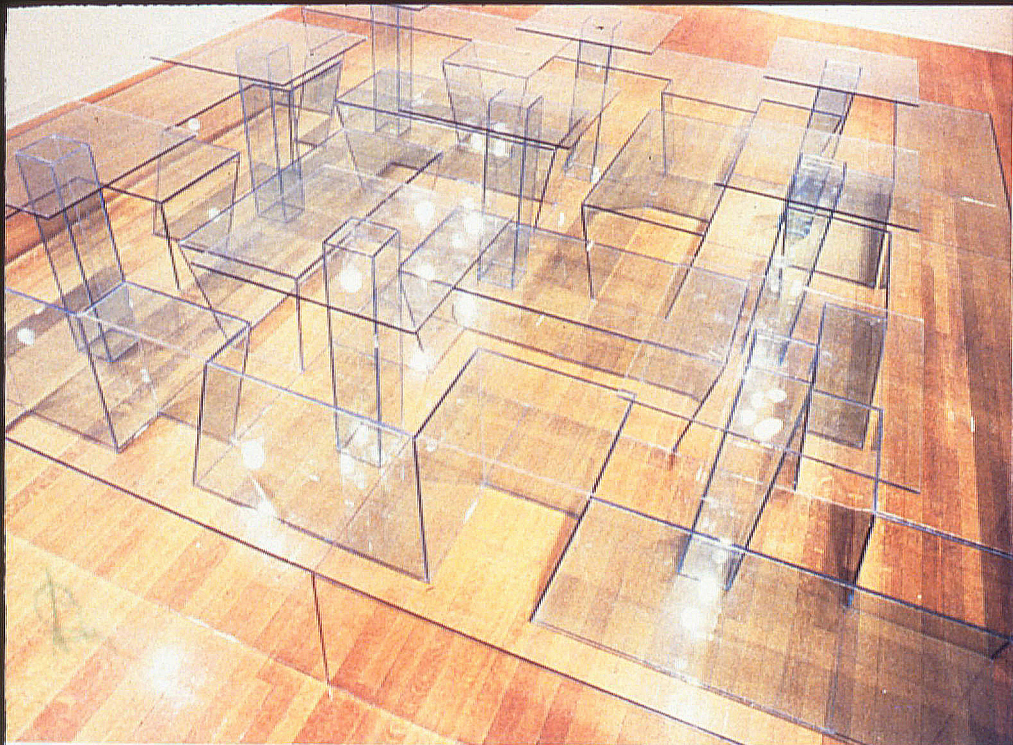


# MAZE



# & LABY RINTH

Anne Barclay Morgan



## Labyrinth and Maze: Reviving Ancient Forms

Over the last three decades a surprising number of visual artists have designed outdoor and indoor structures based on the concepts of the labyrinth and maze. Painters, musicians and writers have also been intrigued by these forms.<sup>1</sup> A recent compact disc by the group Dead Can Dance is titled *Into the Labyrinth*. The title *Labyrinth* is also given to a fantastical Jim Henson movie starring David Bowie. And Jorge Luis Borges made a literary labyrinth the focus of his seminal short story *The Garden of Forking Paths*, where the linearity of the past, present and future are confounded and directional choices reflect opposing outcomes.

Unlike representations of the concept of chaos, labyrinths and mazes, while confusing and chaotic, embody a pattern that must be discovered. Though these structures disorient, confound, engulf and capture us, there is at least one way out. Labyrinths are thus an apt metaphor for the human condition, eliciting self-reflection on the difficulties, challenges and choices we encounter.

A walk through the constricted pathways of a labyrinth or maze awakens our awareness of space. They can also pry open our subconscious, heighten our intuitive faculties, or even facilitate a sense of proximity to the Divine. Meandering through these complex structures, one has a sensation of disorientation, of not seeing the overall pattern or future resolution, resulting in a keen awareness of the present.

Despite the diversity of design, the complex structures of mazes and labyrinths are easily recognizable? The earliest known examples of labyrinths date from the northern European Bronze Age and from the Twelfth Dynasty in Ancient Egypt. Carved or painted on doorposts and rock faces, they were used for ceremonies, rituals, magical protection and ornament. Ancient peoples of Sweden used stone labyrinths to entrap bad spirits or for magic to protect fishermen at sea. A more recent folk custom in Finland involves a virgin standing at the center of a maze, waiting to dance with the first man who reaches her.

In the Christian tradition, mazes became a symbol of pilgrimage, meditation and prayer, of perdition and salvation. Secular garden mazes of knots and flowers began in medieval times and flourished in the 16th century. They were also made of floor tiles in medieval churches, as in the nave of Chartres Cathedral. The puzzle maze—which seeks to confuse with its gamelike qualities—is a relatively recent development, with new variations developed in Victorian times. Hedge mazes, which were first made in France and Italy, became the preferred form by the end of the 17th century.

preceding spread: Robert Morris, *Labyrinth*, 1982. Marble. Collection Giuliano Gori. Courtesy Leo Castelli, opposite: Vito Acconci, *Maze Table*, 1985. Glass, 2 1/2 x 12 x 12 ft. above: Willie Cole, *The Elegba Principle*, 1994. Installation view (detail), Capp Street Project. Photo: Ben Blackwell.

The most famous labyrinth of legend was the Minoan structure on Crete that housed the beastly offspring of woman and bull, the Minotaur. Only by using a thread that Ariadne procured to retrace his steps could Theseus emerge alive. This fascination with the threat of being condemned to eternal confusion is balanced by the hope of redemption, of finding a way out. What is gained in the process is not only one's life, but a deeper self-awareness.

Some contemporary labyrinths borrow ancient patterns and materials such as pebbles or boulders, laid tile, cut turf, walls or hedges. One such example completed in June 1994 is the *Earth Maze* at the Prairie Peace Park in Lincoln, Nebraska, designed by California artist Alex Champion, a former biochemist turned maze-builder. The overall dimensions are 84 x 93 feet, and the single pathway from the entrance, through the 2-foot mounds stretches 927 feet long. The pattern follows that of the classical seven-circuit unicursal labyrinth, known as a Cretan labyrinth; with a cross at the entrance the pathway winds through seven nested, open circles.<sup>3</sup> Billed as one of the largest labyrinths in North America, the mounds of *Earth Maze* have since been planted with wildflowers.

Andy Goldsworthy also worked directly with the earth and landscape in his 1989 *Maze* near Leadgate in County Durham, Great Britain. As a true collaborator with nature, he gently transformed a two-acre site by creating steep concentric walls between narrow paths. Whether on foot or on bicycle, the work feels intimate and of a human scale. Sunk into the ground, *Maze* engenders a non-threatening situation for the pedestrian; a sense of being cradled or protected by the earth.

Robert Morris's *Labyrinth* (1982) is surrounded by trees in the verdant landscape of the Gori Collection in Pistoia, Italy. Unlike mazes made of earth, hedges or wood, Morris's structure is built to endure, with a stone floor and high, solid walls. Based on an equilateral triangle, the two-meter-high walls—made of alternating bands of dark green and white marble—form a single circuit; as in Champion's maze, one has to retrace one's steps to get out. With a narrow opening and a steep pathway, the maze is profoundly disorienting with striking optical illusions. The work raises questions about our sense of equilibrium, order and knowledge of the center.

It is particularly fitting that a number of artists, including Morris, have repeatedly returned to these ancient forms, just as many in our modern society have turned to ancient archetypes and symbols to find new meaning and inspiration. Based on a series of labyrinths he conceived in the late '60s, Patrick Ireland's installation *Labyrinth* for the Elvehjem Museum of Art was the largest and most complex of his designs. Unlike traditional patterns with walls of equal height, the wood and drywall installation had low outer walls, allowing the



viewer to see and be seen. The walls of the nested squares rose to nine feet in the center, thereby hiding the viewers from sight. Yet the blue-colored structure appeared particularly soothing. Like that of Morris, Ireland's design is ultimately intended to be realized outdoors. Ireland's rope installations—such as his 1992 rope drawing for the Elvehjem Museum, where a transparent maze was delineated by obliquely placed ropes—also grew out of his "Concept of the Labyrinth as a Straight Line," which envelops the viewer just like a traditional labyrinth.

Alice Aycock's first major work was a 32-foot circular *Maze* in 1972 on a farm in New Kingston, Pennsylvania, composed of six-

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foot-high rings of wood planks. Her desire for the spectator to experience temporary dislocation in space and entrapment was inspired in part by Bruce Nauman's earlier "Corridor Pieces." Many of her subsequent works have had the complexities of a labyrinth, as in the 1986 *The Glass Bead Game: Circling Round the Ka'ba*, where the glass bead becomes our surrogate and traverses tortuous pathways through multiple levels of circular grooves.

Shifting between interior and exterior with characteristic ease, Vito Acconci first produced *Maze Table* out of glass in 1985. Nine square glass tables were set in a square, with a glass bench running



from table to table and entries at the corners allowing persons to slide onto the bench. Rather than walk a maze, here the person or persons slide around from table to table, devising a dynamic re-patterning of relationships. Two of Acconci's public art proposals also involve reformulations of maze structures. In 1990 for Houston's Autry Park in front of a mental hospital, he conceived a park separated from its surroundings by numerous walls set in complex angles forming trapezoids, squares and rectangles. While reminiscent of walled Florentine gardens, his proposal stressed unusual juxtapositions. In his 1994 *Garden Project for Metro-Tech Center* in Brooklyn (currently under construction), he envisioned a garden for the body, with walls made of ivy-covered chain-link four feet off the ground. Traversing the pathways that branch through the maze, the adult will be seen at chest height and have the sensation of walking through a sea of ivy.

Environmental artist Alan Sonfist also experimented with labyrinthine forms in his 1993 *Maze of the Great Oaks of Denmark*, where he placed boulders on earth mounds in the outline of a ship, a Scandinavian icon of birth and death. The pathway leads past large boulders into the ship's interior, where an oak leaf is patterned with walkable cobblestones outlining the leaf's perimeter and veins. There, Sonfist planted a labyrinth of over 1,000 young oak trees, an endangered species that used to flourish in the area.

The labyrinth can also provide an apt metaphor for the condition of multiculturalism. At San Francisco's Capp Street Project this

spring, Willie Cole installed *The Elegba Principle* using a maze of wooden doors. The viewer was continually faced with a choice between three doors, all randomly labeled with words and phrases such as "sexual security," "Chinese food," "smoke," "desire." An accompanying video shows progress through the maze at normal speed and then speeded up like balls in a machine. In an adjacent space, Cole contrasted a crossroads—a more open meditative space—with his maze structure. Both areas contain Voodoo metaphors. In Yoruba cosmology Elegba is the "Guardian of Doorways," representing choice and the responsibility for one's decisions. From our cultural context, Cole enlisted two lawn jockey statues to signify Elegba. Typically placed outside of homes or at crossroads, these statues were painted the colors of Elegba—red, black and white. Several other artists have used doors or gateways to create mazes and labyrinths, including Walter Gudek in his ongoing project *Unlimited Dimensions* begun in 1960 and Keiko Hara's installation *100 Gates* at Tacoma Art Museum in 1994.

In a complex and compelling installation, Maria Brito created an interior labyrinth, *Merely a Player*, in 1993. The visitor steps onto a platform and into a seemingly inviting living room with books in English and Spanish next to a rumpold sofa. Gradually, an uneasiness sets in. A narrow passageway on the left leads to cubbyholes for masks, clothes and shoes into a labyrinthine corridor of tiny rooms.

upper left: Patrick Ireland, *Elvehjem Labyrinth*, 1992–93, wood, drywall installation, Paige Court of the Elvehjem Museum of Art; 9 x 24 x 24 ft. lower left: Lika Mutal, *Labyrinth*, 1984, Travertine, 19 1/4 x 19 1/4 x 5 in. Courtesy Nohra Haime Gallery.

upper right: Vito Acconci, *Garden Project for Metro-Tech Center*, 1994. Chain-link, steel poles, ivy and lights; 4 x 97 x 160 ft. lower right: Janine Cirincione, Brian D'Amato and Michael Ferraro, *Softworld 2.1: The Imperial Message* (grid scene), 1993–94.

Through a peep hole one can see a black-and-white video loop of a little girl trying to open doors. On the walls are partially concealed images, ladders, and a trap door seemingly leading nowhere. This revelatory work is a metaphor for Brito's own life, divulging elements of both her subconscious and conscious mind. Using a house as a metaphor for self, her interior labyrinth has a forceful relevance beyond her own history of cultural displacement and personal loss.

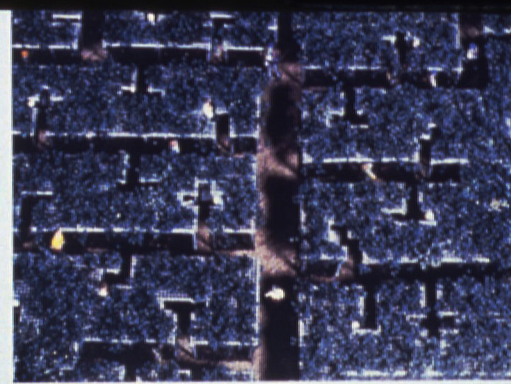
Another interior structure, Dan Graham's *Hedges and Two-Way Mirror* (1991) presents a disquieting redefinition of urban spaces. Here, the viewer's reflection overlaps with strictly confined plants, implying that we are bound by a sterile, constraining world.

Small-scale labyrinths range from Terry Fox's *The Labyrinth in Plaster* (1972) to the more recent work of Dutch-born Lika Mutal. Working in stone, she made a series of sculptures in 1984 containing rings and moving parts around a central form. In 1992, Mutal carved a labyrinth with jutting, clifflike forms and surrounding environment. Although small in scale and relatively simple in structure, they nonetheless possess a powerful character.

Labyrinths can also be formed by images or words in disembodied space. In the virtual reality game *Softworld 2.1: The Imperial Message*—produced by the 3-person team of Janine Cirincione, Brian D'Amato and Michael Ferraro during a 1993–94 artists residency at the Wexner Center for the Arts at The Ohio State University—the player has to navigate through two mazelike structures. The first maze is spawned on a blue grid out of which rise dwellings and

personages of conflicting political opinions, while the other is a yellow mazelike palace which eventually leads to a central orange structure, the "goal." The convoluted navigation through both maze spaces is complicated by the spoken words of men and women who either oppose the hidden Emperor or support him. Here the spoken words serve to confuse just as much as the structures themselves; in the yellow wall maze of the palace, one hears a female voice advise "turn right, turn left," and a male voice interjecting "she's wrong, turn left." After playing often enough, one ultimately discovers that all efforts lead to the same outcome, and one leaves with the inevitable accolade of "well done, kiddo" and the injunction to destroy the Empire.

The physical restrictions [whether real or virtual] engendered by these mazes and labyrinths confound our perceptions. This confusion must be pleasurable on some level, since we continually construct and seek out such structures. Part of their appeal is the process of revelation. When we survive them, we have a mild sense of triumph. Even when not constructed on the basic shapes of square, triangle or circle, mazes underline the importance of geometry in our sense of lived space, and how these shapes can control and disorient just as much as comfort and console. While many contemporary artists use the labyrinth and the maze not to express faith—but rather to convey the trials of passage through perception, memory, desire and



cultural patterns—these forms still capture our renewed interest in the wisdom of ancient symbolism.

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## Notes

- 1 The Festival of Contemporary Music-Performance held in March this year in Linz, Austria, was called *The Inner Ear: Music, Labyrinth, Context*, in which numerous groups created labyrinths—for example, the *Sound Labyrinth* of Karlheinz Essl and Carmen Wiederer, who combined objects with
- 2 According to Sig Lonegren in his book *Labyrinths: Ancient Myths and Modern Uses* (1991, Gothic Image Publications) the true labyrinth has only one path to the center, which one then retraces. Nigel Pennick in his book *Mazes and Labyrinths* (1990, Robert Hale; London, see p. 16) distinguishes structures that are unicursal (one path) to multicursal (multiple paths) and uses both terms, maze and labyrinth, more or less synonymously.
- 3 Some researchers think that this form developed out of the ancient Greek meander pattern (see Pennick, p. 29).

