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Many Adventures in Miniature Golf: Lilliputian Landscapes, Cultural Appropriation, and the Implications of Found Object Design

I was first introduced to the world of golf-course design by the computer game Sid Meier's *Simgolf*, which came out in 2003. After getting home from elementary school I would spend hours hunched over a computer, plotting out the ideal layout for the various holes, paths, amenities, and scenery details from which a golf resort is constituted (Figure 1). Instantly I was a golf-course design fanatic. At some point, my interest in regular sized golf courses diminished in scale, attracted by the diminutive, playful, and fantasy driven aspects of miniature-golf courses.

I love miniature golf with a passion which borders on obsession: the kitschy aesthetics and lilliputian scaling, the prominence of goofy hazards and gimmicks, the linear gameplay, the feeling of integration between player, club, and ball while putting, the haptic response resulting from a ball rolling over a given surface (most notably astroturf and carpeting), the satisfying clicking sound of a ball sinking neatly into a cup/hole, I love it all. As of late, my preoccupation with miniature-golf course design has remained a salient source of inspiration for my artistic creation. Given my interest in all things miniature golf, determining the three topics most pertinent to my Saint Mary's Project, *Many Adventures in Miniature Golf*, was a challenging undertaking. Ultimately I chose the three topics which I felt were most influential on the construction, content, and interpretation of my project. These topics include: miniature golf holes and courses as purely leisure-driven created spaces, the game's longstanding tradition of appropriating and recycling various design themes and motifs, as well as the implementation and implications of using found objects as the material basis for sculptural creation.

Many Adventures in Miniature Golf is a collection of experimental miniature-golf hole designs (as opposed to full courses) in the form of conceptual drawings and interactive sculptures. The project represents the culmination of a year of study into the world of commercial and artistic miniature-golf installations; while firmly situated in the realm of gallery art, the exhibit is also meant to demonstrate conceptual miniature-golf designs for application by commercial miniature-golf operations. I want audiences interacting with my works to be intrigued, entertained, and inspired; fully immersed in the created spaces, both real and imagined, in which my holes exist.

My conceptual drawings are produced on regular paper using a combination of drawing implements, such as pens, markers, paint, ink and calligraphy pens, stamps, and more. My interactive sculptures are constructed using a combination of found materials, lumber, and hardware. Whereas the inherent physicality of my sculptures serves to constrain the breadth and depth of their design, my drawings tend to be more superfluous and fantastical, their content only constrained by the limitations of my imagination and technical drawing skill.

Personally, manufacturing *Many Adventures of Miniature Golf* was a cathartic experience. Each drawing and sculpture I produced acted as a means of cataloging the conflagration of miniature-golf designs which frequent my thoughts, translated into forms which can be readily shared with others. The creation of my drawings and sculptures is driven by freeform experimentation, organized by a master list containing past and potential miniature-golf hole and course design themes, as well as individual hazards and obstacles. Typically I complete a drawing in a single sitting unless I wish to add color with paints, which might then call for several revisitations. My sculptures are fully interactive, meaning they can be both viewed *and* played. Because of this, I always draft several renditions of a hole's layout before construction in

order to optimize its functional accessibility and properly allocate material resources. Once I have established a hole's general layout, I then take liberties in the design of its various components during the actual construction phase, a process which can require up to several days of continuous work.

In the simplest terms, a miniature --or standard sized-- golf hole consist of the area between and directly surrounding a putting green. The area of the green is determined by the gameplay structures essential to miniature-golf: the starting tee and the finishing cup/hole. As described by art-historian Nina Garfinkle, golfing spaces are "specialized forms of enormous landscape garden[s in] which the player must move through a space, not just as an observer of elemental nature, but as a man-with-a mission."¹ Basically, miniature-golf holes and course are created spaces, defined by their gameplay narrative and bucolic connotations; in this sense they can be regarded as a form of landscape architecture.

Miniature-golf holes and courses are landscapes created for leisurely gaming; this means they can be categorized into the third nature of designed landscapes. Landscape historian John Dixon Hunt attempted to sort landscape architecture into three distinct natures, determined by physical alterations on a given environment made to better suit human need and want. The first nature is that of wilderness, or unaltered elemental nature. The second nature is cultivation, and consists of alterations made to an environment for the purposes of human survival. The third nature is a landscape altered to satisfy purely aesthetic or leisurely ends.² I place spaces created for miniature golfing into the third nature of landscape design because they do not feed, clothe, shelter, or protect; miniature golf is not essential for human survival. The game itself is highly aestheticized, a superfluous construct of play. As such, the concept drawings and interactive

¹ Nina Garfinkel, "MINIATURE GOLF & "PUTT-MODERNISM," *Art Papers* 17 (1993): 33.

² Ian H. Thompson, *Landscape Architecture: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 38.

sculptures I made for *Many Adventures in Miniature Golf* are afforded a whimsy and freedom of design not shared by essential, second nature landscapes.

I like to imagine miniature golf holes and courses as micro-sized worlds; integrated into a given landscape, and explored through the gameplay process. This definition can be directly connected to my interactive sculptures because they can be physically explored through play. Despite their static quality, my drawings can also be explored in a similar manner; I intended for viewer to play out drawn holes in their imagination. This intention is directly highlighted in several of my drawings, such as *Roswell Incident Trailer Park* (Figure 2) and *Roswell* (Figure 3), and, which feature guiding notations like arrows and chevrons to better help viewers navigate the layout of those holes.

The appropriation or recycling of various themes and motifs found in popular and foreign cultures, as well as previous miniature-golf installations, has long been a dominant trend in both the commercial and artistic realms of miniature-golf design. Globalization, mass media, and advances in communication technology have led to the creation of the ideal social climate for rampant cultural appropriation. Bicycle blogger BikeSnobNYC has commented on the prevalence of this culture of cultural appropriation:

The sheer degree to which people use products and cultural references to express themselves has reached a bewildering level of sophistication...There's not a single brand, style, lifestyle, or art form that isn't readily accessible, and there's no limit to the energy people have for uncovering new ones in order to appropriate them for the purposes of self-expression...While constantly strip-mining popular culture in search of identities to

appropriate and products to buy can be bad for the cultural environment, it can also yield...genuinely important discovery.³

Since its rise to popularity around the start of the Great Depression, miniature-golf designers have blatantly appropriated various themes and motifs, incorporating them into the narrative structures, hazards, and scenery details of their created landscapes; these design choices have earned miniature golf the title of “the great American trash sport of the 20th century.”⁴ In his book, *Miniature Golf*, photographer John Margolis provided a detailed history of the game while documenting his travels to miniature-golf courses nationwide. Margolis’ photograph selection in *Miniature Golf* indicated his acute awareness of the level of appropriation prevalent within the world of miniature-golf design. Margolis’ photographs of holes range thematically, from kitschy symbols of Americana, storybook characters, and fantasy landscapes, to potentially offense appropriated exotic landscapes and images, like Easter Island Moai heads, Chinese junks, Egyptian pyramids, and Buddhist iconography. Margolis even devoted entire pages of *Miniature Golf* to photographs of the most popular recycled miniature golf hazards nationwide, most notably the windmill (Figure 4), the lighthouse, and the castle.

Many of the concept drawings featured in *Many Adventures in Miniature Golf* reflect the flagrant appropriation and recycling of ideas prevalent in the commercial and artistic realms of miniature golf, as depicted in *Miniature Golf. Tribal Tower* (Figure 5) and *In the Shadow of the Temple Complex* (Figure 6) are two of my drawings which depict appropriated exotic landscapes, thematically oriented around the iconography of various groups of Native Americans. Other drawings of mine, like the aforementioned *Roswell Incident Trailer Park* (Figure 2) and *Roswell*

³ BikeSnobNYC, *Bike Snob: Systematically and Mercilessly Realigning the World of Cycling* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2010), 128.

⁴ John Margolis, *Miniature Golf* (New York: Cross River Press, 1987), 82.

(Figure 3), play upon the regional tropes and qualities of the American Southwest, featuring unidentified flying objects, crash sites, trailer parks, and warm colored, rocky landscapes. In my drawings *Double Windmill Barn* (Figure 7), *Lighthouse on the Sound* (Figure 8), and *Lighthouse on the Bay* (Figure 9), I pay homage to most popular recycled hazards of miniature golf, just as Margolis did in *Miniature Golf*. The first drawing is my own take on the classic windmill; the latter two are holes in which lighthouses are predominant course elements.

My interactive sculptures also aim to connect to the prevalence of appropriation found in the world of miniature-golf design, but due to the use of found objects in their construction, it is the found objects themselves which tend to come under the greatest amount of scrutiny when attempting to derive meaning from the holes. This is because once an object is employed as a found object, that object is denied the ability to fulfill its intended purpose, which calls even greater attention to the object's aforementioned purpose and its current function within an artwork. Artist Chris Burden was known for using found objects in his sculptures. He claimed to use found objects like toys, "the tools used to inculcate children into adults,"⁵ because they reflected society at large. Burden's sculptural installation, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1981)(Figure 10), depicted an imaginary war between three nations and their armies, situated within a miniature landscape. The installation was constructed out of found objects like toy cars and soldiers, bullets, and potted plants in order to communicate the disconnect between playing wargames as a child and the harsh realities of actual warfare. *Metropolis II* (2011)(Figure 11), was an one of Burden's installations in the form of an expansive kinetic machine. Again, Burden used found objects for the creation of his work, putting toy cars and model trains on continuous

⁵ John Pavlus, "How Chris Burden Created Metropolis II, A Tiny City Where 1,100 Toy Cars Zoom," July 5, 2011, <http://www.fastcodesign.com/1664409/how-chris-burden-created-metropolis-ii-a-tiny-city-where-1100-toy-cars-zoom>.

looping tracks through a city constructed of recycled materials in order to emulate and consider the fast pace of life in the modern city. *Vapor Waves* (Figure 12) is one of my own interactive sculptures. For the creation of this hole I used outdated forms of consumable media, such as vinyl records, floppy disks, compact disks, and cassette tapes as building materials to comment the rapid evolution of modern technology and artifacts of technological obsolescence which are left in its wake.

Found objects, in addition to their inherent reference to society at large, are central to my interactive sculptures because they are accessible within my financial and locational limitations. Both of the holes I exhibited in *Many Adventures in Miniature Golf* were made out of found objects obtained from easy to access sources: thrift stores, dumpsters, the basement of my childhood home, as well as in the form of gifts from others. In the economic downturn which followed the onset of the Great Depression, “regulation miniature golf courses [became]...too expensive for most to afford.”⁶ In order to cope the newly imposed financial constraints, builders of miniature-golf holes and courses nationwide began to create “rinkie-dink” style miniature-golf designs, using found objects such as “tires, gutters, barrels, and pipes”⁷ as major hazards and obstacles. My interactive sculpture, *Automotive Adventures* (Figure 13), is a nod to rinkie-dink miniature-golf design and the constraints which defined this method of construction; the hole’s central feature is an old white wall tire, found without personal cost on the side of a local forested trail.

In summation, *Many Adventures in Miniature Golf* is the manifestation of a year of studying the commercial and artistic realms of miniature-golf design and my own personal love for all things miniature golf. The exhibit uses both conceptual drawings and interactive

⁶ Ransom Riggs, “The Zany History of Mini Golf,” *Mental Floss*, September 10, 2008. <http://mentalfloss.com/article/19567/zany-history-mini-golf>.

⁷ Ibid.

sculptures to explore golf oriented landscapes created solely for the purposes of entertainment, the rampant appropriation and recycling of themes and motifs within the world of miniature-golf design, as well as the unavoidable implications of using found objects in sculptural works and their innate characteristics.

Figures



(Figure 1): A screenshot from Sid Meier's *SimGolf*



(Figure 2): Roswell Incident Trailer Park



(Figure 3): *Roswell*



(Figure 4): A collection of windmills in *Miniature Golf*



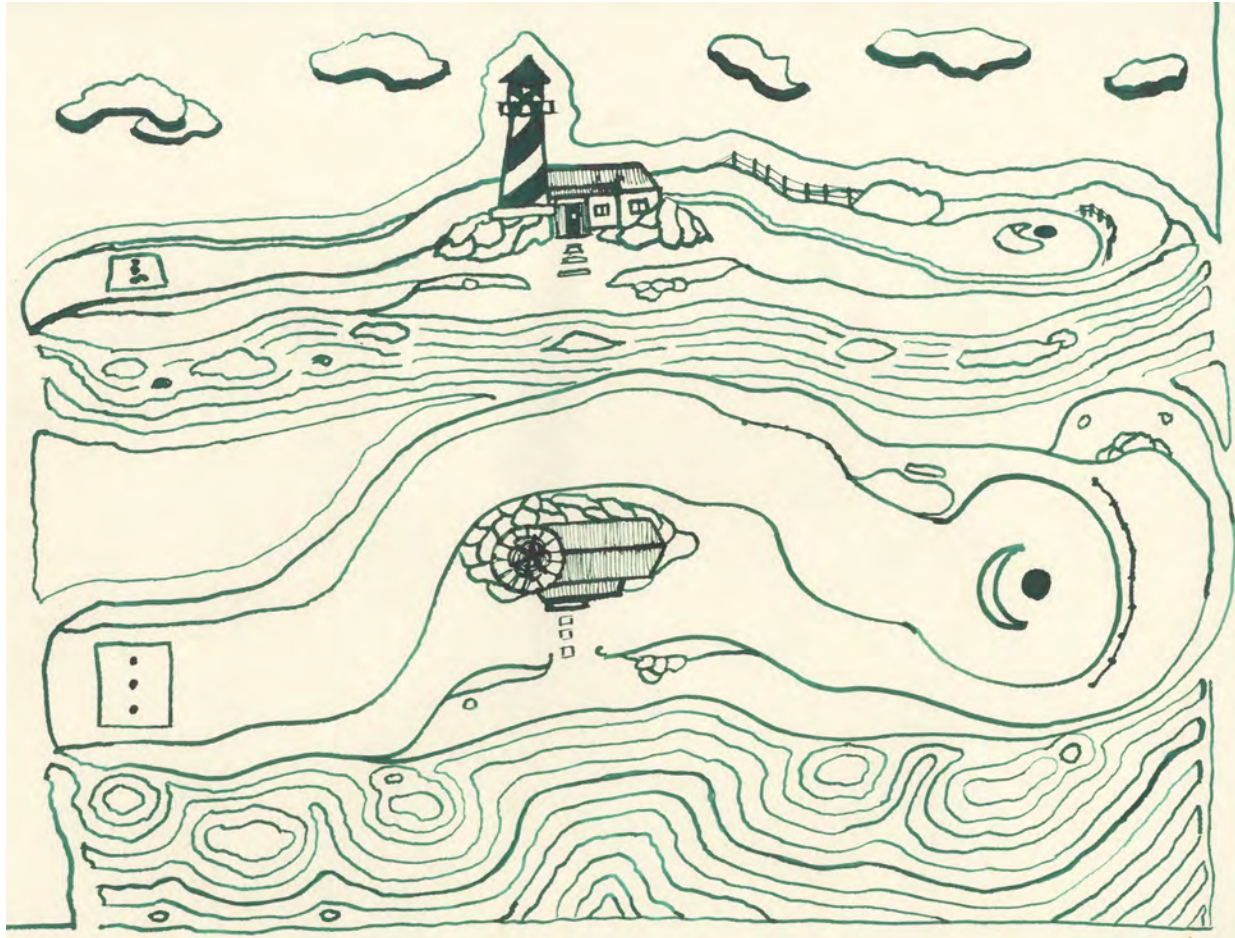
(Figure 5): *Tribal Tower*



(Figure 6): *In the Shadow of the Temple Complex*



(Figure 7): *Double Windmill Barn*



(Figure 8): *Lighthouse on the Sound*



(Figure 9): *Lighthouse on the Bay*

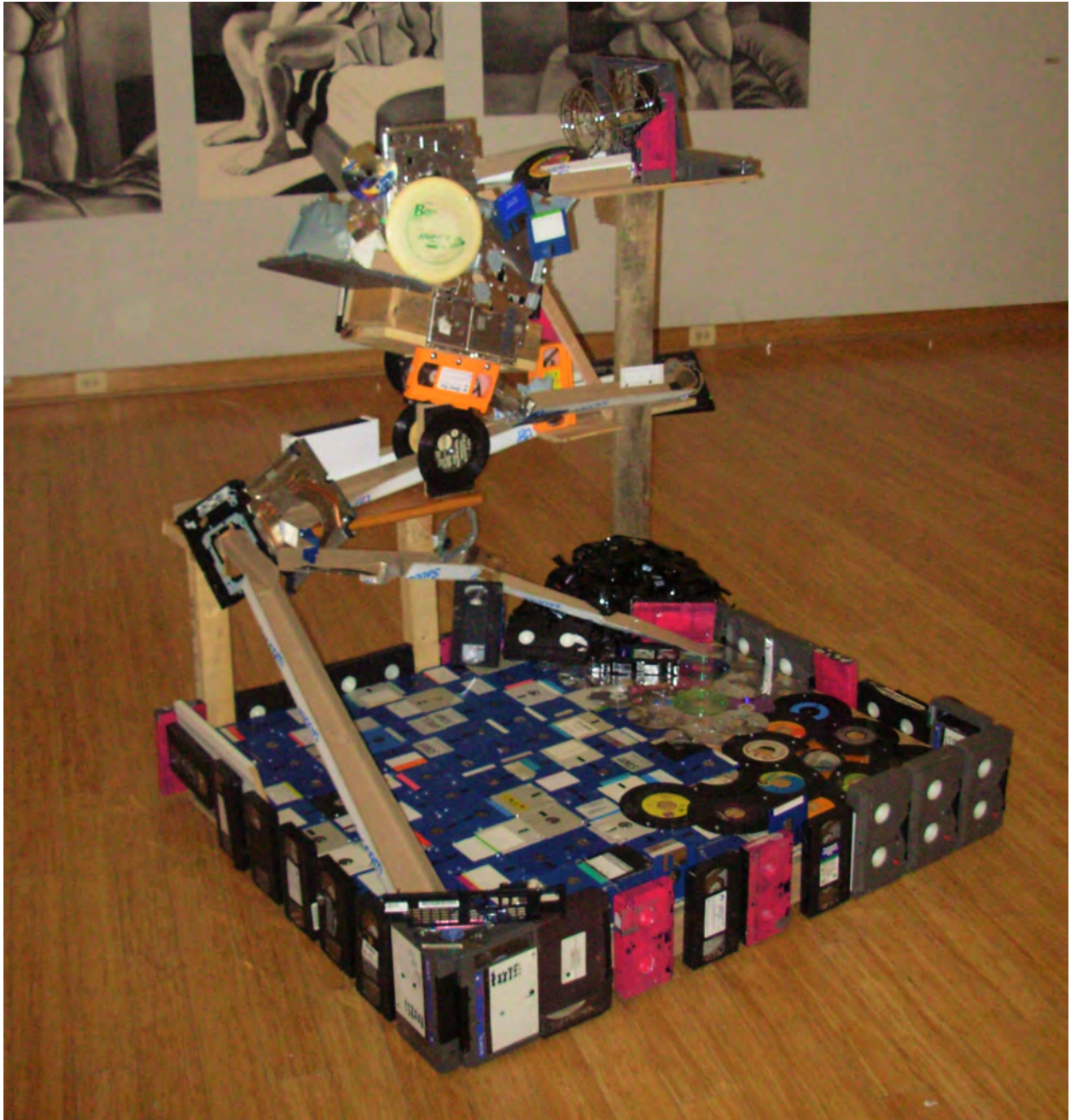


(Figure 10): *A Tale of Two Cities*, http://moussemagazine.it/blog/wp-content/uploads/NM_2013_Chris-Burden_Benoit-Pailley_7149.jpg



(Figure 11): *Metropolis II*,

http://a.fastcompany.net/multisite_files/codesign/imagecache/1280/article_feature/1-Metropolis-II-2010-E.jpg



(Figure 12): *Vapor Waves*



(Figure 13): *Automotive Adventures*

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Source

Carpenter, Allan. "Basement Golf." *Popular Mechanics*, June 1950, 194-8.

This multi-page article was written for popular mechanics in 1950, during the second American miniature golf boom. The article describes how to build a lightweight and portable home miniature-golf course for both indoor and outdoor use, providing blueprints for a nine hole and eighteen hole course. Notable course designs included: "Ski Jump", "Bridge", "Mountain", "Maze", "Turnstile", and the classic "Loop the Loop" (constructed out of an old tire). The blueprints included overhead and two point perspective viewpoints for each of the eighteen holes, as well as exploded viewpoints for further details on specific holes. In regards to materials, the course was to be constructed mostly out of plywood covered in carpeting; certain in-hole elements might be made out of metal or plaster. For an outdoor course, the article recommended green-dyed sawdust, dampened and rolled out. The article claimed this was the same approach to grounding employed by the miniature-golf industry at the time.

Gelders, Jesse F. "Why Midget Golf Swept Country." *Popular Science Monthly*, November, 1930.

An article written for Popular Science Monthly during the first miniature golf boom in the 1930's. Presents a plethora of information on the earliest versions of the sport and its history, with a particular focus on Garnet and Frieda Carter's Tom Thumb Miniature golf empire. Also provides a great deal of information on the then contemporary methods of miniature golf construction and the economical and cultural impact of the sport on the United States.

Secondary Source

BikeSnobNYC. *Bike Snob: Systematically and Mercilessly Realigning the World of Cycling*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2010.

A survival guide written by the notoriously hyper-critical bicycle blogger BikeSnobNYC for the modern cyclist attempting to navigate the roadways and culture of modern American society. *Bike Snob* featured sections detailing the practical matters of bicycling such as rules of the road, bicycle selection, bicycle maintenance and repair, and the history of bicycling. It also analyzed the various tropes and stereotypes found in the cycling community and explored modern culture's culture of cultural appropriation.

Garfinkel, Nina. "MINIATURE GOLF & "PUTT-MODERNISM." *Art Papers* 17, no. 5 (September 1993): 33-38.

A short journal article on the history of miniature golf and several contemporary gallery installations. Does a great job of contextualizing the rise of miniature golf with prevalent social issues which rose to prominence at the start of the twentieth century. Also connects miniature

golf directly to landscape design and demonstrates how the game can be used to highlight various social issues via gameplay.

Patrick, Jehra. "Aesthetics of Miniature Golf: An Interview with a Couple of Putts." *mnartists.blog*, November 5, 2012.

<http://blogs.walkerart.org/mnartists/2012/11/05/aesthetics-of-mini-golf-an-interview-with-a-couple-of-putts/>.

This is an interview with Tom Loftus and Robin Schwartzman, writers of the *Couple of Putts* blog, which charts and rates miniature-golf courses across the United States. The interview covers some of the aesthetic and functional consideration that contribute to making a miniature-golf hole successful, such as maintenance and ingenuity of design, i.e. the many holes in the national building museum were highly aestheticized, yet featured glossy or irregular surfaces that made play functionally difficult. The interview addressed artistic miniature golf: "many [holes]...would never make it in a commercial course due to lack of practicality (fail to facilitate function) and durability." At the end of the interview are links to various artist designed miniature golf exhibits and courses. Loftus and Schwartzman list the most popular thematic styles that have observed in their travels: dinosaurs, pirates, nursery rhymes, castles and dragons, animals, and backlight illuminated courses. The most commonly incorporated elements/obstacles included: sand traps, water hazards, windmills, bridges, loop the loops, waterfalls, ramp, jumps, motorized hazards, rocks, and fiberglass figure. Another interesting topic was the locations in which miniature golf appeared most frequently, such as warmer touristed areas like Myrtle beach, South Carolina. Loftus and Schwartzman also mentioned their favorite holes: The half pipe at the National Building Museum, the lazy river hole at Big Stone Mini Golf, and river ride hole at Barnyard Swing in Cooperstown, NY.

Margolies, John. *Miniature Golf*. New York: Cross River Press. 1987.

One of the only complete English language works on the history of miniature golf. *Miniature Golf* covered the origins of miniature golf, its rapid rise and meteoric fall in the nineteen-thirties, and brief mention of miniature golf in the post-war and modern eras. Every page was filled with primary source imagery: photographs, newspaper articles, drawing, cartoon, and advertisements which contextualized the public's reception to the sport. Countless other photos, taken over a twenty year period of various miniature golf holes and courses throughout the United States served as design inspiration.

Pavlus, John. "How Chris Burden Created Metropolis II, A Tiny City Where 1,100 Toy Cars Zoom." July 5, 2011. <http://www.fastcodesign.com/1664409/how-chris-burden-created-metropolis-ii-a-tiny-city-where-1100-toy-cars-zoom>.

A blog post detailing artist Chris Burden's kinetic sculpture *Metropolis II*. The post cover the creative process and motivations behind *Metropolis II*, and well as the implication of Burden's application of found objects as the building material for his work.

Riggs, Ransom. "The Zany History of Mini Golf." *Mental Floss*, September 10, 2008. <http://mentalfloss.com/article/19567/zany-history-mini-golf>.

Traces the earliest origins of miniature golf to turn of the century gender conventions, the sports early variations and adaptation to the Great depression, as well as conflicting design conventions of the 1950s.

Thompson, Ian H. *Landscape architecture : a very short introduction*. n.p.: Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2014.

Introduction of concepts and history of modern landscape design. This small volume describes the difficulties in defining the practice due to its strong overlap with other disciplines, as well as its varied purposes for application. This work presents ideas useful in connection to miniature golf, laying out the various levels of hierarchy that define wilderness to intentionally altered spaces.

"Walker Exhibit Answers the Eternal Question: How is Art like Mini Golf?" <http://arttattler.com/archiveminigolf.html>.

This uncredited article discussed the Walker's 2008 miniature golf exhibition, a continuation of a similar exhibition in 2004, with a particular focus on environmentalism. Each hole was designed by independent artists, architect, as well as established companies and design collectives. One of the functional constraints faced by contributors was creating holes which could stand up to four month of weather, "not to mention an enthusiastic, club-wielding public." The article depicts several photographs of holes, as well as a technical/concept sketches of two holes, including Michael Keenan's *Big Wave*.

Way, Ron. "Golf as Interactive Art, Political Commentary - and Cultural History." *The MinnPost*, May 29, 2008. <https://www.minnpost.com/environment/2008/05/golf-interactive-art-political-commentary-and-cultural-history>.

A local Minnesota newspaper article on the Walker Museum's fourteen hole miniature golf exhibit and tidbits of historical context on miniature golf in the United states, as well as early golf's homogenous and gendered appeal. Miniature golf allows artists to take "social commentary from subtle to direct", looking beyond, for example the fashionable yet baseless claims of environmentally friendly consumerism to a tangible and direct reality.

18 Far-Out Phobias. (PDF) compiled by Tim Hucklesby. http://design.sva.edu/offcourse/_assets/OffCourseExhibit.pdf.

A website and PDF document on the fully functional miniature golf course created by the first year MFA design students at the School of Visual Arts MFA Design in New York. Each of the eighteen holes is highlighted with a page or two in the PDF. The interactive exhibition was intended to educate visitor in each specific phobia, but also serves to help "drive a particular fear away." The fears included: firearms, magic, dancing, reversed gravity, crabs, being laughed at,

video games, tall people, fish, the moon, bolsheviks, throwing things away, being asymmetrical, clouds, nuclear weapons, taking tests, and vacuum cleaners.