Topic Page: Environmental Art

Definition: **land art** from *The Macquarie Dictionary*

1.

an art movement in the US since the late 1960s which rejects the sophistication of contemporary professional art and of urban life in general, and seeks elemental experience by the digging of trenches, building of mounds, etc., in deserted and remote places; earthworks.

Plural: land arts

Image from: **Andrew Huston, Tidal Marker (Low...** in *The SAGE Handbook of Film Studies*

Summary Article: **Environmental Art**
From *Encyclopedia of American Studies*

With its roots in avant-garde arts and the stubbornly resilient transcendentalism of American nature-worship, the environmental art movement flourished from the 1960s to the 1980s. Its most significant precedent was the radical artistic experimentation of the artists at Black Mountain College in North Carolina in the late 1940s and 1950s, including John Cage's experiments with the boundaries between sound and noise, Robert Rauschenberg's monochromatic *White* and *Black* paintings, and the performance pieces of Merce Cunningham. Reflecting their reaction to purist theories of modernism espoused by critics and artists of their generation, these artists sought to both delineate and blur the lines between art and nonart, between the human-fabricated and the natural environment, and between the artist and the audience as participants in the making of art and artistic meaning.

Brought back to New York City in the 1960s, this ethos fueled new movements in the arts, including most notably Fluxus and the Judson Church groups. When this messy, chaotic, often celebratory anarchism struck the cool formalism of such artists as Carl André and Robert Morris and spilled over into the countercultural impulses of urban disorder on one side and back-to-the-earth naturalism on the other, the environmental art movement was born. Its prime figures included Robert Smithson, Walter de Maria, Claes Oldenburg, Dennis Oppenheim, and Alice Aycock, and its productions formed a dominant strain of late-modern and postmodern art from the 1960s through the end of the twentieth century. The movement served as one of the primary bridges between the radical formalism and minimalism that signaled the end of modernism and the unbounded investigations of postmodernism. Still, much environmental art has been sober, heroic, and philosophically dense; reticent and monumental in its forms; and extremely demanding of its audience—all qualities drawn from the most difficult forms of high modernism.

Subsuming or intersecting such categories as installation and site-specific art and movements such as Fluxus and happenings, environmental art defined itself in the mid-1960s around a series of themes or investigations, each of which has remained central to the movement. The early pieces were often large-scale works that derived force and meaning from the modification of their surroundings. Often the works took as their theme the human alteration of the natural landscape, whether cityscapes or uranium mine tailings, sometimes by commenting, ironically or romantically, on this human drive, and sometimes by offering themselves up as hyper-conscious examples of the human impulse to meddle with nature. At their most monumental and ambitious, environmental pieces came to include, even depend on, the most powerful natural forces for their construction, existence, and eventual transformation and destruction.

From the start, environmental art had two loci: inside and outside. Most of the earliest examples imported nonartistic materials and forms into the gallery setting, both as material and as theme. Walter de Maria's early *Munich Earth Room* (1968) featured nearly 2,000 cubic feet (56 cubic meters) of loamy topsoil, layered two feet (.6 m) deep in a gallery. Robert Smithson is probably the best-known of all American environmental artists. In his early pieces, he quarried geological samples and arranged them within the artistic landscape of minimalist formalism—in the case of *Chalk-Mirror Displacement* (1969), for example, by piling the broken rock within the four quadrants formed by two intersecting two-way mirrors. In these pieces, de Maria and Smithson carved out a separate set of issues from the similar but more resolutely urban, ironically celebratory installation pieces of artists including Red Grooms and Claes Oldenburg. Oldenburg's environmental pieces remain icons of pop art, but they were also meant to alter the urban dweller's experience of urban space and urban place; not gardens or parks, but not equestrian statues, either.

Most of the environmental artists, however, took their work far from the cityscape to the monumental and heroic landscapes of the American West. In 1969, Robert Smithson began the most celebrated of environmental pieces, *Spiral Jetty*. Using Utah's Great Salt Lake as his ground and bulldozers, cranes, and other heavy-construction equipment as his tools, Smithson spent many months extruding a quarter-mile- (.40-km-) long coil of rock and earth from the hostile salt flats out into the lake. His work, while deeply intrusive to the natural environment, was also formed to intensify its properties: the delicacy of the colors within the rock and earth, the monumentality of the geology, and even the near-invisible forms of microscopic flora and fauna that managed to adapt to this harsh environment. Photographing the work, filming it, and writing about it, Smithson was obsessed with the larger themes he found in his investigations of the fundamentals of nature (growth and decay, mutation, and entropy), the tendency of all things to disintegrate and disperse. Since that time *Spiral Jetty* has submerged, reemerged, and submerged again, as the natural and human forces within and around it continue to redefine it.

Concurrent with the creation of *Spiral Jetty*, Dennis Oppenheim and Walter de Maria made monumental outdoor pieces that explored the power of nature and the hubris of man. Oppenheim's *Canceled Crop*, made in the Netherlands, required the artist to cultivate, plant, and manage a field of wheat, which at harvesttime the artist then mowed into a giant *X*. Oppenheim saw his piece as both an opportunity to work at the most elemental levels of human creativity and a chance to comment ironically on the ways in which nature had become redefined as natural resources, to be exploited and tamed. Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field*, begun in 1970 and completed in 1977, was perhaps the most flamboyant combination of minimalist form and heroic nature-worship. Composed of 400 stainless-steel rods in a precise grid across a rectangle one mile (2 km) in length, *Lightning Field* was a triumph of human order over a hostile desert landscape—until, that is, the periodic storm fronts of New Mexico's late summer and fall turned it into a terrifying and sublime spectacle of natural power. Visitors may stay for days, wandering through its patterns, hiking the nearby mountains, and waiting for the rare occurrence of a major lightning storm.

Walter de Maria's piece represented the most monumental and rigorous forms of environmental art. Against this impulse was the far more popular and widely seen work of Christo (born Christo

Javacheff), a Bulgarian artist who settled in Paris but made much of his work in the United States including, most famously, the 25-mile- (40-km-) long *Running Fence* (1972–1976), which meandered through the picturesque rolling hills of Sonoma and Marin counties in California. With its ingratiating mix of delicate decorativeness and monumental scale, Christo's work represented an attenuation of the heroic qualities of the American environmental artists. Indeed, since the later 1970s, most environmental art has been less overscaled in its ambitions, less intrusive on the environment, and less demanding of the viewer. Works by Nancy Holt, Richard Long, and Beverly Pepper have connected the movement to far older traditions of cromlechs and other prehistoric and early historical environmental works, while other artists have tended to treat the environment as a resource and setting, rather than as a force with which to wrestle. A series of exceptions, however, suggests the continuing resonance of the movement. James Turrell's *Roden Crater Project* in Sedona, Arizona, begun in the early 1980s, continues the trend of unbounded works in which human intervention occurs at the scale of sublime nature. Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*, installed in 1981 at Federal Plaza in New York City, was designed to challenge and break the monotonous pedestrian patterns of city workers. But Serra's piece, which many people found obtrusive and unattractive, was removed in 1989 by the federal government over the objections of the artist.

Throughout its short history, environmental art in the United States has linked itself to central themes of American cultural history: the yearning for unbounded sublime nature and the paradoxical desire to conquer, tame, and exploit the wilderness; and the ambivalence toward urbanism, civilization, and the human environment. Emerging from the core impulses of the counterculture and linked to the most radical elements of the artistic avant-garde, American environmental art served as one of the richest and most compelling art movements of the late twentieth century.

The Gates. 2005. Christo, artist. Central Park, New York. Flickr.com.

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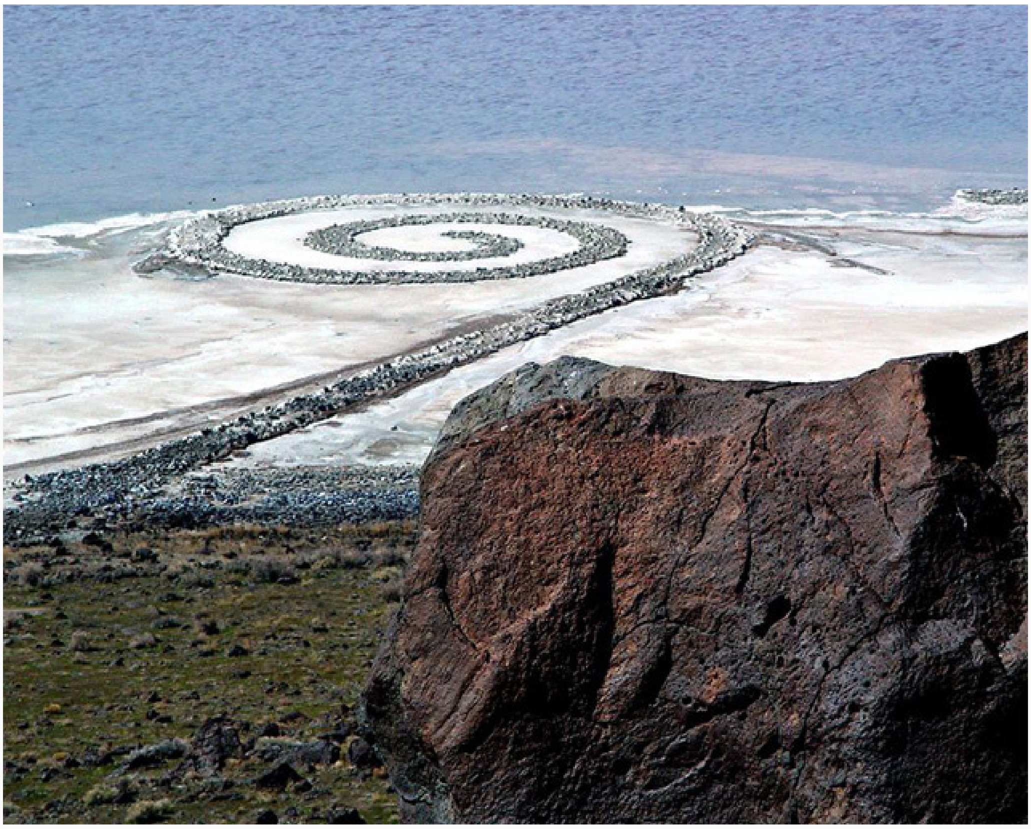

Spiral Jetty. Created 1970. Robert Smithson, artist. Great Salt Lake, Utah. 2005. David Sidwell, photographer. Flickr.com.

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