

Public Art: Linking Form, Function and Meaning

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public art
ART AND
ECOLOGICAL
PROCESS



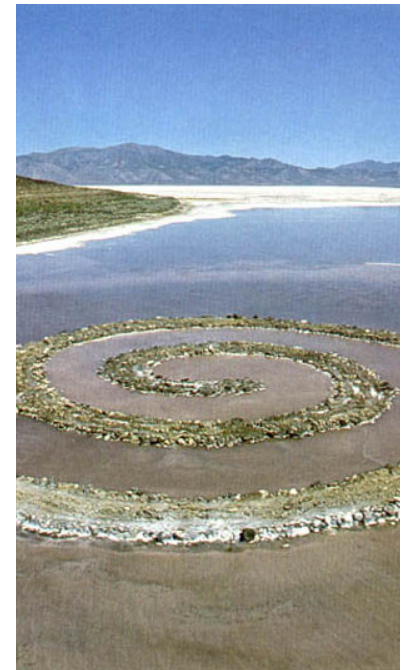
Betsy Damon *Living Water Park* Chengdu, China 1998

Source: Keepers of the Waters

Art fulfills a variety of functions within the public sphere, providing opportunities for, among other things: artistic self-expression; community dialogue; education and enjoyment; inspiring participation in appreciation and creation of art; community problem solving; enhancement of the physical infrastructure and environment; and demarcation, celebration and transformation of place,

Public art comprises a vast and multidimensional urban typology, which ranges from objects placed in a site, to site-based works, to more ephemeral and performative works that explore dynamic processes, artistic and biological. As such, public art can serve to provoke profound changes in both the mental and physical environment, often mediating the real and/or perceived divide between cultural aesthetics and ecological function.

For the purposes of this examination, the discussion will focus on the history and practice of environmental, or “land” art as it manifests itself in the public realm. Even within these narrowed parameters, the range of art and artists cannot be easily defined. Author Jeffrey Kastner, however, has provided a useful framework for understanding the spectrum of work by breaking down artistic endeavors into five distinct and yet fluid categories: integration, interruption, involvement, implementation, and imagination (see page 6).



Robert Smithson *Spiral Jetty* 1970

Source: www.uazg.hr/likovna-kultura/crta.htm

Art is contemplation. It is the pleasure of the mind which searches into nature and which there divines the spirit of which Nature herself is animated. ~ Auguste Rodin



Buster Simpson *Beckoning Cistern*
Source: *Seattle Daily Journal of Commerce* February 19, 2003

The Roots of Land Art

Environmental or ecological art has its roots in the early 1960s when conceptual artists such as Alan Sonfist, Carl Andre, Robert Morris, Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Nancy Holt and others consciously broke from the constraints of the gallery to explore language and metaphor in the more unbounded terrain of land and landscape. Despite their departure from the New York scene, these “land artists” as they were called maintained a close affinity to architecture, both in terms of materials and form, and as such, their work was primarily sculptural. Artists like Smithson were concerned with the way time and natural forces impact on objects and gestures. Many were involved in the creation of monumentally-scaled earthworks, which were alternatively aggressive and nurturing toward the landscape. At one and the same time, these works were both “critical of and nostalgic for the notion of the ‘garden’.”

Artists following in the footsteps of these early innovators continue to use both natural and human-made materials to make marks within both the topographical and psychological landscape; to challenge assumptions about the social and political role of art; and to explore more explicitly the connections among the individual, community, nature and language. An interest in environmental science has inspired the reclamation or rehabilitation work of artists like Mierle Ukeles, Mel Chin, Patricia Johanson, Jackie Brookner and Agnes Denes.

from Jeffrey Kastner, editor, *Land and Environmental Art*, London: Phaidon Press, 1998 and GreenMuseum.org



Robert Morris *Ring with Light* 1965
Source: Re-title.com

Case Study: Early Efforts in Land Reclamation

Robert Morris began his career as an abstract expressionist, like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. However, his focus soon shifted to minimalism and an emphasis on the control of hard, sculptural materials to the degree that the hand of the artist disappeared entirely. As he shifted to examining softer materials, Morris began to explore the possibilities of large-scale monumental work.

“Robert Morris was selected to design an earthwork in conjunction with the symposium, *Earthworks: Land Reclamation as Sculpture*. The purpose of the 1979 symposium was to create new tools to rehabilitate land abused by technology and provide artists with design opportunities for surplus King County property in gravel pits, surface mines and landfill sites. Morris was selected to work on a 3.7-acre site, a sand and gravel pit abandoned in the 1940s. “The work consists of a series of descending concentric slopes and benches located at the top of the site. A hill-form rises on the lower third of the site,” describes Morris. Cleared of all of the undergrowth and trees, the land was terraced and then planted with rye grass. The creation of this artwork returned the land to active use.” from 4Culture http://www.4culture.org/publicart/project_profile.asp?locID=16



Robert Morris *Johnson Gravel Pit*
Source: Center for Land Use Interpretation

While the work does not entail ecological restoration, it marks a shift in the focus from purely aesthetic works, to land art which actively and simultaneously evokes and cloaks human disturbance through the evocation of the pastoral. Morris himself observed that “It would perhaps be a misguided assumption to suppose that artists hired to work in industrially blasted landscapes would necessarily and invariably choose to convert such sites into idyllic and reassuring places, thereby redeeming those who wasted the landscape in the first place.” from Thomas Heyd, “Revisiting the Artistic Reclamation of Nature” *The Trumpeter* Volum 15, No. 1 (1998)

Essential Elements--Defining Environmental Art

While the definition of environmental art might seem self-evident, in reality, the range of artists who define their work as “environmental” comprises a broad category.

The spectrum runs the gamut from aestheticists like Andy Goldsworthy, who utilizes natural materials and forms and explores ideas of cycles of birth and decay, process and ephemera; to research such as Mel Chin, whose creative undertakings test the boundaries between science and art; to activists such as Helen and Newton Harrison, who act as consultants and instigators for large-scale community, regional and even national dynamic living system projects.

Contemporary definitions of the goals and objectives of environmental art are summarized by Lynne Hull in an essay she wrote for the online compendium GreenMuseum. She observes that environmental art:

- Interprets nature, creating artworks that inform about nature and its processes, or about environmental problems
- Concerns environmental forces and materials, creating artworks affected or powered by wind, water, lightning, even earthquakes
- Re-envisions human relationship to nature, proposing new ways for people to co-exist with our environment
- Reclaims and remediates damaged environments, restoring ecosystems in artistic and often aesthetic ways

from Lynne Hull “What Is Environmental Art”, GreenMuseum.org

Case Study: Blurring the Boundaries of Science and Art

Prompted by an interest in testing the boundaries between art and science, artist Mel Chin applied to the National Endowment for Arts in the early 1990s to fund a project involving phytoremediation in conjunction with the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Chin describes the intersection of art and science as a kind of alchemy, an exploration of the “...transformative processes and the mutable nature of material.” As a sculptor, Chin views his work as a subtractive process in which plants would comprise the “sculptural” tools to shape and transform a landscape, thereby ensuring the health of a diverse ecosystem. Chin received NEA funding, which was then subsequently denied, when his proposal was deemed more science than art. Chin negotiated with NEA Chairman John Frohnmayer, who helped reinstate the grant based upon the artistic merits of the project.

Chin located Rufus Chaney, a USDA scientist whose research had examined the properties of *hyperaccumulators*, or plants that have evolved genetically to uptake metals or other minerals. While Chaney had spent years in the lab researching toxic uptake in plants, he had not conducted any field tests. Together, he and Chin located *Revival Field* at a site at the Pig’s Eye Landfill in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1991, making it the first such experiment in the United States. They planted 96 plots with a variety of plant species, including several known cadmium and zinc hyperaccumulators, including *Thlaspi caerulescens*, *Silene cucubalus* and hybrid *Zea mays*. The aesthetic form of the fencing served dual purposes, both to demarcate the form of a target, as well as to divide the control plots from the test plots. Research revealed that the *Thlaspi* performed most effectively and the results were published in both scientific and art journals. Plantings were continued to ensure the complete detoxification of the soil.

In order to make up our minds we must know how we feel about things; and to know how we feel about things we need the public images of sentiment that only ritual, myth, and art can provide.... Art and the equipment to grasp it are made in the same shop.

~Clifford Geertz



Mel Chin Revival Field
Source: GreenMuseum.org

It is the moment when belief has become outrageous that offers opportunity to create new spaces, first for the mind and thereafter in everyday... always compose[d] with left-over spaces and invisible places. ~Newton Harrison



Lorna Jordan *Water Works Garden*
Source: Lorna Jordan

Acquisition / Implementation Mechanisms

Public art is both the manifestation of the ideals of a democratic society and also the site of profound contention. As a result, the social and political agendas of individuals and groups often play a role in manipulating the site and content of public art to align with specific moral or aesthetic values. Despite these inherent challenges, mechanisms to ensure fair and representative work have been established through the creation of arts commissions or boards, comprised of community members, as well as a paid professional staff. Boards have oversight of budgets, design review and de/commissions, while staff are employed to assemble artist selection panels, to facilitate public participation, and to ensure the maintenance and augmentation of public art collections.

Public art is created and funded through a variety of methods. For municipalities, counties and states that support public art and artists, funding may be dedicated through line item designations, the general fund, or through percent for art programs. In King County, public art programs are funded through a one percent addition to all capital projects undertaken by the county.

In a period of economic and social upheaval, federal funding and public support for public programs has waned. As a result, public art programs have sought alternative funding streams, including pursuit of private dollars through development efforts. Several agencies, such as King County's 4Culture, anticipated the decrease in available monies, and transformed itself into an independent cultural development agency, a more entrepreneurial entity, which combines the benefits of a public agency, and the flexibility of a private nonprofit.



Alan Sonfist *Time Landscape*
Reflection Series 1965-2002
Source: Paul Rodgers Gallery

Case Study: Artistic Process, Ecological Process

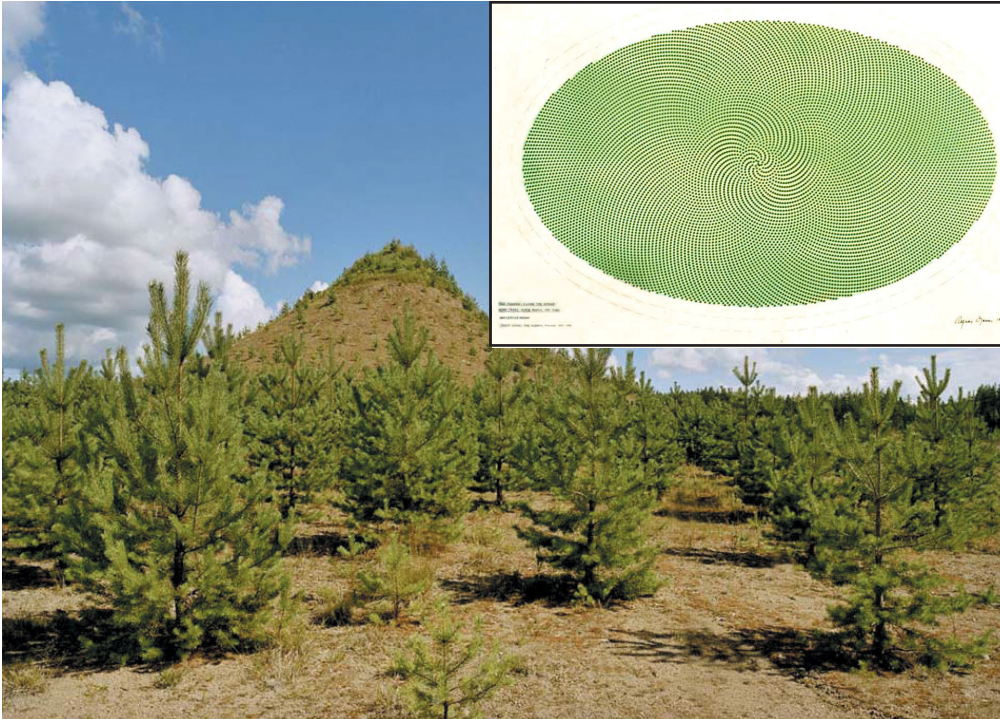
Artist Alan Sonfist was an early advocate of urban forests and historic preservation of disappearing or lost landscapes. In 1965, he began *Time Landscape*, an effort to preserve such landscapes through artistic intervention. This public art piece, located in Manhattan, is a 45 foot by 200 foot patch of oaks, hickories, junipers, maples, and sassafras that recalls a pre-colonial landscape. As an artistic piece, *Time Landscape* performs several ecological roles: absorbing rainwater, releasing oxygen, and absorbing pollutants such as airborne metals and carbon dioxide. Unfortunately New York City Parks Department, which owns the work, has never monitored the impacts of the park itself.

Sonfist insisted that both physical and mental healing are critical components of landscape reclamation. He noted that one must "repair the hole in the psyche which is left when all traces of our biological and ecological roots are obliterated." While Sonfist's artistic gesture marked an innovative turn in understanding the role of the artist in ecological interventions, some critics have suggested that the piece is flawed by the lack of accessibility (the site is locked) and thus its failure to offer a "social site filled with human content." Indeed Louise Mazingo criticizes Sonfist's work for failing to be "iconic". As a result, she argues, the piece disappears into the fabric of the city, with nothing to demarcate or celebrate its presence.

Despite these criticisms, Sonfist's work must be acknowledged for shifting the framework of the form and function of public art and parks. As a result of his work, New York City Parks and Recreation began to re-examine its own parameters for acceptable landscaping plants. Sonfist's series of mini-landscapes planned in 1965--although never realized--curiously match the city's Greenstreets Map created in 2002. ~ from GreenMuseum.org

Pattern finding is the purpose of the mind and the construct of the universe. ~Agnes Denes

public art
PATTERN



Agnes Denes *Tree Mountain with Small Tree Pattern* 2000 Inset: *Tree Mountain Aerial View* 1996
Source: Haggerty Museum of Art

Agnes Denes observes that “Everything in our life is but a transitory state and a recombination of this primordial dust. Yet throughout these cycles of change, there is a deeper component of all things that remains constant, unaltered, and mainly invisible - a deeper reality that lies beyond appearance.’ Amid a world of continuous change, there are fundamental patterns to be found in both the depths of the mind and the depths of the universe. Her art, clearly, is intended to illuminate those patterns, and, in the exactitude of her math, reason is one of her basic tools.”

~ from *New York Arts Magazine*
August 2001

Case Study: Artist As Environmental Activist

Helen and Newton Harrison, two environmental artists from San Diego, have worked as consultants and activists in the field of ecological and community restoration. Their work has “...stressed the significance of invention. Not only do they publicly articulate the inventive aspects of each of their projects, but they believe that every artist’s role is: to search, to discover value, to value discovery, to discover qualities of value... to bespeak those values, to be self-critical... to re-speak the values more clearly, to be self-critical again. From this process, new metaphors emerge and old ones are tested for value.” from GreenMuseum.org

“They advocate allowing nature to repair itself through the reintroduction of diverse species of flora and fauna to areas devastated by overpopulation or industrial pollution. They support “green” farming, and promise new revenues and jobs from eco-tourism and the sale of organic produce and purified water. They also argue that the apparently prohibitive costs of such undertakings are in fact far less than the eventual costs of simply doing nothing. What separates their approach from that of other planners, urban and environmental, is the tenor of their examination. They are poetic but pragmatic, insistent yet gentle, and while vested with urgency are also aware of the persistence of rhythms that have their own pace. They are also inclusive beyond multiculturalism and diversity, since they embrace all factors of place, not just the human component.”

from Eleanor Heartney, “Mapping a better world” *Art in America* October 2003.



Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison
Vision for the Green Heart of Holland
Source: Feldman Gallery

Nature is in a state of change and that change is the key to understanding. I want my art to be sensitive and alert to changes in material, season and weather.

Each work grows, stays, decays. Process and decay are implicit.

~Andy Goldsworthy



Andy Goldsworthy *Tossing Sticks in the Air* 1980 **Source:** www.art-word.com



Andy Goldsworthy *Rivers and Tides*
Source: Thomas Riedesheimer

Themes, Goals and Characteristics of Environmental Art(ists)

Integration

- Manipulation of landscape as a material in its own right
- Artist adds, removes or displaces local natural materials to create form
- Like minimalism, emphasis on materiality, elemental geometries and siting
- Examines relationship of site characteristics, evidence of human intervention
- Monumental in scale; simulate spatial expanses they occupy

Interruption

- Conjoin environment, human activity using non-indigenous, man-made materials
- Large scale
- Manufactured substances and structures, or machines and technology to frame, set in motion or harness natural elements
- Emphasis on transgressive qualities in activities, questioning notions of "natural"
- Critique terrestrial exploitation
- Interrupt landscape by bringing it into gallery space

Involvement

- Individual acting in relationship with land
- Scale in relationship to human form
- Emphasis on primal, symbolic link to earth, forms of ritual and reaction against monumentality of early land art
- Engage conceptualism and substitute words to evoke physical experience

Implementation

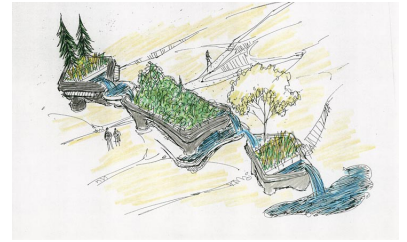
- Investigate environment as ecosystem and depository of socio-political realities
- Explore nature as dynamic, interactive system
- Critique of industrial development, urban expansion, mass market agriculture, scientific intervention of natural processes
- Sculptural and performative

Imagining

- Land as concept, metaphor and signifier
- Environment as historical narrative, symbols describe contemporary society
- Forms of measurement such as maps and place names deconstructed and played with as acts of interpretation



Noel Harding *Elevated Wetlands* 1996 Toronto **Source:** City of Toronto



Resources

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4Culture Public Art Program <http://www.4culture.org/publicart/index.htm>

GreenMuseum <http://www.greenmuseum.org/>