

# CONCRETE CONSCIOUSNESS: LAND ART IN THE AGE OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

BY JEFFREY KASTNER

The desert is less “nature” than a concept, a place that swallows up boundaries. When the artist goes to the desert he enriches his absence and burns off the water (paint) on his brain. The slush of the city evaporates from the artist’s mind as he installs his art.

—Robert Smithson, 1968<sup>1</sup>

The artist, ecologist, and industrialist must develop in relation to each other, rather than continue to work and produce in isolation. The visual values of the landscape have been traditionally the domain of those concerned with the arts. Yet, art, ecology, and industry as they exist today are for the most part abstracted from the physical realities of specific landscapes or sites.... The ecologist tends to see the landscape in terms of the past, while most industrialists don't see anything at all. The artist must come out of the isolation of galleries and museums and provide a concrete consciousness for the present as it really exists, and not simply present abstractions or utopias. The artist should accept and enter into all the real problems that confront the ecologist and industrialist. . . . Art should not be considered as merely a luxury, but should work within the processes of actual production and reclamation. We should begin to develop an art education based on relationships to specific sites. How we see things and places is not a secondary concern, but primary.

—Robert Smithson, 1972<sup>2</sup>

The basic origin story of land art would by now, a half century on from its first telling, appear to be a comfortably settled bit of postwar art history: a cadre of rogue Postminimalists decenter their practices from the capital of the global art world and begin the process of excavating a startlingly new strain of artmaking from the landscape itself. This first generation of American earthworkers—most notably Walter De Maria (1935–2013), Michael Heizer (b. 1944), Dennis Oppenheim (1938–2011), and Robert Smithson (1938–1973)—turned their backs on traditional art world settings that had, like all institutions during the countercultural moment of the late 1960s, come under increasingly critical scrutiny. “The museums and collections are stuffed, the floors are sagging,” wrote Heizer in 1969, “but the real space still exists.” It’s this zone of spatial authenticity that’s seized upon by these toolbelt conceptualists as an opportunity to put newly conceived ripostes to Modernist ideas of spectatorship and objecthood into dialogue with age-old forms of inscriptive and sculptural expression.<sup>3</sup> The deserts of the American West would become a particular locus for their activities, and, over the next few years, those desolately real spaces (whose claim to realness was in no small part predicated on what was figured not just as geographic remoteness, but also detachment from contemporary society and culture) would come to host constructions and inscriptions that engaged with the natural world, with its evocations of both the evanescent and the eternal.

Like most grand narratives, this story contains both significant kernels of truth and significant omissions. There is no question that the signal examples of American land art bore unmistakable resemblances to the nation’s own colonialist westward expansion, where land was thought and spoken into a kind of blankness in order to more readily receive its new occupants. But the genre, even in its earliest moments, was never a solely American phenomenon. Land-based practices of very different styles and forms were



Michael Heizer, *Double Negative*, 1969–1970, 240,000-ton displacement of rhyolite and sandstone, Mormon Mesa, Overton, Nevada, courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Gift of Virginia Dwan, photo by Tom Vintz. artwork © Michael Heizer/ Triple Aught Foundation

being explored at the exact same time in Europe, by artists such as Barry Flanagan (1941–2009), Richard Long (b. 1945), Giuseppe Penone (b. 1947), Keith Arnatt (1930–2008), and Jan Dibbets (b. 1941), and even earlier in Japan by members of the Gutai Group, such as Kazuo Shiraga (1924–2008). And the differences were not purely geographical—projects that engaged with the natural world but with quite distinct conceptual concerns and artifactual manifestations were proposed and produced during the late 1960s and early 1970s by a long list of American artists, including Agnes Denes (b. 1931), Hans Haacke (b. 1936), Helen (1927–2018) and Newton Harrison (b. 1932), Nancy Holt (1938–2014), Patricia Johnson (b. 1940), Mary Miss (b. 1944), Robert Morris (1931–2018), and Alan Sonfist (b. 1946). Meanwhile others, such as Harvey Fite (1903–1976), Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988), and Herbert Bayer (1900–1985) had already begun to moot and make interventions into the landscape years and sometimes decades earlier. Even the official announcement to the international art world of the first stirrings of the land art “movement,” the “Earthworks” show held at Virginia Dwan’s Manhattan gallery in the autumn of 1968, was so diverse in the kinds of approaches it included that it almost immediately called into question whatever coherence of conceptual interests it might have been understood to propose.<sup>4</sup>

Fifty years on, the range of artistic approaches to the natural world gathered in by the category of land art—from the ephemerally miniscule constructions of an artist like Andy Goldsworthy (b. 1956) to the sprawling research-based enterprises of groups such as the Center for Land Use Interpretation (founded 1994)—are so varied in their forms and interests that the category can sometimes feel indeterminate to the point of meaninglessness. But it is the case that artistic endeavors in and about nature have, in a general sense, always been guided by one of two basic perspectives, which I think



Richard Long, *A Line Made By Walking*, 1967 © Richard Long. All Rights Reserved, DACS/Artimage 2020. Photo: Richard Long





Helen and Newton Harrison, *Flat Pastures*, from the work entitled *Full Farm*—a large installation done at the then new Museum of Contemporary Art in Houston, Texas in 1972. Photo by anonymous.

are neatly summarized by the pair of quotes from Smithson—land art’s most voluble and trenchant theoretician—that serve as the twin epigraphs to this essay. The first passage illustrates how the genre was initially, and in some cases still is, figured—as an intervention into a kind of space freely given to artists to resituate their formerly studio-based concerns in a setting free from the “slush” of cosmopolitan thinking and making. This conceptual relocation is less concerned with the actual conditions on the ground than with how the available expanses might further individual artistic goals. The second, written just four years later, provides an early glimpse into how the field would begin to evolve. In contrast to the inner-directed nature of the earlier position, Smithson now figures the field in terms of a broad turn out-



*Earthworks*, Virginia Dwan Gallery, New York, NY, 1986 Dwan Gallery (Los Angeles, California and New York, New York) records, 1959-circa 1982, bulk 1959-1971: Series 2: New York Exhibition Files, 1965-1971, after 1982, Smithsonian Archives of American Art

ward, toward the world at large. A potential catalyst for the development of alternative forms of interdisciplinary collaboration and connection, this new kind of land art, he argues, must seek a firmly grounded awareness of the broad conditions of specific landscapes, and how this cognizance might be mobilized in a project that reconceptualizes interests (civic, pedagogical, remediative) beyond the precincts of the gallery and museum.<sup>5</sup>

Smithson, who died in a plane crash in the summer of 1973 at the age of thirty-five, would not live long enough to realize his proposal for a land-based practice that might exceed conventional notions of artmaking. And while there’s no question that he was operating in a context inflected by a



Center for Land Use Interpretation Desert Ramparts: *Defending Las Vegas from the Flood*, July 7–September 17, 2017. Black Mountain Detention Basin (interpretation photo)

growing public sense of looming environmental crisis, it's not clear in retrospect whether his latter-day conversion to a gospel of ecologically based cooperation was a case of situational ethics or indicative of a real sea change in his thinking. ("Proposal," the text from which our second excerpt is taken, was after all part of an attempt to secure industry funding for a reclamation project at an Ohio strip mine.) But his articulation of the critical need for attention to "the physical realities of specific landscapes or sites"—the first glimmerings of a discourse around what I like to think of as a burgeoning *aesthetic geopolitics*—was as influential as any of the handful of sculptural interventions into the land that he actually produced. Indeed, with the lessening vogue over the following decades for the kinds of heroically scaled



Center for Land Use Interpretation Desert Ramparts: *Defending Las Vegas from the Flood*, July 7–September 17, 2017. F3 Detention Basin (interpretation photo)

acts of maverick dislocation that earned the first generation its notoriety, it's in this mode of ethical close looking and intimate engagement—potentially epic in scope, if not in artifactual size—that later generations of artists working with the landscape would find an example to be followed.

For more than two decades, the Boston-born, New York-based artist Blane De St. Croix has been making work that has sought its own path in the conceptual and aesthetic landscape of latter-day land art. In De St. Croix's work, the question has never been whether the landscape is a place more fundamentally "natural" or "cultural," but rather how the on-the-ground truths of the world at large put the lie to supposed distinctions between the

two. The dawning of the Anthropocene Era—the name chosen by scientists for our current geologic interval, in which for the first time in the history of *Homo sapiens* human activities have become the predominant driver of terrestrial change—has signaled the need for a fundamental recalibration of our relationship to the earth. In many ways, De St. Croix’s work can be seen as prescient of this recalibration, operating as it has in a conceptual space where the landscape is never taken simply for a spacious tabula rasa on which artistic gestures might be exercised, but rather is always understood as an environment richly and repeatedly marked by human activity, one that the right kind of artistico-scientific inquiry can help decode and explain.

De St. Croix operates in a kind of hybrid space that draws on both art and science, and thus on the legacies of both the early and the late postures of Smithson. Consider, for example, his gatherings of carefully considered forms and materials in the gallery in relation to the latter’s celebrated “non-sites.” “By drawing a diagram, a ground plan of a house, a street plan to the location of a site, or a topographic map,” wrote Smithson, “one draws a ‘logical two dimensional picture.’ A ‘logical picture’ differs from a natural or realistic picture in that it rarely looks like the thing it stands for. It is a two dimensional *analogy* or *metaphor*—A is Z.”<sup>6</sup> Smithson described a non-site, an accumulation of natural material from a given location transported to the gallery and often displayed in some sort of minimalist container, as “a three dimensional logical picture that is abstract, yet...represents a site.”<sup>7</sup> De St. Croix’s sculptures, by contrast, are almost never abstract. They have typically modeled, quite realistically, aspects of the sites with which they are concerned. But, crucially, the things they “stand for” are rarely limited to the bare physical characteristics of a location. And it’s here that they utilize what might be thought of as a secondary layer of abstraction, one paradoxically founded in figuration—a distillation of place not only



Robert Smithson, *A Nonsite (Franklin, New Jersey)*, 1969: © Holt/Smithson Foundation / VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Collection Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Gift of Susan and Lewis Manilow, 1979.2.ag. Photo © MCA Chicago

concerned with an aesthetic transmission of its particular qualities, but just as importantly with what those qualities can tell us about the larger issues (economic, environmental, juridical) that have produced and shaped them; with the “present as it really exists,” beyond appearances, for a given site.

De St. Croix’s exhibition at MASS MoCA takes inspiration for its name, *How to Move a Landscape*, from one of the works included in it, *Moving Landscape* (2020), a model train set that winds through the gallery with a cargo of scale-model landscapes on its flatbed cars. Though charmingly lighthearted in the way that all miniatures are, it also provides a fitting metaphor for De St. Croix’s project—an attempt to put gallerygoers in contact with the distant landscapes on which he focuses, and the complex informational traces those landscapes encode, using a conceptual and formal strategy that juxtaposes verisimilitude with forthright transparency about his makerly sleight-of-hand. De St. Croix knows that the vast majority of viewers by definition cannot physically access the far-flung places where he does his fieldwork (the Gobi Desert or the Arctic Circle), and yet his seductive sculptural works conjure those places—not as formally atomized logical pictures in the manner of the non-sites, but, instead, and rather more daringly given contemporary aesthetic tastes, in a way that draws on quite traditional forms of sculptural realism; a realism that echoes, but also is in tension with, the epic naturalisms of classical landscape painting. His precisely crafted works often resemble nothing so much as scientific models used to represent landscapes and habitats in natural history museums, yet they don’t propose generalized objectivity. De St. Croix’s subjective artistic mediation of the sites he works on and with, shape the works’ pedagogical impulses into a kind of aesthetic advocacy and activism. His works seduce to teach; bear witness to the physical grandeur of the land, but use it not to conjure transcendent sublimity, but to spark a quite literally “grounded” impulse to involvement and care.

De St. Croix focuses his capricious practice in elements which consider a given ecosystem and its formal, environmental, economic, and political status. He typically approaches a given site in a variety of scales, forms, and media—in the past, for example his work on mountains has included not just imposing sculptural works like *Mountain Views* (2011), a large-scale recapitulation of a range decimated by natural resource extraction that was sited along the East River at Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City, New York; or *Mountain Strip* (2009), a hulking section of strip-mined mountain face made from wood, foam, and natural materials that felt like a geologic eruption into the white-cube calm of the Brooklyn gallery where it was shown; but also delicate ink drawings of strip mining landscapes. While the nature of the artifacts was wildly divergent, they shared a common inspiration, a research trip to visit active and abandoned strip mines in the mountains of West Virginia, during which De St. Croix also conducted extensive interviews with miners and anti-mining activists alike.

The MASS MoCA show features two major examples of this rhythm of alternating material, size, and angle of inquiry. The ice works, for example, are anchored by *Hollow Ground* (2020), a massive sculptural canopy depicting the earth’s permafrost layer, which is now at risk of thawing—with potentially catastrophic atmospheric consequences—as a result of climate change. Meanwhile, the centerpiece of the borders section includes the eighty-foot-long diorama-like sculptural depiction of a topographical segment of the US/Mexico border, *Broken Landscape IV* (2009), which bisects the gallery space in an echo of the function of the border/barrier itself. But each area of focus also includes smaller sculptural works and drawings and each is supported by the same deep research—in northern Alaska, where the melting permafrost is causing the very ground to collapse as its internal structures subside, releasing massive amounts of greenhouse gases into the



air; or along the three-thousand-mile-long southern border of the US, where legitimate concerns around territorial integrity have been hijacked by political nativists in ways that cruelly belie the fundamental immigrant nature of the nation. De St. Croix wisely doesn't try to make his works articulate the full measure of the information that goes into their making, presenting his research and documentation separately here in a media center that functions as a kind of massive interactive didactic for the individual pieces. Instead, he figures them as solicitations to a conversation; seductive aesthetic inducements to further political, sociological, and scientific study; invitations that are expressed in a language that draws the viewer into the artistic particulars of the works precisely in order to begin building an outward relationship to the specific sites they reference.

In the conclusion to his seminal collection of landscape sketches, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), the writer and conservationist Aldo Leopold considers how humans might develop what he calls a "land ethic," a state of affairs that "changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it."<sup>8</sup> It's not hard to see, in the arc Leopold describes, something of the trajectory of the land art genre as it's changed across the last fifty years, from the Postminimalist conquests of the late 1960s to an artistic outlook increasingly awake to the ethics of stewardship necessary to the development of the "concrete consciousness" to which Smithson refers. "An understanding of ecology does not necessarily originate in courses bearing ecological labels," Leopold writes of the potential ways to transmit the requisite tenets of care to future generations, "it is quite as likely to be labeled geography, botany, agronomy, history, or economics."<sup>9</sup> To that list we should add artmaking of the sort practiced by De St. Croix, whose primary concern is *seeing* things and places in all their complexity, and framing those observations in a way that opens viewers

not just to the ways that the land might affect us or how we affect it, but finally to the fundamental, and crucially important, indivisibility of those two processes.

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- 1 Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," *Artforum*, September 1968, p. 49.
- 2 Robert Smithson, "Proposal," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 379–380.
- 3 Michael Heizer, "The Art of Michael Heizer," *Artforum*, December 1969, p. 34.
- 4 Despite the inclusion of several outliers, Dwan's show, which ran from October 5–30, 1968, was remarkably prescient in its inclusion of artists who would come to define the form: De Maria, Heizer, Oppenheim, and Smithson all participated.
- 5 There was, of course, a broad interest at the time in collectivist projects, inspired by a gathering momentum around not just environmentalist ethics, but also greater equality on the basis of gender, race, and sexual orientation. It's also interesting in this context to consider projects like *Experiments in Art and Technology* (E.A.T.), the organization founded by Billy Klüver, Fred Waldhauer, Robert Rauschenberg, and Robert Whitman in the late 1960s that brought artists and engineers together to work on projects. For a selection of documents published by the group, see the archive held by the Daniel Langlois Foundation at [www.fondation-langlois.org/html/e/page.php?NumPage=237](http://www.fondation-langlois.org/html/e/page.php?NumPage=237).
- 6 Robert Smithson, "A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 364.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (1949; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 204.
- 9 Ibid., p. 224.