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Earth Into Art

The earth moved – more than 240,000 tons of sandstone and rhyolite in the case of Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* (Kaster 29) and over 6,650 tons of material in the case of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, a work that took 292 truck hours and 625 man hours to construct (Kaster 58). The Earth Art or Land Art movement fits well into the theme of this volume as it allows us to see how some artists of the late-20th century dealt with questions of the natural and the artificial – in earth art can one separate the natural from the artificial? In this essay I will situate the Earth Art movement in its historical time period, present and discuss some of the major artists and works, and make some connections to related cultural developments, especially in postmodern literature.

The Earth Art movement arose in the United States in the 1960s among a group of sculptors and conceptual artists who were disenchanted with high modernism and – like participants in other movements of the time that rejected institutions and consumerism – rebelled against the museum, the gallery and the commodification of art those institutions represented. Among the other aspects of the *Zeitgeist* at work here we can cite the increased consciousness regarding the environment, the back-to-the-land movement, a heightened interest in spiritualism and alternative religions, and even the changing view of the earth provided by the photos of it shot by astronauts from space – by which the earth itself could be seen as a sculptural object.

Michael Heizer perhaps most strongly articulated both the rejection of commodification and the attraction to spiritualism. Born in California in 1944, the son of an archaeologist, Heizer grew up with an appreciation of the spaces of the American Southwest and the cultures of the native peoples. His *Double Negative* which I have mentioned above was created in 1969-70. Two chasms 50 feet deep, 40 feet wide and over 1200 feet long were cut in the Nevada desert – a sculpture created by removing rather than accumulating material. The viewer walks through the trench, through the void, the negative of the title, but is unable to view the work as a whole. In 1972-76 also in the Nevada desert Heizer created *Complex City* , a work on an equally large scale as *Double Negative*, but this time above ground and weighing over 9,000 tons, measuring 140 feet in length, 24 feet in height. *Complex City* evokes associations with the pyramids of Egypt as well as with the great pre-Columbian pyramids. Heizer was explicitly aware of the spiritual aspects of this work and its relation to the great religious monuments of past civilizations like Stonehenge in England and the Mayan pyramids. He also was among the artists most specifically linking his preference for creating earthworks with his revolt against the gallery system and the commodification of art. "One aspect of earth orientation," he said, "is that the works circumvent the galleries and the artist has no sense of the commercial or the utilitarian.... One of the implications of earth art might be to remove completely the commodity-status of a work of art and to allow a return to the idea of art as.... more of a religion" (Smithson 246-247).

Heizer's work, on the other hand, also can be seen as illustrating some of the contradictions of earth art. In spite of his rejection of museums and galleries and art as a commodity he exhibited photographs from the work at the Virginia Dwan Gallery, and of course the creation of massive earth works takes even more financial backing than does the creation of easel paintings. Some did not find Heizer's work compatible with "the spirit of the 60s." It was criticized as violating the very earth and space it claimed to revere. Some saw the work as an attack on the environment, others used gendered language to decry the rape of Mother Earth by macho male artists (Kastner 29).

I'd like to move now to the work which perhaps more than any other has come to symbolize for many the Earth Art movement. Robert Smithson's 1970 work *Spiral Jetty* is probably the best-known earth artwork for many reasons. One is the work itself: a simple, elegant form that is instantly recognizable from photographs. Another reason is the film Smithson made with the same title which documents the creation of the jetty in the Great Salt Lake. The film has been seen by many more people than have ever seen the work itself. It was included in the Whitney Museum's major survey of the art of the twentieth century. A third reason is Smithson himself: he was a charismatic figure, a prolific writer, and died an early and dramatic death in a plane crash while viewing the site of his 1973 work *Amarillo Ramp*.

If Heizer illustrates the sacred aspects of earth art, Smithson may be classed with the more profane issues--especially that of recycling waste. Entropy (the tendency of all things to tend towards disintegration) and the irreversible de-differentiation of matter were key concepts in Smithson's writings and art work. He read and admired the works of J.G. Ballard. Smithson sought damaged sites for his work. "The best sites for 'earth art' are sites that have been disrupted by industry, reckless urbanization or nature's own destruction," he maintained. The Great Salt Lake attracted him as a site for his jetty because of the red color of the algae – which reminded him of blood – as well as for the unstable nature of the salt reef and the disruption of nature caused by the lake's salinity. Smithson also was drawn by the man-made damage to the site: the work of the oil drillers and miners in the area. "The Salt Lake piece is right near a disused oil drilling operation and the whole northern part of the lake is completely useless. I am interested in bringing a landscape with low profile up, rather than bringing one with high profile down" (Smithson 297). Looking at the work itself, we can note it is a spiral of black basalt rocks, limestone and earth curling in on itself, measuring 1500 feet in length. The work was completed in 1970 and by 1973 had completely disappeared from view because of the rising waters of the lake. For 20 years the work existed only in films and photographs until it re-emerged in 1993 and 1994, only to disappear again until 2002 when drought in the region returned the *Spiral Jetty* – encrusted with salt crystals – to view. This contingent nature of the work has also contributed to its legend. If one wishes to know whether the *Spiral Jetty* is visible at any particular time one needs to check the water levels posted for the Great Salt Lake on the U.S. Geological Service web site. When Smithson constructed the work the water level was at 4195 feet. If the posted water level is below this, *Spiral Jetty* is visible.

After *Spiral Jetty* Smithson created *Spiral Hill/Broken Circle* in a sand quarry in Emmen, the Netherlands in 1971. He then entered into talks with mining companies in the U.S. for projects that would reclaim land devastated by strip mines and turn it into land art. He saw this as recycling land that could not be restored or cultivated. Unlike other land artists Smithson chose to work not in wilderness or pristine sites but in industrial or damaged sites or even urban sites. One of his most famous pieces is "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic New Jersey." Smithson himself was born in New Jersey (William Carlos Williams was his pediatrician), a fact which also sets him apart from the other earth artists I will be discussing in this paper as they were all born in California. On his tour of Passaic (on a bus from the Port Authority terminal in New York) Smithson used an Instamatic camera to photograph such "monuments" as a bridge over the Passaic River, a bulldozed road, pipes gushing water into the river, and a sand box. In another piece on an urban site, Smithson named Frederick Law Olmsted "America's first 'earthwork artist'"(164) for his transformation of a rubbish-strewn site on Manhattan into Central Park. Smithson remarked that the "before" pictures of Central Park reminded him of strip-mined regions he had seen in Ohio (158).

Smithson's tragic early death kept him from realizing these mining recycling projects. However, his wife and others completed *Amarillo Ramp*, and Smithson's influence lives on in other ways as well. In postmodern writers like Pynchon and DeLillo we can see similar interests in entropy and waste. Pynchon was writing *Gravity's Rainbow* during the same period when Smithson was creating his major earth works. However, I think we can see Smithson's legacy most clearly in *Underworld*. Klara Sax's enormous art project recycling warplanes in the desert owes a great debt to the earth artists of Smithson's generation. Listen to Klara as she described her work to an interviewer from French television: "This is a landscape painting in which we use the landscape itself. The desert

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is central to this piece. It's the surround" (DeLillo 70) or to Nick as he mused: "I wondered if the piece was visible from space like the land art of some lost Andean people" (126). DeLillo explicitly invokes the major land art pieces of the 1960s and '70s which also saw themselves in relation to prehistoric monuments.

Similarly, *Underworld*'s preoccupation with waste and what we are to do with it can be seen as another expression of the passions which motivated Smithson. "It seems that when one is talking about preserving the environment or conserving energy or recycling one inevitably gets to the question of waste and I would postulate that there's a certain kind of pleasure principle that comes out of a preoccupation with waste... there's a kind of equation between the enjoyment of life and waste" (Smithson 303). Like Smithson, Klara Sax is known for work based on recycling waste and using castoffs. Nick Shay's "firm was involved in waste. We were waste handlers, waste traders, cosmologists of waste" (88), and Nick recognized a link between his work and that of Klara, although he dared not articulate it. "I almost mentioned my work to Klara Sax when we had our talk in the desert. Her own career had been marked at times by her methods of transforming and absorbing junk. But something made me wary. I didn't want her to think I was implying some affinity of effort and perspective" (102). And waste and land art come together in DeLillo's description of the Fresh Kills landfill: "three thousand acres of mountained garbage, contoured and road-graded, with bulldozers pushing waves of refuse on the active face" (184) – the bulldozers calling to mind the bulldozers building the *Spiral Jetty* in Smithson's film.

I have organized this paper not only chronologically but also as a literal, physical trajectory from low to high, from Heizer's 50-foot trenches to Smithson's low-lying jetty and the recycling of waste and now to Walter de Maria's marriage of earth and sky in *The Lightning Field*. De Maria himself remarked that this 1977 work is neither of the earth nor the sky but both. "The land is not the setting for the work but a part of the work" – a definition which could apply to all earthworks (Tomkins, "The Mission" 53). *The Lightning Field* also gives me a chance to discuss another aspect of earth art – its sublime aspect, as this work without a doubt evokes the awe-inspiring, terrifying aspects of nature that Edmund Burke cited as "the ruling principle of the sublime" (262). De Maria's work consists of 400 custom-made stainless steel poles with pointed tips arranged in 220 feet intervals on a rectangular grid measuring one kilometer in width and 1.6 kilometers (one mile) in length. The poles average 20 feet in height. The work is located on a high desert plain (7200 ft) in southwestern New Mexico, an area with the highest density of lightning in North America. When lightning strikes the field the visible electrical charges light up the sky producing a sublime effect – the power and terror of nature at her most elemental. It is an effect that very few have been privileged to witness. For one thing the site itself is remote – about a three-hour drive from Albuquerque with no public transportation available, and the number of visitors is limited to six per day and only allowed from May to October. It would be more accurate to say six visitors are allowed each night because all visitors must spend one night in the cabin provided by the Dia Foundation which maintains the site. Lightning strikes on only a few days each month – like Smithson's *Spiral Jetty, Lightning Field* is very much a contingent work of art. But those who have visited the site have not been disappointed even if they have not been lucky enough to observe a lightning strike because the field of shining poles is in itself awe-inspiring as the poles catch the rising or setting sun. In midday the poles all but disappear to the eye but throughout the day as the sun's angle shifts the light on the poles changes constantly. As one visitor put it "What you come here for is the light, not the lightning" (Tomkins, "The Mission" 52).

Tomkins' remark provides a perfect bridge to the next artist I want to discuss – James Turrell. Continuing our journey both through time and in an upward trajectory we can now turn to James Turrell's *Roden Crater*, a work begun in 1974 in the great era of earthworks but still in progress and not expected to be completed before 2006. In his gallery works as well as in *Roden Crater* Turrell's medium is light, not the effects of light, but light itself. He has made light tangible, so much so that visitors have to be restrained from walking directly into his works in an effort to touch the light. In an extinct volcano outside Flagstaff, Arizona Turrell has been working to create his master work – "a naked-eye observatory for celestial events" (Tomkins, "Flying into the Light" 62). To prevent any interference from man-made light Turrell persuaded the local authorities of Coconino County to pass a "dark sky" ordinance, outlawing upward directed lighting within 35 miles of Roden Crater (Tomkins, "Flying into the Light" 64-65). The work will capture light from the sun, moon, and stars. Nine underground chambers with tunnels and openings are being constructed to receive celestial light at precise moments of the solar and lunar calendars, in a conscious reference to sacred sites of the past also constructed so that the sun entered an opening precisely on the solstice or other significant moments. In the crater's enormous bowl one can lie on one's back on a limestone platform, with one's head lower than one's feet, and experience "celestial vaulting" where the sky appears as a dome. Although Turrell has had more than a million cubic yards of rock and earth moved to sculpt the shape of the crater's rim into a uniform height, he sees his work as different from that of Smithson and other earth artists because he wants *Roden Crater* to look untouched from the outside. "It's a powerful geological form. I wanted to keep the strength and beauty of that form. This is different from the land art of Smithson and the others. They want to make a place. Of course Roden Crater is a place.... But I don't want it not to be a volcano" (Tomkins, "Flying into the Light" 71).

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Turrell's insistence that *Roden Crater* be seen as a volcano keeps "earth" an essential part of this celestial work.

The many years of work required and enormous cost of *Roden Crater* as well as the political maneuverings necessary to get the "dark sky" ordinance passed exemplify the complexities and contradictions that have faced the earth art movement ever since its inception. Far from being a "simple," "natural" movement, earth art requires considerable economic and political efforts, a feature perhaps most evident in the work of Christo and Jeanne-Claude. Their *Running Fence* in California (1972-76), for example, required eighteen public hearings, three sessions at the Superior Court of California and a 450-page Environmental Impact Report.

The earth art movement has outlasted many of the other movements which had their origin in the 1960s and has spread far beyond the U.S. Art outside the galleries and museums has become a permanent part of the visual landscape, affecting our perceptions of both art and the earth.

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