

Earthworks Art



Michael Heizer. *Water Strider*, 1983-85. Effigy Tumuli, Illinois

Begun in the late 1960s and coinciding with the inception of the sociopolitical environmental movement, Earthworks art briefly took the art world by storm and almost as quickly receded from the spotlight. Its proponents and creators have been accused, variously, of attempting to save the natural environment and of attempting to destroy it, although the movement may or may not have anything to do with the natural environment as thought of politically. Principles espoused by the earliest practitioners of Earthworks art had less to do with the impact of humanity on the environment than with a rebellion against the gallery system, which dominated the art world at the time. These early Earthworks pioneers considered the natural landscape, particularly that of the American West, to be their medium and thought that the physical immersion of the viewer in the environment created by the piece itself (or representation thereof) was paramount.

Paradoxically, it was a gallery patron, Virginia Dwan, who provided the private funding for several of the earliest and most influential large-scale Earthworks pieces, all of which were created far from her New York gallery. This gallery, however, was probably the birthplace of the movement, drawing together many of the movement's creators, such as Michael Heizer, Walter DeMaria, and Robert Smithson. It is worth noting that several of these artists were present during the creation of each other's early works.

Early Innovators and Works

Michael Heizer

A sculptor born to a family of geologists, Michael Heizer had already begun to produce large-scale works in the American West when Virginia Dwan asked him to be part of her seminal *Earthworks* exhibition in 1968. Prior to that, Heizer and Walter DeMaria had toured the country together searching for potential sites. Heizer's early works include *Nine Nevada Depressions*, *Displaced-Replaced Mass*, *Complex One/City*, and *Double Negative*. Of the latter work, two massive bulldozer incisions into the landscape which face each other across a wide chasm, one critic at the time said: "it proceeds by marring the very land, which is what we have just learned to stop doing." (Beardsley) Heizer continues to work producing large-scale Earthworks. When completed, his *Complex One/City*, begun in 1972, will be part of a complex of buildings evoking the prehistoric native constructions of the region. (Beardsley, Korp)

Walter DeMaria

Perhaps best known for his extravagantly expensive, sprawling work, *Lightning Field*, DeMaria was one of the seminal creators in the movement. His first work appears to have been two chalk lines running parallel for a mile in the Mojave Desert. He created a similar work, *Las Vegas Piece*, in 1969 and *Lightning Field* in 1974, that being a collection of 400 sharpened stainless steel poles set on a mile-by-half-mile grid in New Mexico. In 1977, John Beardsley noted that even without the presence of lightning, the piece is of "dimensional, directional space with an understated, almost immaterial means." (Korp)

Robert Smithson

Known also for his writings about his work, he said of his most famous piece, *Spiral Jetty*, “A dormant earthquake spread into the fluttering stillness, into a spinning sensation without movement.... From that gyrating space emerged the possibility of the *Spiral Jetty*.” (Korp) Smithson believed in the existence of an interaction between the site of a piece and what he termed the “nonsite” or the piece in a foreign setting, evoking its absence from its natural environs. His works in reclamation projects (discussed later in this report) were involved with affecting, rather than aesthetically restoring, damaged land sites. (Frost-Kumpf)

Nancy Holt

Though not supported by Virginia Dawn (seemingly, no women are) (Boettger), Nancy Holt was familiar personally with Heizer, DeMaria, and Smithson, having known them in New York. She also used the spare scenery of the American West to set her pieces, most notably, her *Sun Tunnels*, created in 1973. This piece, along with Heizer’s *Complex One/City* seems to have been the first of the contemporary Earthworks to make use of the changing elements, particularly shadows created by the motion of the sun. Like many native earthen creations (if one considers concrete earthen), it is aligned with the sun on the solstice. (Beardsley) Currently, Holt is at work on a reclamation piece to be called Sky Mound, which would turn a New Jersey landfill into an array of astrologically-oriented mounds. The project is on hold while environmental tests are done and funds are raised. (Frost-Kumpf, getty.edu)

Tools and Forms of Earthworks Art

The tools and materials of Earthworks art include bulldozers, dynamite, asphalt, concrete, and other man-made materials, as well as stones, twigs, feathers, leaves, trees, and the land itself. Some Earthworks art makes use of the surrounding landscape as part of the art and attempts to integrate the art within the environment. Other Earthworks art, particularly the early works, are more involved with creating art by manipulating the

landscape, such as a sculptor might manipulate clay. Regardless, a work's environment (or even its conspicuous absence) plays a heavy role in all earthworks art. Later works, particularly those by British artist Andy Goldsworthy, attempt to respect the natural environment and have introduced the photograph as an accepted method of presenting the subject. Although photographs had been used in Earthworks from the movement's inception, it was these later artists who relied on the photographic medium as a way of presenting their works to achieve minimal impact upon the existing environment.

Environmental Reclamation

A particular movement within Earthworks is that of reclamation art. This name might be deceiving, as not all works of reclamation art involve "reclaiming" the natural landscape. Some do, but others use the man-made scars on the land (such as landfills, strip-mines, and the like) as a foundation and build upon them as works of modern art.

Past, Present, Future

Although the original Earthworks pieces were created as a means for artists to escape the stultifying and self-referential gallery system and expand their media to include the land itself, it is difficult to ignore seeming similarities between the works produced by this movement and prior works by prehistoric peoples and more recent large-scale sculptors. If *Spiral Jetty* is Earthworks art, who is to say that *Mount Rushmore*, which predates the movement by 30 years, is not? Though some early Earthworks artists did recall native works in the forms and orientation of their works, it is more recently that artists have begun to draw more clearly delineated connections between the earth and landscape art of the past and the Earthworks art of the present and future.

References and Resources

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