

The History of Land Art, Its Styles and Contemporary Artists, and How to Draw Inspiration from It.

The creative practices using nature as a material and taking place in outdoor environments have existed since the dawn of civilization. Throughout ages, landscape has been treated with different intentions and visions. In the 20th century, a contemporary art movement appeared and was named Land art. The creations of this movement are stunning inspirations for architectural and creative designs taking place in natural landscapes.

It can be made by directly sculpting the land into earthworks or by building structures using materials such as rocks, wood, sand but also the less materially graspable features such as perspective, water and light. While encompassing a wide range of activities, the common names for these works are “earth art”, “earthworks”, “environmental art” and “land art”. The complexity of Land art lies in the variety of its creations, its internal contradictions and the fact that not all the creators labeled ‘Land artists’ today defined themselves as such. To understand Land art, it is essential to dive deep into its History and look at its key artworks.



Martin Hill and Philippa Jones, *Synergy*, 2009 | Courtesy of Martin Hill

1 - The History of Land art

Land art's appearance in the USA (1960s-70s)

The specific economic and social context of the United States in the 1960s & 1970s sets the stage for the emergence of Land art. It was part of a wider conceptual movement that questioned the traditional framing of art as it was seen as too elitist and separated from life. This return to nature was also impulse by the appearance of the ecologist movement and raising awareness of the consequences of humankind's behavior on the planet. In 1962, Rachel Carson published the book *Silent Spring* where, for the first time, the negative impact of pesticides on the environment was shown. An increasing number of artists decided to leave the city and explore the world to find a new canvas. It was about experiencing space and horizon in a new way and changing the scale of the artwork, reminding the human being of its smallness.



1. Exhibition views of "Earth Works" (also known as "Earthworks"), by Robert Smithson, with works by Smithson and Robert Morris in the foreground. Dwan Gallery, New York, N.Y., October 1968.
2. Map and Photography of the Non-Sites, by Robert Smithson (1968), Source: Pinterest.

Artists decided to go beyond the restrictive white walls of galleries and museums to create art that couldn't be commodified by the art market. But this defiance contained paradoxes as land artists still needed the gallery to expose representations or traces of their creations, often located in inaccessible and faraway places. Sketches and photographs as well as elements like soil were brought into galleries and museums. Some artists even created installations out of dirt.



Neil Jenney, Dennis Oppenheim, Günther Uecker, Jan Dibbets, Richard Long, and Robert Smithson (left to right) with Thomas W. Leavitt, Director A.D., White Museum of Art, Cornell University.

In 1968, the exhibition *Earth Works* took place in New York and is known to be a foundation event for Land art. The following year, another exhibition named *Earth Art* was organized by Michael Heizer alongside the artist couple Christo and Jeanne-Claude. Multiple exhibitions brought coherence to this movement as well as texts written by artists helping its theorization. A key figure of this movement is the artist Robert Smithson after the publication of his essay *The Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects* the same year.

In 1970, he created one of the most famous land artworks: *Spiral Jetty*. Located in Great Salt Lake, Utah (USA), this earthwork was built using mechanical earth-moving equipment. More than 6,000 tons of basalt rocks were needed to create this 1,500-foot vortex.



Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970.

Being exposed to natural erosion, some artworks have disappeared. To keep a record, land artists documented their creations using photographs, videos and maps. Thanks to these more traditional and tangible works, the artist could exhibit in a gallery. Some artists have also managed to bring land art into the gallery by taking material from the landscape and using it to set up installations.

A wealthy clientele and private foundations were bringing economical support to their creations that could be understandably expensive to make. The economic crisis of the 1970s put an end to their financing. Land art also suffered from the death of Robert Smithson in a plane crash in 1973. However, artists like Charles Ross, Michael Heizer and James Turrell pursued their projects and Land art, as a practice and art form, evolved worldwide leading to new unique expressions.

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2 - Styles and different types of practices

Land art is a broad category that manifests into a variety of forms and shapes. Some projects were monumental and long lasting while others light and ephemeral. And while some artists added material to the landscape, others made the choice to take matter away. To bring clarity

and inspiration, we have decided to propose what we view as some of the key styles and practices.

Earthwork

The term “Earthwork” was first used to name the type of creations with a specific technique implying the displacement of soil by digging. For example, Michael Heizer made large excisions in Nevada to elaborate his artwork *Double Negative* (1969-70).



Michael Heizer, *Double Negative*, 1969. Michael Heizer/©Michael Heizer/Collection Of Museum Of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

For Robert Smithson, the word is derived from a book titled *Earthwork* by Brian Aldiss in 1967.



Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970.

The creation process can imply the use of substantial means in a material and financial aspect. It is one of the most durable techniques used by artists in nature, leaving a long-lasting imprint. This also implies that the artwork evolves with the changes of the environment. *Spiral Jetty* is a perfect example as the color of the lake and the basalt change continuously. The changing color of the lake and its red tone is due to a certain type of organism in the waters.

This ever-evolving aspect of nature is one of our key principles at LASD. Each one of our creations takes into account the never static ecological system and processes.



Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty* (1970), Pinterest.

In 1971, Robert Smithson created Broken Circle in Emmen (Netherlands) for the temporary international exhibition named 'Sonsbeek 71'. Around the rock, a form of jetty is drawn to evoke the dykes of the Netherlands.



Robert Smithson, *Broken Circle*, 1971, Emmen Photo ©Wikimedia Commons/Gerardus

Monumental Land art

Implying a more imposing construction, is the type of Land art we will call Monumental. Similarly, to the Earthworks, they are also long-lasting and durable.

Among the most astonishing creations is *Star Axis* by Charles Ross (1971). Situated in New Mexico, this sculpture is made to be an observatory aligned astrologically. This type of construction is based on knowledge of the solar system and diffusion of light. It leaves the viewer with the feeling of contemplating a mix between an ancient temple and a futuristic building.



Charles Ross, *Star Axis*. Charles Ross/©artist Rights Society (Ars), New York.

Another artwork, that may be less gigantic but surely as emblematic, is *Sun Tunnels* by Nancy Holt. Between 1973-1976, she placed cylinders made out of concrete positioned based on summer and winter solstices. Thus making the sun a piece of the artwork. She also pierces holes in the cylinders to recreate four constellations: the Dragon, Perseus, Colomba and the Capricorn.



Nancy Holt, *Sun Tunnels*, 1973-1976, installation Photo ©Wikimedia Commons/Calvin Chu



Nancy Holt, *Up And Under*, 1987–98. ©holt/Smithson Foundation, Licensed By Vaga At Ars, New York.

In another of her land artworks named *Up and Under*, Nancy Holter reiterated the use of concrete tunnels aligned with natural elements. Here, the cylinders are with the North Star and covered with earth and grass gathered from surrounding locations. The sky also comes into action thanks to water in round shape pools.



Andy Goldsworthy, *Striding Arch*, Colt Hill Photo ©Flickr/Alastair Ross

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With *Striding Arches* Andy Goldsworthy, a renowned British land artist, built a monumental mineral sculpture resisting the passing of time. Nestled in the hills of Cairnhead (Scotland), a series of self-supporting arches stand erect. Each one is composed of 31 red blocs and had to use heavy machinery. He went on to build other monumental arches in Canada, USA and New Zealand. Aside from these imposing works, Andy Goldsworthy is mostly recognized for his more delicate and ephemeral creations (see Ephemeral Land art).

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Natural vegetation landscape art

Instead of adding new indestructible material into the landscape, some land artists decided to use the natural material at hand even if it would disappear with time.



Maya Lin, *Storm King Wavefield*, 2009. Jerry L. Thompson/©maya Lin/Courtesy Pace Gallery

A mesmerizing succession of waves made of grass is how the artwork *Storm King Wavefield* could be best described. Created by Maya Lin and located in Upstate New York, these waves could nearly seem like an unusual natural phenomenon.



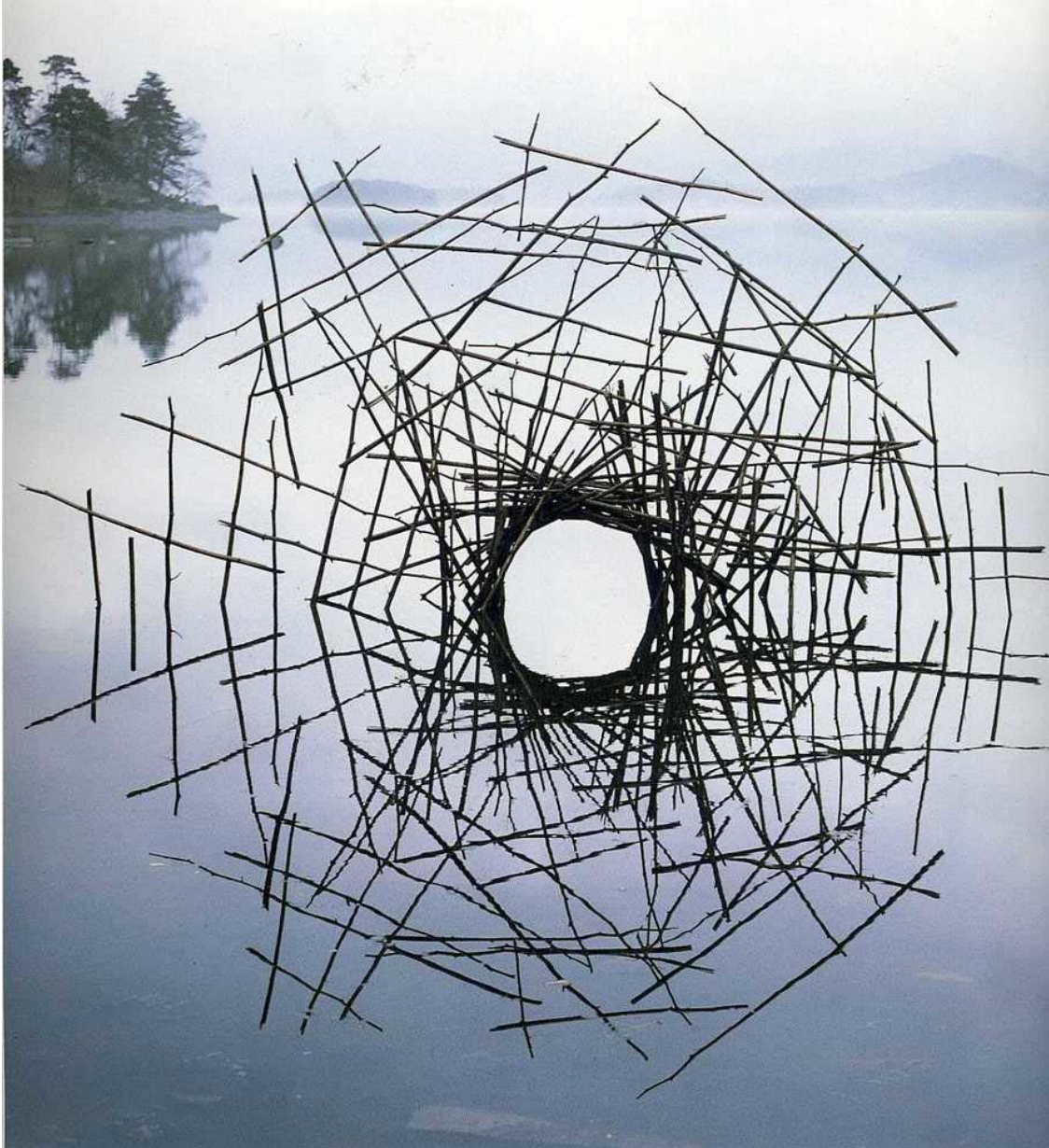
Marinus Boezem, *The Green Cathedral* (1987) Near Almere in the Netherlands,

Another impressive creation made thanks to the natural resources of the landscape is *The Green Cathedral* by Marinus Boezem. It replicates the shape of the Reim's Cathedral de Notre-Dame with 178 poplar trees. Since the artwork was created in 1987, vegetation has grown and is ever-evolving with nature.

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Ephemeral Land Art

By using natural elements that grow and change, some land artists deliberately conceive their creations to be ephemeral. This is the case of some pieces by Andy Goldsworthy. He usually relies on materials such as dead leaves, branches, stone or even ice. The short life cycle of his creations is the essence of their beauty.



Reminding of nature's fragility is his work *Out early morning calm* (1988). The thin branches meticulously placed in the ground form a vortex thanks to the reflection in the lake. Thus, creating an artwork that has a unique moment of contemplation in time.

While the destiny of this type of art is often to disintegrate, other ways of communication such as photography and video have helped to keep a trace of ephemeral land art and enable us to understand its history. With this type of creation, what is more important is the sensorial experience of nature.

Minimal and Conceptual Land art

Pushing the idea of Land art even further, are the more minimal and conceptual land art creations. British artist Richard Long is a key figure of this practice by making minimal and temporary interventions in the landscape. In 1967, he created *A Line Made by Walking* (Somerset, England) by walking back and forth to leave a mark on earth.



Richard Long, *Dusty Boots Line*, 1988. The Sahara.

In 1988, he traced a line in the Sahara Desert for his *Dusty Boots Line*. Richard Long's creation may seem dull to some, but each one could take a lot of time and effort. This can be seen as a way to represent the insignificance of the traces which humans leave on earth and maybe, an invitation to more humility.

To some others, the overly conceptual Land art and a certain megalomaniac tendency was the source of ridicule. In the 1970s, the Polish art collective Druga Grupa put together detailed charts and plans to cut into Giewont, a peak in the Tatra mountains in Poland. The very well-documented earthwork was in reality fake.



Druga Grupa, *Giewont*, 1970. Jacek Maria Stoklosa/Courtesy Cricoteka
Bill Beckley, *Washington's Crossing* (1969)

This made up land artwork is an intelligent caricature of the limits and contradictions of some artists' beliefs and principles. Nonetheless, Land art remains a source of inspiration for many artists and enables us to experience art and space on a whole other scale.

3 - Contemporary Land artist

Today, a variety of artists continue to work with the ideas initiated by Land art and use nature as a source of inspiration.



Richard Serra, *1/11 East-West/West-East*, (Qatar, 2014) ©Stefan Ruiz.

Richard Serra is an American artist known for his monumental sculptures and also for his creations in harmony with nature. In the desert of Qatar, he erected four panels 15 meters high, creating an interesting game of contrasts with the horizon. This undoubtedly references the creations of the pioneers of monumental land art.



Christo and Jeanne-Claude L'Arc de Triomphe, Wrapped, Paris, 1961-2021 — Photo: Wolfgang Volz © 2021 Christo and Jeanne-Claude Foundation

In October 2021, the famous French monument Arc de Triomphe was wrapped in a silvery aluminum-like fabric by artist couple Christo et Jeanne-Claude. Having both passed away, Jeanne-Claude in 2009 and more recently Christo in June 2020, they didn't have a chance to see the final project. Being one of the dreams of Christo, the making of the art piece was a touching tribute to this emblematic couple.



Surrounded Islands, Biscayne Bay, Greater Miami, Florida, 1980-83© Christo and Jeanne-Claude

The covering recalls the early works in other locations such as *Surrounded Islands* in the 1980s. The pink enhanced islands have become one of the world's most emblematic images and goes to show how Land art can shed the light on the beauty of our planet and the necessity to take care of it.



Christo et Jeanne-Claude, *The Floating Piers*, (2016), Italy.

Although his wife died in 2009, Christo's work was strongly attached to her work and contribution. In 2016, at the age of 81 years old, he made *The Floating Piers* in Italy. A stunning and bright land artwork that enable to walk on water linking lands with a surreal yellow path.



Christo, The Floating Piers (Project for Lake Iseo, Italy), Drawing 2016 in two parts. Private collection Photo: André Grossmann ©
2016 Christo and Jeanne-Claude Foundation

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