

Spring Essay, *How did artist's
conception of space, place or
location change since the 1960s?*
*Discuss in relation to no more than
two exhibitions.*
by Chloe Diamond

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The late 1960s saw a rise in Land Art, one of the first instances of art consciously escaping the gallery space and challenging the traditional conventions associated with exhibiting art. Growing commercialisation of art after the Second World War combined with an expanding environmentalist movement encouraged artists to draw inspiration from the earth as a means to reject the commercial gallery while encouraging discussions surrounding our relationship with the environment.¹ Earthworks, so-named by the 1968 *Earthworks* exhibition because of their use of the natural materials as medium, gained prominence in the late 1960s. Otherwise known as Land Art, Land Art represents the rejection of the gallery space and centralised powers, but also urbanisation, industry and consumer culture. In this essay, I will explore the ways in which Land Art challenges the ways in which art is exhibited, and what relevance location and space have on determining the conceptual meaning of art from the 1960s onwards.

The economic expansion of the post-war period in the United States saw the rise of consumer culture as more people had access to disposable income due to rapid industrial growth. As Modern art had reached its truest and purest form in the works of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning,² post-Abstract Expressionism artists sought alternative mediums and means of display that would signify their break with the confines of Modernity. The ironic nature of Pop Art embraced popular culture and kitsch, encouraging viewers to critically analyse their relationship with society by elevating mundane, quotidian objects to the status of fine art, thereby directly connecting real life with the increasingly-isolated art world. With an expanding industrialised environment, anxiety levels were high, with many struggling with a profound disconnect from religious, moral and ethical values during a tumultuous political and social climate.³ These anxieties somewhat mirror those felt during the nineteenth century, which saw a similar trend of artists drawing inspiration from nature and withdrawing to the bucolic through materials, craft and subject matter.⁴ In the mid-twentieth century, the desolate landscapes of the

¹ Nicholas Alfrey, Stephen Daniels, Joy Sleeman, 'To the Ends of the Earth: Art and Environment: Art & Environment', in *Tate Papers*, no.17, Spring 2012, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/17/to-the-ends-of-the-earth-art-and-environment>, accessed 22 March 2019.

² Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969* (USA: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 54-55.

³ Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960's* (USA: MIT Press, 2004), p. 38.

⁴ Joshua C. Taylor, *Nineteenth-Century Theories of Art* (USA: University of California Press, 1987), p. 241.

American Southwest sparked a search for spiritual clarity through nature and the Sublime, as seen in the land art works of the period.

The geographical context of Land Art in the United States is significant, as the escape from the gallery aligned with an escape from the Modern,⁵ associated with New York City following the influx of European modernists during the first half of the twentieth century.⁶ The *Earthworks* exhibition in New York at the Virginia Dwan Gallery in 1968 was arguably the first step taken to reject traditional sculptural forms by featuring artworks consisting of natural materials such as soil, sand and water and combining them with industrial materials like concrete and metal (*Fig 1*). For the pieces that were too large for the confines of a gallery, *Earthworks* relied on other documentation such as photography to exhibit them within a conventional gallery setting, despite potentially undermining the conceptual value of the work itself.

By placing photographic representations of the works on to the gallery wall, the viewer is not required to visit the artwork themselves to understand how it looks. However, many land artists, felt that the atmosphere and experience created by visiting the artwork was vital to its understanding. Robert Smithson established this as a Sublime experience,⁷ and valued the adventure created through the journey taken to reach the artwork,⁸ otherwise known as 'destination art'. However, land artists relied on external documentation to ensure the public were aware of the artworks, such as with Smithson's *Spiral Jetty (Fig 2)* ⁹ Smithson created a video to accompany the work, which could be considered a piece of art on its own accord. Others, like Michael Heizer, rejected photographic documentation as he felt it misrepresented sculpture that could only be known through physical presence. Any documentation associated with the work, such as photography, legal documentation, and coordinates effectively represented the artwork

⁵ Peter Smithson, Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (USA: University of California Press, 1996), p. 105.

⁶ Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (USA: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 63.

⁷ Thomas Dreher, *Robert Smithson: Land Reclamation and the Sublime*, trans. by Gérard A. Goodrow, Andreas Fritsch, *Art Factum* 9, no. 45 (October - November) edn ([n.p.]:, 1992), p. 27.

⁸ Amy Dempsey, *Destination Art: Land Art · Site-Specific Art · Sculpture Parks* (UK: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 2011), p. 80.

⁹ Harry Seymour, *Shifting the Earth's Landscape to Create Conceptual Art* (2016) <<https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/17/to-the-ends-of-the-earth-art-and-environment>> [accessed 22 March 2019].

itself, muting the way in which the artwork would be experienced and interpreted, overshadowing the artists' original intention.

Many artists allowed for representation of remote artworks in the gallery as it allowed the artworks to reach a wider audience. This democratic approach could be considered as a political act against the increasing commodification and elitism of the art industry.¹⁰ *Earthworks* allowed artists to explore new concepts of space in a traditional gallery setting, challenging existing notions of what constitutes art by embracing natural materials as a new type of readymade. Large-scale artworks offered space itself as an alternative medium for artists. Heizer's *Double Negative* consists of the 'displacement of material' which he deemed a 'sculpture in reverse' as the artwork is the experience of empty space, attempting to manufacture a Sublime experience,¹¹ forcing the viewer into a state of isolation and awe through the immensity of the piece by relaying practices of Romantic painters such as Casper David Friedrich (*Fig 3*) and J. M. W. Turner (*Fig 4*) who used scale, subject matter and ethereality to evoke the Sublime.

Heizer stated 'I go to nature because it satisfies my feeling for space', implying that the impact he wanted his works to have were unachievable in both the gallery and the city. The Sublime, typically associated with vast, undisturbed landscapes where human intervention is non-existent or insignificant, forces the viewer into a state of awareness of something greater than themselves. During the Enlightenment, the Sublime compensated for the increasing removal of religious beliefs from societies that had instead found solace in science and technology. However, the sense of awe and fear caused by the Sublime was also present in cities, such as in Turner's *The Burning of the Houses of Parliament* (*Fig 5*), in which nature disrupted the order of the city and the manmade environment, with its power and ability to destroy emphasised by the violent beauty of fire. By the 1960s, following the devastation of two world wars and increasing anxieties surrounding technology with the Cold War, space race and arms race; retreating to nature in search of clarity or release from the pressures of life in the city was common,¹² with many

¹⁰ Smithson, Smithson, p. 24.

¹¹ Dempsey, p. 80.

¹² Charles H. Lippy, *Faith in America: Changes, Challenges, New Directions*, Volume 1 (USA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), p. 51.

embracing Eastern religions,¹³ arguably as an idolised Other,¹⁴ by adopting their cultural and spiritual practices in an attempt to access what was still considered 'uncivilised' and, therefore, morally superior by contemporaneous western standards.¹⁵

Land art that sought to bring nature back into the city, such as works by artists such as Alan Sonfist and Agnes Denes, utilised land and location to provoke controversial discussions around money, resources and inequality. Sonfist's *Time Landscape* (1965) (Fig 6) occupies a 92m² plot of land in lower Manhattan in which plants native to New York City in pre-colonial times continue to grow, 'memorialising ecological losses like... battles'¹⁶. By interrupting the chaotic city environment with nature, Sonfist effectively creates a form of peaceful protest in which expensive, high-demand real estate has been occupied and reclaimed by land and life to which it originally belonged. Now, over five decades later, the effect of *Time Landscape* is even more prevalent, emphasising the shifts in time since the 1960s which are arguably more comprehensible than the comparison between pre and post-colonial times for a contemporary audience. Similarly, Agnes Denes' *Wheatfield* (1982) (Fig 7) occupied two acres of land in lower Manhattan, two blocks from Wall Street and the World Trade Center, facing the statue of liberty,¹⁷ in which she planted and harvested wheat on land worth \$4.5 billion. According to Denes, *Wheatfield* acted as a symbol for 'our misplaced priorities', representing 'food, energy, commerce, world trade and economics' while highlighting environmental issues and world hunger.¹⁸ In both examples, the location and occupation of space was vital in determining the meaning of the artworks that, while challenging existing exhibition conventions, bring art to the public by actively penetrating everyday city life.

Whether in the city or in remote areas of the Nevada desert, the combination of natural materials and man-made materials defined the land art movement, whether through direct use of

¹³ Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 140.

¹⁴ Jane Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* (UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 112.

¹⁵ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (UK: Penguin UK, 2016).

¹⁶ Alan Sonfist, *Natural Phenomena as Public Monuments* (USA: Neuberger Museum, 1978)

¹⁷ Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield - A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan* (1982/2019) <<http://www.agnesdenesstudio.com/works7.html>> [accessed 22 March 2019].

¹⁸ Denes.

readymades or its specific location within an urban setting. In the case of *Double Negative*, the artwork, although consisting only of a clear-cut void into the existing landscape, resembled the same rigidity of machine-made structures, thereby reinforcing the synergy between the natural and the artificial. As Heizer instructed that the artwork be left alone and not maintained,¹⁹ it has since deteriorated, with shrubs reclaiming the structure through cracks in the rocks, reminiscent of ancient ruins that Heizer and other land artists were profoundly influenced by due to their stubborn occupation of space and time. The gallery, on the other hand, exists as a physical structure, but remains ever-changing and to be visited temporarily, essentially acting as a non-place.²⁰ With this, galleries lack any permanence like land artworks seek to imitate. Richard Long's *A Line the Length of a Straight Walk from the Bottom to the Top of Silbury Hill* (1970) (Fig 8) brings the concept of land art into the gallery by creating an indexical print of a performance on a notable ancient site. In each example, the emphasis is on the relationship between humans and the natural world. With Long, that relationship often emphasises the physical mark of humans on the landscape; a subtle but provocative way of encouraging discussions around environmentalism and time.

The artworks featured in the 1968 *Earthworks* exhibition consisted of a variety of assemblages of natural materials that juxtaposed the sterility of the white cube gallery space. Other works, such as *Pomona College Project* (1970) (Fig 9) by Michael Asher, used light, air and sound as types of medium. The existing gallery was manipulated by physical disruptions of the area through partitioning walls that transformed the space into two adjacent triangular rooms connected by a small opening. One side was open to the outside and subject to modulating light and air patterns, whereas the flow of light and air to the other room was severely restricted (Fig 10). The experience of each space depended on the way the viewer navigates the exhibition and varied greatly depending on time of day, ambient sounds, and accessibility.²¹ Light, air and sound, albeit intangible and ephemeral, represent the natural element within the space, thereby emphasising tensions between the developed world and the uninhabited. The abstraction of these

¹⁹ Dempsey, p. 81.

²⁰ Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. by John Howe (USA: Verso Books, 2009).

²¹ Ginger Wolfe, 'Michael Asher Interview', *InterReview*, (2004), p. 2.

elements offers an unusual, transcendental experience unique to that space, relying completely on the environment, the climate, and the existing gallery structure to provide new conceptual experiences.

Asher reuses the existing gallery location by bringing another meaning to something that already holds its own historical context. Although the trend of the white cube that came to dominate the art gallery throughout the 20th century aimed to create a neutral environment on which to exhibit, it too holds its own connotations. In particular, the white cube emerged as an alternative to the traditional way of displaying art, as seen in archaic institutions such as the Royal Academy in London and the Salon in Paris. Due to its emergence alongside Modernism, the white cube aesthetic is associated with particularly Modern ideals of form and purity, constructing a 'supposedly unchanging space... or a space where the effects of change are deliberately disguised and hidden... in an attempt to cast an appearance of eternity over the status quo...'²².

With the white cube's refusal to allow time to penetrate the gallery space, it creates an experience that is both sterile and spiritual, giving viewers the opportunity to fully immerse themselves in the art with as few distractions as possible. In a sense, the modern gallery has adopted the role of a spiritual escape within secular societies. The white cube allows people to step away from everyday life and to the eternity and abstraction of art.²³ However, with the Land Art and other artistic movements from the 1960s onwards, artists challenged existing gallery protocols and placed the art world firmly within its time, with a type of self-awareness that has since come to define Post-Modernism. It is with this that artists challenged existing notions of space, place and location, as the legacy of the art gallery within the art industry has, until the 1960s, been dominant in determining artistic practices and value. By utilising the eternity of land and nature, land artists addressed prevalent environmental concerns whilst critiquing contemporaneous attitudes to nature and spirituality in an attempt to surpass the triviality of the art industry. With the evolution of conceptual art, artists meddled with Modernist concepts of time, creating a domain for Post-Modern artists to continue to challenge notions of space and

²² Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (USA: The Lapis Press, 1986), p. 9.

²³ O'Doherty, p. 9.

location at a time when post-colonial overhang and prevalent social disparity defines authority within art and society.

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Fig 1: Installation view of *Earthworks*, by Robert Smithson, Dwan Gallery, New York, Oct. 1968



Fig 2: Aerial view of *Spiral Jetty*, by Robert Smithson 1970



Fig 3: *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, by Caspar David Friedrich, 1818



Fig 4: *Snow Storm - Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth*, by Joseph Mallord William Turner, 1842



Fig 5: The Burning of the Houses of Parliament, by Joseph Mallord William Turner, 1834-5



Fig 6: *Time Landscape* by Alan Sonfist, 1968 - Present



Fig 7: Agnes Denes pictured in *Wheatfield*, 1982. Courtesy of the artist's website



Fig 8: *A Line the Same Length as a Straight Walk from the Bottom to the Top of Silbury Hill*, by Richard Long, 1970



Fig 9: View from first area looking onto the street, *Pomona College Project*, by Michael Asher, 1970

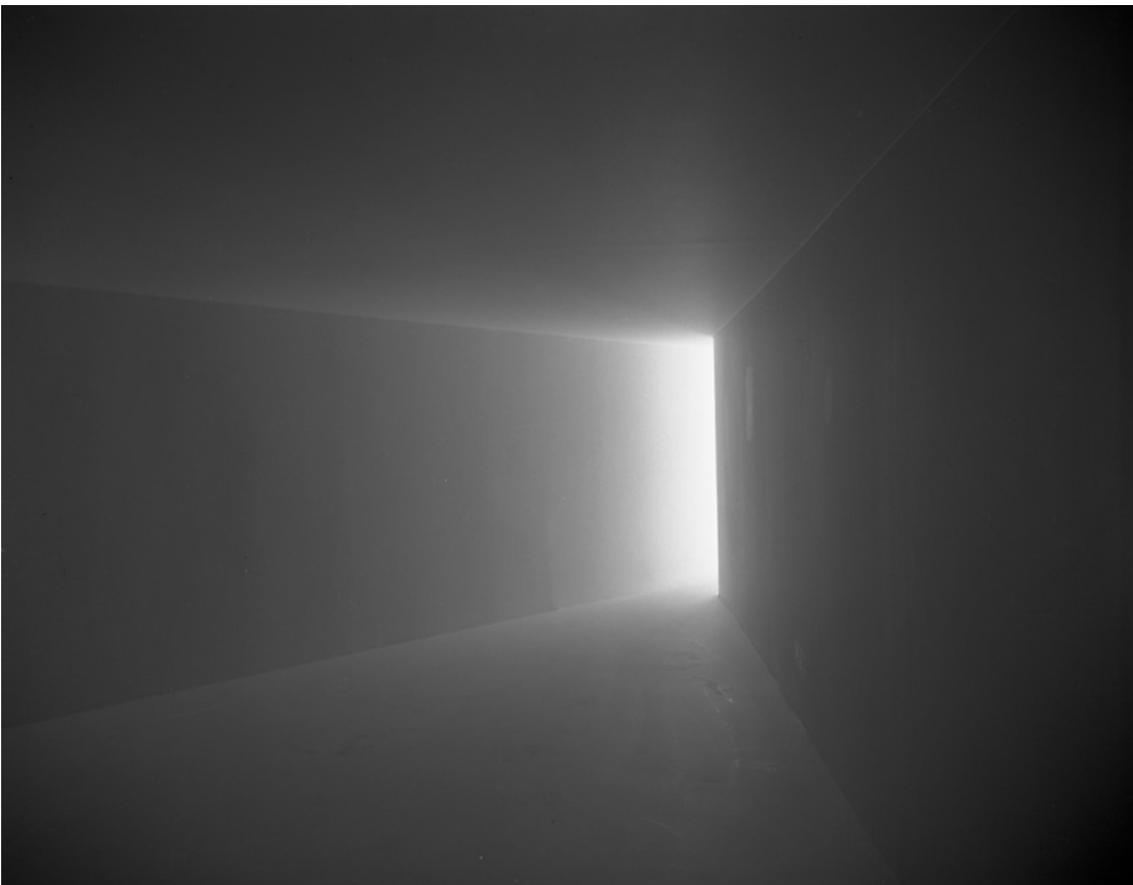


Fig 10: View from the second area looking towards the opening *Pomona College Project*, by Michael Asher, 1970