

INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

Spring 2022 Edition, ISSN 2611-5166, ISBN 9788857592633, DOI 10.7413/18258630118

ENVIRONMENTAL ART

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(First published May 31, 2022)

It. *Arte ambientale*; Fr. *Art environnemental*; Germ. *Umweltkunst*; Span. *Arte ambiental*. Since the 1970s, the term “Environmental Art” has increasingly been used to denote the practice of those artists who have chosen to place their works in nature or to realise them using natural elements. Gradually, it became clear that this was an extensible and usable label for a wide range of artworks and installations, to the point that artistic practices that are antithetical in scope (from minimal sculptural objects to grand gestures in the land) and essence (from impermanent ephemeral works to permanent ones) can be categorised under it. However, what paradoxically seems to distinguish the macro-category of Environmental Art is the choice to privilege natural spaces or natural elements, without however an adequate ecological awareness and often with a high degree of anthropocentrism.

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

In the last 50 years, many “movements”, currents and individual artists have worked with and in nature (Andrews 1999), but the question is: are they automatically to be considered ecological forms of art? The answer seems to be mainly negative. There are many contradictions in artistic expressions that prefer nature as a “location” or as a “construction site”, in which, however, the environmental responsibility of the artists is almost non-existent (Tufnell 2006: 97).

1. Let us begin by considering the best known and most contradictory “historic phenomenon” (Tufnell 2006: 122), namely Land Art, whose heterogeneity cannot be traced back to a movement with its own precise manifesto (Kastner-Wallis 1998: 12; Tufnell 2006: 15). The event that symbolically initiated this non-conformist tendency was the exhibition entitled *Earthworks*, organised at the Dwan Gallery in New York by Robert Smithson (1938-1973) in October 1968 with mostly American and unknown artists. The works, mostly made in open, uninhabited and boundless spaces, were documented in the exhibition through photographs that evoked their rebellious spirit. These transgressive intentions, however – among which the

desire to break out of traditional art circuits stands out – were by no means carried out according to a coherent “ecological” project (Gianquitto 2018: 30). In fact, in order to produce their site-specific works, land artists mostly needed a team of technicians, substantial funding and the blade of a bulldozer.

It is an art for the few that, while rhetorically rejecting the consumerism and mainstream of the art world of the time, wants to be just as iconic and exclusive. In order to be able to experience the earthworks, the public has to make long journeys, have aerial visits to the sites, and spend time away from urban centres in the hope of being able to contemplate the works in favourable atmospheric and environmental conditions.

One of the most famous and evocative works, Robert Smithson’s environmental sculpture *Spiral Jetty*, at Rozel Point on the Great Salt Lake in Utah, is an emblematic example of the ontological instability of many Land Art works. *Spiral Jetty* is in fact mostly submerged and inaccessible, but periodically it emerges as the lake level changes naturally. Furthermore, the fruition of this legendary (Tufnell 2006: 32) and massive work – in the form of an enveloping spiral, 457 metres long and 4.5 metres wide, built from mud and rocks from the site, winding in an anti-clockwise direction – is only entirely possible by flying over it with a helicopter. Walter De Maria’s *The Lightning Field* of 1979 is also as colossal as it is unstable. Without a thunderstorm, the sublime light show does not begin and the picturesque panorama turns into an ordinary expanse, with nothing on the horizon but four hundred metal poles attracting lightning within a square kilometre of land in New Mexico. Visitors can stay on site in a small hut for 24 hours hoping for thunderstorms.

Both works are monumental anti-monuments, revealing both the megalomania of the founding fathers of Land Art and the anthropic heart of the Land Art movement. Without the constant maintenance of the non-profit D.I.A. Art Foundation, *Spiral Jetty* and *The Lightning field* would be overwhelmed by the forces of nature, which in many Land Art works are clearly contrasted. This also highlights the ambiguous relationship between Land Art and museum institutions, which is short-circuited in Michael Heizer’s *Double negative* (1969-70). A gigantic work, a monumental excavation (15 m. deep, 10 m. wide, 560 m. long) realised thanks to the financial support of the gallery owner and patron Virginia Dwan, which became part of the permanent collection of the MOCA in Los Angeles in 1985. The opposed museum institution was thus gradually sought out and pursued to ensure artistic dissemination of the artworks (Baker 1983: 74), which are paradoxically enjoyed by most people as traditional images and not as lived experiences (D’Angelo 2001: 204).

2. In the America shaken by the events of 1968, another innovative artistic tendency can be identified: the California movement launched in 1971 by the exhibition *Transparency, Reflection, Light, Space: Four Artists*, in which Peter Alexander, Larry Bell, Robert Irwin and Craig Kauffman participated at UCLA University. Although he was not among the four artists at UCLA, the best-known exponent of the so-called Light and Space Movement became – with time – James Turrell (1943), who since 1966 had dedicated himself to the realisation of “intense perceptual experiences” (Tufnell 2006: 116) and had collaborated with Irwin on a project to be realised within the context of the LACMA-funded “Art and Technology” program (Cateforis et al. 2018: 79-90).

Beginning in the 1970s, Turrell worked on Skyspaces – openings on the roof of enclosed spaces from which to have a meditative experience while admiring the sky, as if it were “a solid object” (Tufnell 2006: 117) – and on the complex project of the Roden Crater in the Painted Desert in Arizona, in which, inspired by Merleau-

Ponty, he created powerful perceptual experiences with sunlight, moonlight, celestial light and starlight (Goodwin 2016). The loss of orientation through a sublime bath of light is instead offered by Turrell to the viewers of the work *Bridget's Bardo* at the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg (2009-2010), an immense light installation of the *Ganzfeld Pieces* series, 700 square metres of which are illuminated by red and blue light allowing the viewer to have a sensitive experience of light and almost tangible space (Figal 2018: 311, 317), while the chromatic character of light has its primary "ecological" significance in an eminently philosophical sense (Gambaro 2020a, 2020b). Even if his research is usually classified under Environmental Art (see for instance Balzarotti 1988), Turrell is rather interested in perception and the limits of experience; nature with its perceptual atmospheres is evoked to cause disorientation and lead the viewer, through powerful immersive experiences, toward the sublime.

3. Most environmental artists of European origin mainly produced ephemeral landscape artworks, simple performative experiences in nature, small scale sculptural practises or experimental actions. Among the pioneers of European Environmental Art, Richard Long (Bristol 1945) stands out. In extreme solitude, he carried out light and imperceptible, but conceptually powerful and ground-breaking pieces such as *A Line Made by Walking* (1967). The work, made when he was only 22 years old, was compared by Rudi Fuchs to Kasimir Malevic's *Black square* for its "radical rupture with the art of the past" (Tufnell 2006: 23). His art and work are closely linked to the body, the breath and the footsteps perceived as the artist explores the landscape. Long does not use any invasive tools to appropriate nature, nor does he create "expensive" works, expressions in his opinion of a "true capitalist art" (Gablick 1984: 44) typical of the production of some American land artists, which is why Long defines his artistic research as the antithesis of American Land Art. On the other hand, both can be considered "part of the art installation culture" (Malpas 2005: 28) and share the same apolitical essence.

More engaged, albeit not without contradictions, is the artistic research of Christo (1935-2020) and Jeanne-Claude (1935-2009), which is constantly crossed by a democratic aspiration. The couple always wanted to present very expensive but free works to the public, "without reservations, nor owners" (Gianquitto 2018: 84), financed by the sale of sketches, drawings and photographs of the projects and not supported by sponsors. However, if we think of the colossal packaging, although made of recycled material and in turn entirely recyclable, they seem to aim more at their shock-effect than at launching a clear ecological message. An emblematic example is offered by *Surrounded Islands* (1980-1983), a spectacular work in which eleven islands in Miami's Biscayne Bay were wrapped in brilliant pink for two weeks. The realization required a budget of \$3.5 million and the collaboration of 430 people for a work visible and enjoyable only by helicopter (Malpas 2005: 162). More "earthly" is *The Floating Piers*, a 3 km long, 5.5 m wide, dahlia-yellow fabric walkway that was set up over Lake Iseo for 16 days in the summer of 2016. At the end of the installation, all the components were removed and industrially recycled. Nevertheless, for his aerial patrols of the areas to be covered (be they atolls or lakes), Christo has a strongly anti-ecological tendency which some critics have called "vandalistic", and his research remains absolutely anthropocentric (Auping 1983: 93, Gianquitto 2018: 30).

More minimalist is the British Artist Andy Goldsworthy, known for his ice sculptures as well as artworks with leaves and sticks that have no explicit ecological purpose. Although the artist is pleased that his snow-works or landscape works can stimulate ecological reflection, this is by no means the intention of the works, because if it were, his artistic production would be dependent on it and thus weakened (Tufnell 2006: 93). When a *Midsummer Snowballs* (2000) was placed near the London Headquarters of BP, the artist was both shocked and indignant because he saw his work being exploited for environmental goals when it did not have – to use Danto’s term – that aboutness. *Midsummer Snowballs* was not conceived around the question of climate change, but “to touch the chords of desire for nature in people” (Malpas, 2005: 179). One of the aspirations of Goldsworthy’s art is in fact “touching nature” (Tufnell 2006: 9) in an erotic relationship that reveals an implicit tendency to anthropomorphise (Malpas 2005: 172). The relationship with nature is by no means neutral, but sexual and gendered, so much so that some critics have found a “macho posturing” in it (Malpas 2005: 173). Contrary to what one would expect, therefore, it is often not ecological or green purism that distinguishes European Environmental Art. It is rather formal aesthetic values (such as beauty) or mystical values (such as mortality, decay, disintegration) that inspire the deliberately and provocatively apolitical practices of many artists who work with nature.

Nevertheless, there are exceptions, as shown by the Italian Gianfranco Baruchello (1924), an eclectic and engaged artist who deserves to be mentioned in this context at least for his Duchampian action *Agricola Cornelia S.p.A.* (1973-1981), the Farm Art at the outskirts of Rome where he raised animals, produced milk, grew potatoes and beets, but did not consider himself a farmer at all, but an artist grappling with a daily and total ready-made (Baruchello 1981). Everyday life was transfigured to art, thanks to his self-conscious assertion that “farming land could also be considered a work of Art” (Baruchello, Martin 1983: 35). *Agricola Cornelia S.p.A.* was therefore intended both as a political gesture criticising bourgeois culture, but also as a tireless meditation on animal life (with its rhythms of birth, growth, death), on natural cycles, on the growth of plants, on food, on the economic dynamics linked to agriculture. Farm Art was therefore a reaction against the excesses and wastefulness of Land Art, especially against its indifference to social hardship, given that in 1974 Christo wrapped Porta Pinciana in Rome, when the Roman suburbs looked like South American “slums” (Baruchello, Martin 1983: 36). Nevertheless, Baruchello’s committed research was not “ecological”, but aesthetic-philosophical with evident Kantian resonances (Iannelli 2021).

The various and heterogeneous forms of Environmental Art considered here cannot be considered expressions of ecological art, since human action either profoundly and irreversibly modifies the appearance of the landscape (as in the case of American Land Art) or uses (albeit temporarily) invasive and polluting materials and/or instruments (e.g. Christo), or rejects a specific environmental issue as an artistic intention (e.g. Goldsworthy) or prefers a more sophisticated political-philosophical influence (e.g. Baruchello), in any case showing itself to be fully anthropocentric.

To conclude, the critical and theoretical positions on the impact of Environmental Art are the most disparate: some, like Crawford, maintain that many environmental artworks are aesthetic affronts to nature by “forcibly assert[ing] their artifactuality over against nature” (Crawford 1983: 57). There are those who, like Emily Brady (2007: 291), believe that an aesthetic regard for nature can also be solicited by some

invasive works of Land Art (such as *Spiral Jetty*) capable of drawing attention indirectly to the destructive human impact on nature, or those who, like Elisabeth Baker, maintain that earthworks, as stages of an artistic pilgrimage, indirectly exercise a “preservational effect” on the territory (Baker 1983: 83), even though they are not forms of “ecological art”.

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HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

F. Iannelli, *Environmental Art*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Spring 2022 Edition, URL = <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2022/spring/EnvironmentalArt.pdf>, DOI: 10.7413/18258630118.

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F. Iannelli, *Environmental Art*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Vol. 5, Milano, Mimesis, 2023.