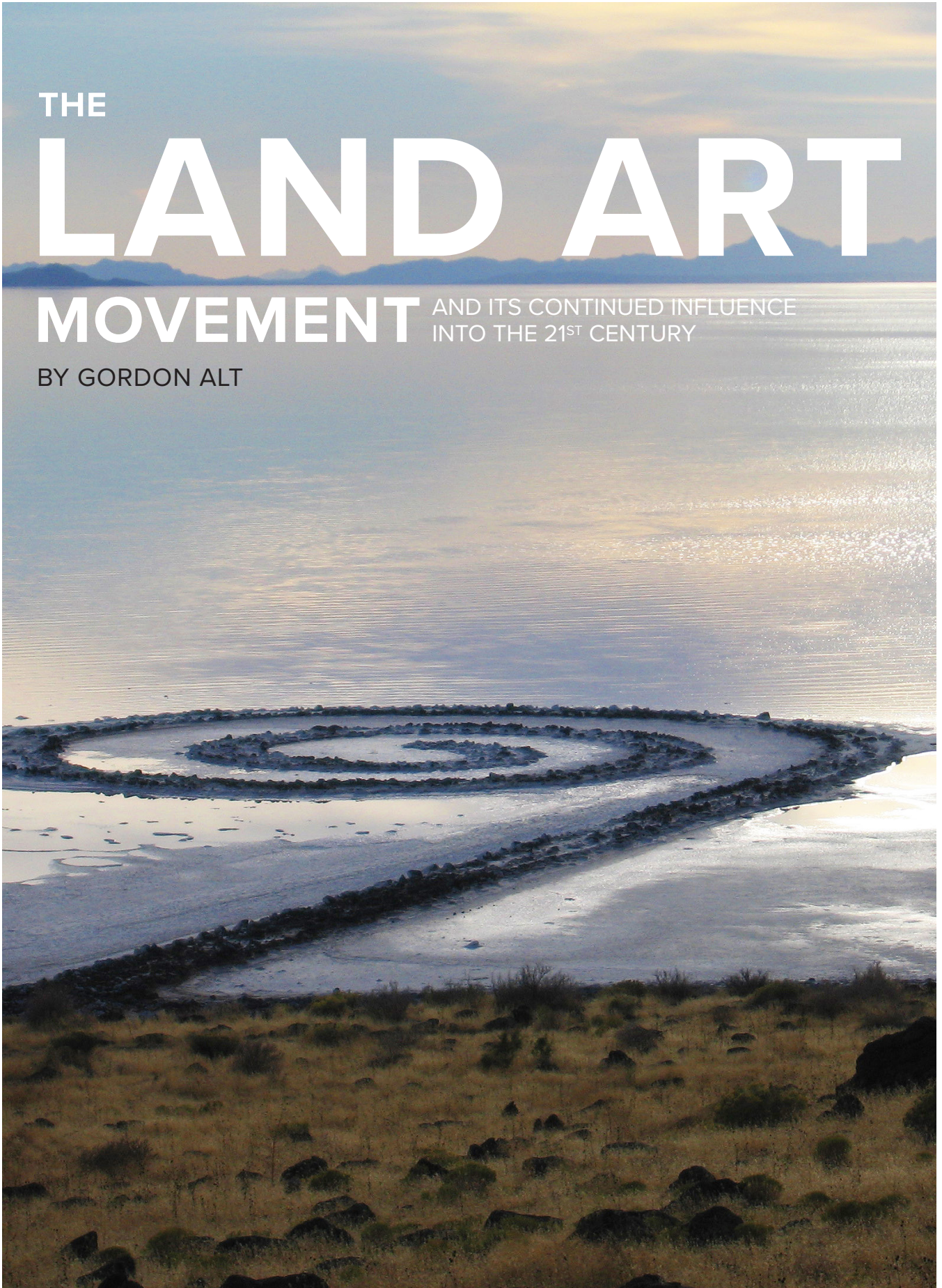


THE LAND ART

MOVEMENT AND ITS CONTINUED INFLUENCE
INTO THE 21ST CENTURY

BY GORDON ALT





Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*. Created in 1970, this is the most iconic work of the early Land Art Movement. Smithson, using material from near the site, extended a narrow reverse spiral out into the Great Salt Lake in Utah.

Photo: Netherzone, Wikimedia Commons.

Last year Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* project, located in the Great Salt Lake in Utah, celebrated its 50th anniversary. Created in April 1970, it is without doubt Smithson's most successful work, as well as the most iconic structure of the Land Art Movement, which began to emerge in the 1960s and the 1970s.

Smithson, along with a small group of like-minded artists, decided to look beyond his studio life in the city and move out into areas where he could be closer to nature and work with the natural environment. The group also focused on protesting against the significant commercialization of art in the city centers, which were dominated by commercial art galleries, museums, and powerful curators and critics. They chose instead to look outside the traditional art community and move their projects closer to the natural settings that would incorporate their new vision—sometimes to very remote places across the United States. The movement generated a specific following within the art community, and the artists in the movement were eventually able to garner sufficient financial support for their projects from prominent foundations and generous donors.

As many of the project sites required visitors to make a pilgrimage great distances to view the work, during their various installations, Smithson and the other Land Art artists usually chose to document their work and process with a photographic record and with film. This eventually allowed them to share their work throughout the art community and generate enormous awareness and support for their projects. Today one of the original supporters of the early projects, the Dia Art Foundation, now curates and administers the *Spiral Jetty* and a number of other early Land Art Projects.

The Land Art Movement generally refers to those projects that blend and relate to their environment. Many are actually made from the materials located at or near the sites where they are constructed. The Land Art Movement has also been called the Earth Art Movement and Earthworks. While most of the projects were created in the United States and Great Britain, Smithson's *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill* was created in Emmen, the Netherlands, and Marinus Boezem's 1987 project, *The Green Cathedral* is also in the Netherlands. Toward the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first

century, projects inspired by the Land Art Movement can be found in several countries.

Many of the earlier Land Art projects seem to reflect references to ancient and prehistoric sites, such as Stonehenge, the talayots in Mallorca, the native American petroglyphs, and the Nazca Lines in Peru. Like these ancient sites, many of the Land Art projects often relate to the spiritual center found in their structures. In 1969, Robert Smithson was photographed at the prehistoric burial site, Pentre Ifan, at Pembroke, Wales, after traveling to other ancient sites such as Stonehenge in his trip to Europe. His notebooks from 1966 thru 1968 also show his interest in monolithic shapes juxtapositioned over natural settings.

When Smithson developed the *Spiral Jetty*, he chose a site on the northeastern shore of the Great Salt Lake in Utah.

With construction machinery and a crew, he collected material from neighboring areas to create the structure. Primarily made up of basalt rocks, salt crystal, and earth, he created a long narrow reverse spiral from the shore out into the lake. It was 1,500 feet in length and the material weighed roughly 6,600 tons. A few months later, when he returned to the site, he was unsatisfied with the structure and had the crew reinstall the *Jetty* to its current design. At the time of the initial installation, the water almost covered the structure. Several years later, after the region suffered a long drought, the water receded and the lakebed was left with just moist and cracked soil. This is an example of what Smithson had expected in the ongoing life of this structure, as over time it will continue to change with age and erosion—a reminder of the temporary nature of the earth.



Andy Goldsworthy, *Fold*. This is one of the 48 “sheepfolds” that Goldsworthy has explored and restored or modified in the remote area in Cumbria. Many of them date back hundreds of years and all of them were in different states of repair. Starting in 1996 he began to work on these sheepfolds to create something unique across the landscape, highlighting their historic and artistic importance.

Photo: Wikimedia Commons.



Christo & Jeanne-Claude, *The Gates*. *The Gates* was a site-specific work created in New York Central Park in 2005. It consisted of 23 miles of colored nylon fabric and it was installed in the winter to add bright color to the otherwise bleak landscape in the city.

Photos: (Above) Delaywaves, Wikimedia Commons; (Below) Morris Pearl, Wikimedia Commons.







Michael Heizer, *Double Negative*. In 1977 Heizer used dynamite to carve out a deep cut in a Nevada mesa near Overton. After carving the walls, he created a massive Land Art piece with two positive sides with a deep negative cut in the center of the barren landscape.
Photo: Clf23 at English Wikipedia.



Robert Smithson, *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill*. In 1971 Smithson created the first major Land Art piece outside Britain and the United States at a quarry in Emmen, The Netherlands. In a sand quarry, he carved a circle with two interfacing canals with water and a large boulder in the center. He used the material available to him near the site to complete this piece. Photo: Gerardus, Wikipedia Commons.

One of his Smithson's other powerful projects is *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill* (1971) at a sand quarry in Emmen in the Netherlands. Standing at 140 feet in diameter, it is made up of sand topsoil and has a large boulder at its center, material gathered from the area adjacent to the site. It is a round structure on the edge of a quarry with two channels for water mirroring itself on each side, like a "yin and yang" visual symbol. The two opposing elements he created allow the water to enter the channels from each side, creating the reverse visual image. Sadly, while Smithson was working on another Land Art project in Texas, he died in a small plane accident while he was just in his mid-thirties.

Michael Heizer, one of the early Land Art members, has been active since his early twenties; most of his work is in California and Nevada. Like Smithson, he had worked in New York City and he decided to leave the city to work in the deserts out West. One of his early projects is the

Double Negative (1977), which is on a piece of land that a patron purchased for the work on Mormon Mesa near Overton, Nevada. He initially used dynamite to carve out a deep section of the land, leaving two powerful matching positive sides to interact with the void of the deep slice in the center representing negative space in the land created by the explosions and cutting. One of his most important projects, *City* (1972), is also in the desert. It is now a vast series of powerful monolithic structures made of earth, rock, and sand to create concrete—material that has also been gathered near the site. This project has been developing over several decades and was scheduled to be finished in 2020, but it is still ongoing. When complete, it will be one of the longest sculptures ever created, over a mile long with a cost of several million dollars.

Another early Land Art practitioner is Nancy Holt, the wife of Robert Smithson, who has created important Land Art projects. *Sun Tunnels*, created in 1973, utilized

four massive cylinders that are arranged to react to different positions of the sun. They are collectively 86 feet long and configured in various patterns to more effectively create the desired effect. They are also calculated to react to the Summer and Winter Solstice.

Another important member of this early group is Walter De Maria, who created the *Lighting Field* (1977). He used 400 tall, stainless-steel poles to form a massive grid in the desert in New Mexico. Over a mile long on one side, spaces of the grid are mathematically calculated to have these “lighting poles” effectively interact with active storms to cause a possible lightning strike and interaction with the site. De Maria also liked the site because of an intensified sense of aloneness that only nature can create.

In the 1980s, artist Agnes Denes created *Wheatfield—A Configuration*. Unlike the other Land Art artists who built projects way outside of cities, Denes utilized two acres of land in the city in the shadows of large New York skyscrapers. Here she planted over 1,000 pounds of wheat and tended it over a four-month period. After it was full and mature, she harvested the wheat and donated it to needy populations.

There were other artists who were not directly identified with the Land Art Movement, but who created projects that reflect the ideals of the movement. Christo, for example, is normally recognized for wrapping large buildings and structures in fabric, such as the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. However, he and his wife had projects that fit the model as in the 1970s, when he stretched a massive amount of canvas across the mountainous span of State Highway 325 in Colorado. He also had a project using canvas along a great length of land and the sea in California. Much later, in 2005, his project *The Gates* in New York’s Central Park also created an unusual effect when he stretched 23 miles of fabric walls in various configurations along pathways in the park, creating a series of fabric gates. Also, Donald Judd, who is recognized for his finely made minimalist cubes for gallery exhibitions, cre-

ated a series of 15 very rough cement blocks to be placed in open land outside Marfa, Texas.

The 21st Century has seen a resurgence in interest in Land Art projects. Patrick Dougherty, who is reviewed in a separate article in this issue, has been very active throughout the United States. Also, British artist Andy Goldsworthy has an extensive number of Land Art projects found throughout the country in landscapes and forest settings. He often uses materials that tend to be very ephemeral such as leaves, branches, and twigs that will eventually disintegrate and return to nature. In some projects, he has even used seaweed and ice.

Maya Lin, the American artist who is known for her successful *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* in Washington D.C. has also created successful projects in the manner of Land Art projects. While the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* itself, created by cutting a deep gash in the landscape, could be considered compatible with the Land Art Movement. Her project *Storm King Wave Field* in New York is a powerful project in the Land Art manner. Covering an area on a grassland plot, it is a series of subtle grassy mounds appearing as “waves” undulating through the land.

The Land Art Movement offers extraordinary examples of formal and professional projects and informal amateur projects that continue to interest the public in following their work. Just open Pinterest and review several categories, such as land art, natural settings, pocket parks, and art installations, and you will find hundreds of projects by both professional artists and casual individuals who are creating projects in their own personal urban and rural landscapes. There has also been a renewed interest in the projects of the original Land Art Movement. Just this past January 2021, *The New York Times* shared a virtual exhibition by Highsnobiety of Robert Smithson’s work from his *Museum of the Void*, which includes his early drawings from the 1960s and 1970s. ●

