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Marking the Land in North America

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Disorienting Geographies: Land Art and the American Myth of Discovery

Antonia Rigaud

- 1 Robert Smithson, the most notorious of the land artists of the 1970s, claimed that

The miner who cuts into the land can either cultivate or devastate it... Depending on how conscious he was of nature in himself and the landscape. A mine could be as natural as wilderness. (Smithson 164)
- 2 This statement encapsulates the problematic relationship land artists entertain with the notions of nature, landscape and environment and explains why it is so difficult to find an adequate term to refer to these artworks, which have been referred to either as earthworks or Land Art. The first term was the one used for the first major exhibition of these works at the New York Dwan Gallery in 1968 which presented works by conceptual artists such as Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, or Robert Morris but also people who were to become key figures of the Land Art movement such as Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer or Walter De Maria. The conjunction of conceptual art and of earthworks shows the dual tendency of the Land Art movement, which, while it was presented as belonging to the avant-garde, envisioned the land from an overtly romantic perspective. With time the term Land Art has come to be used more systematically, probably because the juxtaposition of the word land, with its political and geographical connotations, with the word art, which references human-made objects, creates a tension that calls for some theoretical resolution. Both the land on which these artworks are created, and the land with which these artworks are created, is a “thing”, that is, a material object turned into an artistic language, and a “place”, a geographical space that needs to be claimed and defined. In other words the land is here at the heart of an artistic discourse that bears both on aesthetics and culture.
- 3 These works, and the spirit in which they were created, are very much products of the times, as these artists were extremely conscious of the rise of environmentalism and shared a renewed awareness of the land’s susceptibility to catastrophes as suggested by Smithson’s quotation from Emerson “we live ruins amid ruin” (Shapiro 191), or Walter

de Maria's statement, "I like natural disasters and I think that they may be the highest form of art possible to experience" (Tiberghien 52). Michael Heizer, on the other hand, is concerned with disasters created by mankind: "part of my art is based on an awareness that we live in a nuclear era. We're probably living at the end of civilization" (Graziani 150). Heizer's *Dissipate, Nine Nevada Depressions*¹ is perhaps the purest expression of the conjunction between the massive cultural dissatisfaction with the American system that was being expressed in the sixties and the idea of the built ruin that was unconsciously in competition with the landscape itself. In this case, the surface of the land, the soil, is marked by taking it away and getting to the subsoil underneath through methodical excavation. Heizer's concern with nuclear power probably explains the choice of Nevada as a landscape marked by the bomb testings which left their imprint on the soil and one could argue that *Dissipate, Nine Nevada Depressions* is Heizer's own counter-narrative to the nuclear markings of the land. What is significant is that the artistic ambition is on this scale; and that the media in which that ambition was expressed was the land itself. In these works, currents of a specific cultural moment conjoined: rising ecological concerns, industrialization, the atomic age and the sense of how the landscape had been engineered by the state². At the same time, I would argue that it is not the cultural moment that wholly determined the Land Art movement. Rather, looking back, we can see how much these artists belong to a larger American tradition that endows the land with a mythic presence. Indeed, Smithson referred to the land as a "left over arcadia" in a phrase which evokes very clearly his sense of belonging to a tradition where the land is considered both as real and mythical space. The land is thus a concept which these artists come at from various perspectives, as material or ideal, and as something they mark, either by violating it or by celebrating it, in order to rethink the role and function of the artist in relation to his environment, as well as the artwork in relation to the modern tradition that invariably associated it with one sense—sight.

- 4 These artists were for the most part very conscious of a long tradition of American reflections on the land, and their vocabulary and aesthetic framework all bear the impress of this tradition, from which they drew many assumptions that went into their artistic practice. One might argue that land artists redefine the sublime by drawing from a long American tradition that, on the purely artistic side, goes back to Thomas Cole and the Hudson River School, which sought to define in American terms the beauties of the "new continent". Marking the land, in their works, therefore equals orienting oneself in "new lands" through artworks that seem to re-enact a mythical first encounter with the continent.
- 5 In this paper, I would like to give a framework for exploring the way in which Land Art fits into the mythical cultural construction of America as a New World. In creating "natural formations" as in Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*³ or James Turrell's *Roden Crater*⁴ (an extinct volcano the artist has been transforming into a celestial observatory for the past thirty years). Land artists take the discourse of discovery and of domination over the land to replace it within an aesthetic discourse on our relationship to art. Borrowing from the narrative of America's discovery, these artists reshape our artistic experience by turning it into an experience in orientation. I would like to explore the way land artists disorient the viewers in creating a process of loss and ignorance where the sense of knowing space and geography seems to disappear behind a new form of aesthetic experience. Orientation, in these works, is primarily about

making it “through” a space, instead of establishing the proper spectatorial distance from which to view a space.

Reading and Writing the Land: the Land Between Myth and Science

- 6 Land Art establishes itself with relation to geography, the science which describes the earth’s surface, and with relation to earth science, in other words the physical exploration of the earth’s mechanisms and its relationships to the cosmos. A review of the 1968 exhibition of earthworks at the Dwan Gallery in New York characterized the artists exhibited as “artists who reveal their geophilia” (Tiberghien 44). This geophilia calls for an analysis of the type of concern for the earth these artists reveal, as they seem to have two different types of attitudes to the land and to ways of marking their relationship to it. Some seem indeed to be more geographical, more interested in the presentation of the specificities of a landscape which, more than being marked, is presented to the viewers in order to put forward and to extol its inherent sublimity, much as the Hudson River school fastened obsessively upon the most romantic and suggestive panoramas⁵. The other tendency looks at the land from a planetary perspective, creating works that belong within the tradition of observatories, where the land is marked, and its strata uncovered, in order to understand one’s position in relation to the landscape and—it should be noted—also to the heavens. The planetary in this sense shares with the geographical perspective the idea of finding oneself in a place. These artists explore this idea through both its utilitarian purpose and as a joy in itself, the joy of being in motion under the stars, of feeling attuned existentially to the land.
- 7 Art historian Jean-Marc Poinot noted that for the two successive generations of Land Art artists “the two original models are the labyrinth and the observatory” (Tiberghien 152). This typology is particularly relevant when one tries to consider how these artists have marked the land, as it underlines a paradoxical attitude to the land, which can be summed up under the headings of the mythical and the utilitarian. In the mythical perspective, symbolized by the image of going through the labyrinth, the land is coded with symbolic meaning resonant with the entire life cycle—from the womb to the tomb, so to speak, both of which are conflated in the labyrinth. In the maze, the traversal of space is ritualistic and deals with symbolic objects and places. The other attitude that tends to mark the land, or to chart it, or to observe it, is to orient oneself in order to journey through space. In this attitude, the journey is utilitarian and the rules of efficiency govern the mode of traversal. What is traversed has no symbolic weight, but is instrumental to some end. Both seem to encapsulate the paradoxical tradition of American reflections on nature and the land. The two Land Art practices are reminiscent of the first pilgrims’ accounts of the forest as mythical landscape (the howling wilderness that Cotton Mather condemned) as well as of the tradition of marking and surveying which is emblemized by the great surveying expeditions that traversed the West—the Lewis and Clark expedition and John Wesley Powell’s exploration of the Colorado in 1869, that charted the Grand Canyon, being the most famous instances. I would like to explore this double tradition and see how the notion of orientation allows for a reconciliation of these antithetical attitudes. Perhaps the figure which best encapsulates this tension within American visions of the land is that

of Thoreau who, as a surveyor, knew the land from a scientific and rational point of view, wanting “nature as she is” (Schneider 98) while also envisioning it in his texts from a larger and more symbolical perspective, as in his essay “Walking” where the wilderness as an object of study is replaced by the notion of “wildness” which has much more to do with a mindscape than a true landscape. I am suggesting, in this paper, that Land Art is the child of this dual conception of nature and that the artists working within the Land Art movement reproduced, consciously and unconsciously, the long American tradition of poetic, artistic and philosophical enquiries directed towards “finding one’s space” shaped under the myth of discovery. Emerson and Thoreau will be my main references here as they represent a meeting-point between earlier reflections on this issue, from the Puritans onward and modern and contemporary reflections. I believe their position in history as well as their influence on American culture made them into central references for the land artists with whom I am concerned. These artists were positioning themselves in relation not only to “land,” or to the Earth, but to “American land,” that is, land that bore the mark of a previous, massive claim, with all that meant in a history of transformation and dispossession.

- 8 Land Art marks the land in a way which tends to either impose meaning on it, or derive meaning from it, as do “the steps of the surveyor,” or to consider the land as a mysterious object which plays on our sense of orientation through the sense of loss. In both instances, Land Art marks the land in writing a narrative of what the land does to us or what we do to the land. My argument, in other words, is that Land Art, in spite of being transposable to other cultures, was first configured in a way that is recognizable within the American grain, engaging a thematic stretching back to the Puritan tradition of the land as both a text and a place of salvation (or perdition).
- 9 Land artists have for the most part participated in the continuation of a mystique of the land, as suggested by Michael Heizer’s remark: “In the desert I can find that kind of unraped, peaceful, religious space that artists have always tried to put in their work” (Boettger 196) or James Turrell who conceived his *Roden Crater* to render the sense of the vault of heaven. The vocabulary is either explicitly religious as in Heizer’s statement or implicitly so through the mention of the vault of heaven and its implied Christian connotations. In other words, Land artists are acutely aware of and rely on a strong tradition where the land, as well as the landscape in general, belongs to the realm of the symbolic. These artworks create rituals and rites of passage which evoke the archaic meaning of mazes and labyrinths.
- 10 Walter de Maria’s *Las Vegas Piece*⁶ (1969) consists in marking on the landscape of the Nevada desert a geometrical figure made of crossing lines which oppose the fluid lines of the rivulets crossing the same landscape. With this artwork, De Maria sets himself as a land marker, but the work only makes “sense” when looked at from an elevated distance and thus loses the onlooker in a maze of natural fluid lines and man-made straight ones. The pattern cannot be seen, yet it is perceived and gives the viewer the sense of being in front of a “pattern,” or a narrative that he cannot access and understand. Tim Ingold’s anthropological study *Lines* allows us to see that the space used by Land artists relies heavily on a mythological perception of space, where space takes on an existential dimension which transforms these spaces into the existential and potentially ritual experiences of traversing them.⁷ As he suggests, the absence of a known and understandable pattern plunges the viewer in an existential space where it

is his life that is at stake, from the story of Theseus onward. This is exactly what Robert Morris had put forward by emphasizing the experience of being lost in a labyrinth:

The labyrinth form is perhaps a metonym of the search for self, for it demands a continuous wandering, a relinquishing of the knowledge of where one is. A labyrinth is comprehensible only when seen from above, in plan view, when it has been reduced to flatness and we are outside its spatial coil. But such reductions are as foreign to the spatial experience as photographs of ourselves are to our experience of ourselves. (Tiberghien 290)

- 11 A similar existential sense of space is to be found in Smithson's description of the Great Notch Quarry in New Jersey:

The walls of the quarry did look dangerous. Cracked, broken, shattered; the walls threatened to come crashing down. Fragmentation, corrosion, decomposition, disintegration, rock creep debris, slides, mud flow, avalanche were everywhere in evidence. The gray sky seemed to swallow up the heaps around us. Fractures and faults spilled forth sediment, crushed conglomerates, eroded debris and sandstone. It was an arid region, bleached and dry. An infinity of surfaces spread in every direction. A chaos of cracks surrounded us. (Smithson 9)

- 12 The industrial landscape bears here on a primitive sense of loss and chaos where the land, marked by humans, turns into a force of magnified proportions emphasizing the loss of intelligible marks. Smithson goes further in the description he makes of his travels in Yucatan:

Through the windshield the road stabbed the horizon, causing it to bleed a sunny incandescence. One couldn't help feeling that this was a ride on a knife covered with solar blood... The tranquil ride became a sacrifice of matter. (Tiberghien 294)

- 13 The violence imposed on the land here associated with the road and the car, shows, particularly through Smithson's choice of vocabulary, how Land artists were aware of the primitive sense of the sacredness of the land and consciously played on their markings of the land to question our relationship to a primordial sense of the land's power over humans.

- 14 Thus the labyrinths created by some land artworks root themselves within a mythical relation to the land, the art work is meant to be kept at an existential distance from the potentially all-seeing gaze of the viewer and loses him within a maze of undecipherable patterns.

- 15 Yet it would be a mistake to reduce the impetus behind Land Art to the mythical impulse of loss. Opposed to these mazes, land artists were also extremely interested in the language of spatial conquest, following "the steps of the surveyor" that Smithson referred to. Land artists mark the land in order to enact the quest for orientation, and create works that seem to try to recapture an original sense of the land, through the sense of time, of one's position in space, or of the seasons for example. Charles Ross's *Star Axis*,⁸ which he described as "naked eye astronomy" (Tiberghien 226) exemplifies this very well as does Robert Morris's 1971 *Observatory*.⁹

- 16 The notion of measurement is put at the eye-level of the individual and of the possessing, civilizing body. The sensation of measuring the land in order to situate oneself is felt, almost instinctively, by the viewer positioning himself in front of works that function like compasses or magnifying glasses. Nancy Holt's description of her *Sun Tunnels*¹⁰ shows her desire to make her viewers feel abstract notions such as that of time:

Day is transformed into night, and an inversion of the sky takes place: stars are cast down to Earth, spots of warmth in cool tunnels [...], 'time' is not just a mental concept or a mathematical abstraction in the desert. The rocks in the distance are ageless; they have been deposited in layers over hundreds of thousands of years. 'Time' takes on a physical presence. Only 10 miles south of Sun Tunnels are the Bonneville Salt Flats, one of the few areas in the world where you can actually see the curvature of the earth. Being part of that kind of landscape, and walking on earth that has surely never been walked on before, evokes a sense of being on this planet, rotating in space, in universal time (Tiberghien 146)

- 17 Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* or *Locators*, Dennis Oppenheim's *Annual Rings*¹¹ or Robert Morris's *Rulers*¹² mark the land with observation tools, challenging the viewers' expectations of an artwork as stable while giving him the tools to orient and locate himself in space.
- 18 Another example of these artists' fascination with the language of orientation is to be found in the motif of maps to which these artworks constantly refer, as suggested by Nancy Holt's "Buried Poems."¹³ The artwork consisted of five poems buried in places that were to be found using five maps distributed to five of her friends. This sets up a relationship between language (and language as treasure), land and the map, drawing attention to how the land is traversed by words: its naming is coincident with its discovery. This positions these artists within the tradition of mapping which is constituent to American identity and culture and owes a lot to Buckminster Fuller's explorations of dymaxion maps.¹⁴ Smithson's description of the new kinds of maps that R. Buckminster Fuller made at the time is very telling of the way in which these artists thought about maps not as points of orientation but rather as disorienting documents:
- The dot evades our capacity to find its center. Where is the central point, axis, pole, dominant interest, fixed position, absolute structure, or decided goal? The mind is always being hurled towards the outer edge into intractable trajectories that lead to vertigo. (Smithson 19)
- 19 This is an idea he exemplified in his 1968 *Untitled Circular Map*,¹⁵ which distorts the notion of orientation and of an absolute structure, turning the map into a labyrinth. This description of the maps suggests how the language of orientation was questioned by these artists whose geographical explorations seem to always lead them outside of maps, thus following Thoreau's call for extra-vagance, for wanderings outside of the lines of knowledge and geographical control¹⁶. The *terra incognita* of classical maps becomes the individual who makes the maps, himself; it is his own body in space which must be discovered in an answer to Emerson's seminal question "where do we find ourselves?" (Emerson 198). The works call for a reappraisal of our position in space in relation to the land, our use of it, our right to it, the languages that have crossed it, the control that we exercise over it by knowing its name. Yet that control is suspended when the map is no longer an evocation of the land but the land itself; these artworks negate the idea that a map could give an objective sense of the land and rather suggest that the land must be sensed individually for the map to have any meaning.
- 20 The two approaches to space that I have tentatively identified with the maze and the observatory, around which I believe the Land Art movement defined itself, seem to gain coherence when one realizes that they are in both instances defined by the notion of orientation. In both cases, the artworks deny us the role of spectators but call rather on participation, either in ritualizing space through labyrinths and mazes or through engaging the viewer's physical experience of the land¹⁷. Robert Smithson defined the "new monuments" built by this generation of artists in a phrase which shows the

double tendency of Land Art experiments, which has to do with marking, as monuments do, while doing it in a way that subverts classical notions of monumentality as verticality and that rather monumentalize

- 21 what is traditionally anti-monumental, or even non-material. Robert Morris explains the desire to make the viewers go through space very clearly: “I am concerned with spaces that one enters, passes through, literal spaces, not just a line in the distance, but a kind of space the body can occupy and move through” (Tiberghien 99). This is what I would like to explore now in order to see how these works call for the physical involvement of the viewer rather than intellectual reception.

Disorientation: Towards Discovery

- 22 The shift Thoreau makes from landscape to mindscape in “Walking,” where the wilderness is replaced by the state of “wildness” is an attempt to find other ways of dealing with the land than through the supremacy of vision. I would like now to explore the way in which land artists dethrone the hegemony of the optical in works of art which all seem to try to create a sense of disorientation in us, through works which all seem to aim at making us get lost in space. “You begin your travels by being immediately lost” (Shapiro 177) Smithson writes, in a sentence that encapsulates the effect these markings of the land have on the viewer. Going to see these artworks is part of the artistic experience; it puts the art observer in a different and unfamiliar situation: the journey there presses upon the viewer’s self-reflections about traversing space in order to experience space aesthetically—in so doing it ritualizes space. And this ritual takes the viewer out of the normal way of experiencing space and disorients him, or makes him experience a sense of loss.
- 23 The sense of loss is also brought forward by the fact that the major land artworks are positioned, by definition, *far* away. One has to get to them, as one would to some natural wonder. Craig Owens has shown how distance participates in the sense of loss by emphasizing the fact that these works of art mostly exist as traces of the earthwork in the land; their existence as sculpture is much less firm than their existence as traces in the shape of photographs, films or accounts. Owens has suggested that these traces are what give meaning to these works which remain unclear seen on site as their scale blurs the overall pattern that structures them. In other words, the intentional impediment to their access, along with the scale that characterizes these works, contributes to challenge our sense of orientation in the work. As Owens suggests,
- Smithson accomplishes a radical dislocation of the notion of point-of-view, which is no longer a function of physical position, but of the mode (photographic, cinematic, textual) of confrontation with the work of art. The work is henceforth defined by the position it occupies in a potentially infinite chain extending from the site itself and the associations it provokes [...] to quotations of the work in other works. (Owens 47)
- 24 This sense that one has lost a dominant or central position from which to view and understand the work suggests that the work cannot rely on a total or totalizing aesthetic experience. Yet this partiality is not a nostalgic gesture, as it is with the Hudson River school or the romantic cult of the primitive and the organic. Rather it raises a certain challenge—that of finding clues in the wilderness, the way the hunter studies the hoof print.

- 25 In front of these works that exist necessarily as objectifications of distance, the viewer, be he very far away from it in a gallery showing photographs of the work, or on site, necessarily also experiences the loss of a full experience of the work. This impossible contact with the artwork and with the land is reminiscent of the fear of never truly finding one's bearings which Emerson defines in "Experience" as the founding condition of life, or which we might consider as the American anguish over an authentic way of inhabiting the world: "Nature does not like to be observed [...] Gladly we would anchor, but the anchorage is quicksand" (Emerson 199) or "There are moods in which we court suffering, in the hope that here, at least we shall find reality, sharp peaks and edges of truth. But it turns out to be scene-painting and counterfeit" (Emerson 199). Emerson's essay defines this peculiarly American dilemma, of a never-achieved balance between pragmatism and the pangs of a lost authenticity, in terms consonant with the motives of the land artists. They, similarly, take both of the modes of space we have distinguished—the utilitarian, navigator's space as something to be skillfully traversed, and the wilderness as the site of the encounter with or test of, experience, as the parameters of the experience they seek to induce. For them, the "innavigable sea" into which we must plunge is that of the kind of disorientation that, as well, pulses through the impossible quests of classic American novels and stories, from *Moby Dick* to Faulkner's "The Bear".
- 26 These artworks distort our sense of visual orientation through the use of unstable and changing artistic objects, such as water, smoke (Robert Morris's *Steam*¹⁸ or Dennis Oppenheim's *Whirlpool Eye of Storm*¹⁹) or lightning (Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field*²⁰) These works evoke Emerson's discussion on the instability of our relationship to the outside world in "Circles":
- There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees. Our globe seen by God is a transparent law, not a mass of facts. The law dissolves the fact and holds it fluid. (Emerson 174)
- 27 The sense of loss is built also on the way these artists shift from the visual to other modes of perception, exemplifying Emerson's statement in *Nature*, "to speak truly, few adult persons can see nature" (Emerson 29). One might argue that these works accept the impossibility of truly seeing nature, by distorting the visual sense and replacing it by a sense of physical disorientation. Smithson consciously constructs this sense of disorientation in his 1965 *Enantiomorphic Chambers*²¹ which result in "[Seeing] one's own sight [which] means visible blindness" (Smithson, 39) and transforms the familiar, vision, into a most unfamiliar and disorienting oxymoron "visible blindness", a phrase which, interestingly, evokes Emerson's "transparent eyeball" (Emerson 29). The artwork invites its viewers to look for new ways of approaching it; by negating vision it presents the viewer with an unprecedented problem: how is one to experience the work? The viewer must reorient his gaze to confront the very question of what it means to be looking at art.
- 28 Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field* where the viewer finds himself immersed in a field of 400 stainless steel poles and loses his sense of spatiality operates on a similar theme: a disorientation of our approach to the artwork. Kenneth Baker's description presents the challenges the work imposes on its viewers:
- When crossing the first row of poles, the sensation of passing into something is unmistakable, yet it is not the feeling of entering architecture. Although the Field's grid structure is visible from the outside, within it you see the resonance, the

rapport among 400 elements that allows you to feel connected to the entire expanse of space the work claims, even when its limits are visually elusive. (Baker 13)

- 29 Art critic Guy Shapiro suggests that the universalization of the Renaissance model of perspectivism

contributes to the unfortunate illusion that we can attain a perfect God's eyes view of the world in which it is completely present to us and spread out for our observation and manipulation. (Shapiro 65)

- 30 One might argue, following this, that land artists fight against the notion that we can "attain a perfect God's eye view of the world" in confronting us rather with works which challenge the notion of orientation.

- 31 These works disorient our classical sense of perspective since they function like anamorphoses, changing according to our position in space. As the critic Craig Owens has shown, the very reality of these artworks depends on our point of view and the fact that they mostly exist for us as photographs or films shows that they transform the notion of perspective and challenge the very notion of seeing a work of art. Smithson himself followed this by suggesting that this art exists "through the camera's eye":

We live in frameworks, and are surrounded by frames of references, yet nature dismantles them and returns them to a state where they no longer have integrity. Today's artist is beginning to perceive this process of disintegrating frameworks as a highly developed condition. (Shapiro 126)

- 32 Exactly as Ruskin suggested that landscape painting gave us a new sense, in which the landscape exists as that which challenges human proportions and is ultimately surmounted by human rationality (for instance, the skill to paint the landscape), land artists seek to challenge the supremacy of vision and perspective by pressing us into situations of physical disorientation. The artist, as Smithson suggested, is a "site-seer" (Shapiro 2) who teaches us a different way of looking at the land.

- 33 Making us go through the frame, land artists force their viewers to go through space thus challenging their physical perception of space and the land. The observatories we are invited to visit frame our experience as an "absolute" one, indicating our position in space in absolute terms, while also challenging this absolute knowledge through individual specific sensations brought about by the very experience of the work. Nancy Holt has explained that "changes in sunlight cause the colour of entire pools to change or vanish in a silvery glimmer. Shades of green, aquamarine, blue, and silver come and go as I move around the pools" (Tiberghien 293). This description of changing colours evokes Thoreau's descriptions of the water at Walden Pond because these works engage us to keep, as Thoreau did, a "meteorological journal" of our impressions in a way which situates these artists within the American tradition of naturalist notations—naturalist notations which rely on connecting the sense of vision to the planetary experience of the self.

- 34 The spectator is forced to navigate, to find his or her own narrative to make meaning out of what has always been the hallmark of meaning—marking the land. But this signifying system is intentionally de-stabilized, oscillating with the point of view we adopt to go through them even as they suggest some systematic meaning that will be revealed at the end of our experience of them.

Land Art and the Narrative of Discovery

- 35 These works challenge each viewer individually by making him go through a ritualistic experience of the land. Viewers are made to experience physical or cognitive disorientation, which transforms them into explorers of the land, navigating between orientation and disorientation. Our experience of the works is no longer based on knowing but on finding.
- 36 Land Art appropriates the narrative of geographical exploration and of the discovery of new landscapes in a world in which the age of these discoveries was over, or was, at least, confined to space flight. This symbolic transition, from art to the discoveries of new vistas situates these artists within the mythical context of America as a land of discoveries. They situate themselves within the American tradition that extols and celebrates the vastness of the land as defined by Gertrude Stein: “In the United States there is more space where nobody is than where anybody is. That is what makes America what it is” (Stein17-18). These artists rely on the sense that space must be discovered and inhabited. I would like to draw from this traditional and yet essential theme of the discovery of the land—of the land defined by a scale vast enough that it is continually being discovered—in order to see how the land artists’ fascination with the question of orientation echoes the tensions of various of America’s founding nineteenth century texts, when the colonial moment was closed, while the question of the United States as a nation was still undetermined. Two quotations come to mind here: Emerson’s question, “Where do we find ourselves?” at the onset of his 1844 essay “Experience”, a philosophical opening in the shape of a question which situates American thought within the study of space and the human’s position in space as well as in relation to the land. And Thoreau’s echo of Emerson’s question is his exclamation: “Talk of mysteries!—Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it... Who are we? Where are we?” (Myerson 136).
- 37 We could use these two questions as a way of understanding the position of the Land Art movement within American culture, apart from the critical question of the status of the art object, which obsessed contemporary critics at the time. These critics (for instance, around *October* magazine) influentially located the American art movements of the 60s through the 80s within a broader, global break from modernism. This critical perspective looks at these artworks in relation to European art and thus blurs the crucial vocabulary of orientation and discovery under a vernacular of de-commodification and appropriation. Looked at in the long view of American culture, orientation, the dynamic axis of moving through space, and the notions of finding or discovery tie these artists to the transcendentalists’ concern with grounding American philosophy in the specific context of the nation’s land and geography. They indirectly reference the famous vanishing frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner (1893), which claimed that American development as a whole was a function of “the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward” (Turner 1).²² In the West, especially, the vastness of the landscape seems to overbalance the human definition of land in terms of dwelling places, while at the same time dwelling places relentlessly replace vacant land throughout the Southwest and West. Here we find the land artist’s reflection on the human relationship to the environment is inscribed totally within the American tradition of land discovery.

38 The horizon line is a recurring motif for land artists, situating them in the tradition of Emerson whose philosophy is marked by the same recurring motif. Smithson, who quotes Emerson (notably the sentence “we live ruins amid ruins”. Shapiro 191), seems to appropriate Emerson’s reflections on the horizon to suggest the difficulty of getting a true sense of the land: “One is always crossing the horizon, yet it always remains distant. In this line where sky meets earth, objects cease to exist” (Smithson 119). This evokes Emerson’s dictum, “I am ready to die out of nature, and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the west” (Emerson 208). Emerson merges the pioneer and the prophet, the watcher of the horizon and the emblem of God’s imprint on creation. Land Art’s aspirations are built on these large lines. The ever receding horizon line which Land Art makes us see and yet keeps at a distance seems to enact the Emersonian celebration of an unapproachable landscape, as suggests this statement by Smithson about the landscape of Yucatan, which I believe applies to the landscape of Land Art in general: “it is the dimension of absence that remains to be found... Yucatan is elsewhere” (Smithson 103). There is indeed an interesting paradox in Smithson’s writings on the subject of the materiality and reality of the land:

The ponderous illusion of solidity, the non-existence of things, is what the artist takes for ‘materials’. It is this absence of matter that weighs so heavy on him, causing him to invoke gravity... It is the dimension of absence that remains to be found. (Tiberghien 259)

39 In taking the land as the literal playground of art, these artists made full use of the metaphors and metonymies of land in America, with its pre-eminent consciousness of being a place that was *discovered*. They enact the mythical foundation of the country through the motif of discovery. But if America’s discovery was an accident as Cavell suggests in his *Senses of Walden* (“America’s discovery was always an accident”, 8) it was followed by the conquest of a continent marked by both human and environmental violence. These works seem to all perform the founding myth of discovery while at the same time evoking its fundamental ontological ambiguity based on the illusion that the discovered thing—the continent—is ‘new’. In this way, land artists positioned themselves within a long literary and intellectual tradition marked by a reflection on the difficulty of coming in contact with the land, in creating a relation to the land that corresponds to the scale of its discovery. Smithson’s interest in Emerson, which has been discussed by Richard Sieburth in his essay on “Smithson and American Hieroglyphics” (Tsai 219-224), offers an interesting insight into how American artists of his generation looked not only to European thought to construct their theoretical approaches to art, but also focused (in a gesture that has been comparatively neglected by critics) on the American tradition encapsulated by Emerson and Thoreau. The two writers cannot be treated as if they were the two faces of one thought; however, they were certainly in dialogue one with the other in the transcendentalist moment, and so they were read by Smithson, Carl Andre and, most explicitly, by John Cage, who in turn influenced his contemporaries. The transcendentalist moment was something that could be recuperated as an American intervention into a critical discourse that, in the sixties and seventies, looked more largely to the East for its spirituality or to Europe for its critical and theoretical vocabulary.

40 Smithson’s idea according to which “It is the dimension of absence that remains to be found” suggests that these artworks can only be apprehended by relinquishing the desire to understand them rationally as they call for a physical perception of space; their experience seems to rely on a radical shift from reason to physical perception. In

so doing, these artworks call for an ignorant perception, one that would allow for a primitive and straightforward encounter with the landscape. This echoes Thoreau's call for "beautiful knowledge":

41

knowledge useful in a higher sense; for what is most of our boasted so-called knowledge but a conceit that we know something, which robs us of the advantage of our actual ignorance. (Thoreau, 1975 622)

42 The ambition of Land Art can be understood, structurally, by using the dynamic notion of going through space to define two approaches to space, the geographic (a term which encodes an inscription on the land, a handwriting, that is never neutral and always constructed around familiarity and strangeness) and the planetary (a term which connotes a certain objectivity, a metalevel in which to pose the question: where?) associated with two Ur-forms, the labyrinth and the observatory. These motifs and these spaces are inscribed within American culture by a myriad of themes that develop within a country that fosters a self-conscious image of itself as beginning with a—or numerous—discoveries and progressing by way of moving towards an ever receding frontier. Within American space, the wilderness that is inhabited by the hunter or Thoreauvian visionary seems to be in conflict with the utilitarian space of the discoverer and developer. Yet both converge in motifs that we can largely classify under the concept of orientation. It is this concept and its antithesis, disorientation that is teased and elaborated by the work of the land artists.

43 Their geoglyphs question the possibility of orientation; they mark the land while both orienting our gaze and distorting it. Smithson describes this sense of loss in "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art":

in the illusory babels of language, an artist might advance specifically to get lost, and to intoxicate himself in dizzying syntaxes, seeking odd intersections of meaning, strange corridors of history, unexpected echoes, unknown humors, or voids of knowledge... but this quest is risky, full of bottomless fictions and needless architectures and counter-architectures... At the end, if there is an end, are perhaps only meaningless reverberations. (Smithson 78)

44 The old interactions of meaning that constitute Land Art narratives plunge these works within the "strange corridors of history and unexpected echoes," encapsulating the "bottomless fiction" of the perpetual discovery of the land, in America.

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NOTES

1. http://www.kunst.uni-stuttgart.de/seminar/complex_one/images/dissi.jpg
2. The Land Reclamation Act was voted in 1977 to ensure the rehabilitation of mining sites.
3. http://www.robertsmithson.com/earthworks/spiral_jetty_big.jpg
4. http://greenmuseum.org/a_img/turrell_roden_crater.jpg
5. Robert Smithson mentions the "Hudson River School", notably F.B. Morse's *Allegorical Landscape* in his essay "A Tour of the Monuments of Pasaic".
6. http://territoiresinoccupes.free.fr/art/2_1_F37.jpg
7. Ingold defines the labyrinth in the following words: "is not available to the terrestrial traveler who is already embarked upon a journey across the earth's surface—a journey that is tantamount to life itself. The entrance to the maze marks the point not at which he touches down upon the surface, but at which he goes underground. Now as an interface between earth and air, the ground is a kind of surface that is visible from above but not from below. It does not have another side. Thus at the very moment of going underground, of entering the labyrinth, the surface itself disappears from sight. It appears to dissolve. This moment marks the transition from life to death. Thenceforth [...] the ghostly traveler finds himself in a world without any surface at all. Every path is now a thread rather than a trace. And the maze of passages, never visible in its totality, can only be reconstructed by those few who such as the hero Theseus or the Chuckchi shaman who have visited the world of the dead and made it back again" (Ingold, 56-7).
8. <http://www.montana.edu/cpa/news/images/articles/img201004131271191587.jpg>

9. <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~matc/math5.geometry/unit22-/2203.jpeg>
10. <http://www.artistsofutah.org/15bytes/10jan/images/02.jpg>
11. http://www.dennis-oppenheim.com/web/artwork/content/images/img_6.jpg
12. <http://radicalart.info/concept/tautology/measurement/morris/Morris3Rulers1963-L.jpg>
13. They were presented a series of maps, which indicate the poems' location.
14. Dynamic *maximum tension*; the *dymaxion* map is a projection of a world map onto the surface of a polyhedron, which can then be unfolded to a net in many different ways and flattened to form a two-dimensional map which retains most of the relative proportional integrity of the globe map: <http://www.lynnwashere.com/images/bmf.png>
15. http://29.media.tumblr.com/KG7JsrN0oo7n9gkzRgHyUHQVo1_500.jpg
16. "I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be extravagant enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced. Extra vagance! it depends on how you are yarded. The migrating buffalo, which seeks new pastures in another latitude, is not extravagant like the cow which kicks over the pail, leaps the cowyard fence, and runs after her calf, in milking time. I desire to speak somewhere without bounds; like a man in a waking moment, to men in their waking moments; for I am convinced that I cannot exaggerate enough even to lay the foundation of a true expression. Who that has heard a strain of music feared then lest he should speak extravagantly any more forever?" (Thoreau, 218).
17. Space as what we move through creates a dynamic axis that produces, on the one hand, a notion of space we move through to reach some objective—thus casting behind us some space as we come nearer our goal—and, on the other hand, the space that we move through for its own sake — as in dance, or in strolling, or in ritual. In the former, space divides up into useful and waste space, and in the latter, it unfolds as meaningful and disorienting space, in correspondence to our sense of self, or community, or the cosmos.
18. [http://radicalart.info/kinetics/condensation/Morris-Unt\(Steam\)-68-69A.jpg](http://radicalart.info/kinetics/condensation/Morris-Unt(Steam)-68-69A.jpg)
19. <http://merc.tv/img/art/DOP1466-md.jpg>
20. <http://www.diacenter.org/sites/main/lightningfield>
21. http://www.robertsmithson.com/sculpture/300/enantiomorphic-chambers_300.jpg
22. Until the frontier line vanished at the end of the 19th century and Turner's rhetoric was followed by the NASA space program in the 1960s, and it isn't surprising to hear echoes of it in the statements of the era's artists.

ABSTRACTS

This paper looks at the way land artists deal with the notions of nature and environment and at how their artworks aim at creating a particular relationship with the land. These artworks shift away from the optical and seek to create a sense of disorientation in order to shake the spectator out of the routines that normally structure his relationship to the environment. In so doing, the works put in question how we control nature, how direction and meaning are inscribed upon the landscape, and what limits pertain to the use of nature. This article aims at looking at Land Art practices not only from the perspective of the foregrounding of the materiality of the art object, but also from a more cultural perspective that connects them to the founding American narrative

of space as both the means and object of discovery, encrypted in the American motif of the “frontier”.

Cet article s'intéresse à la manière dont les artistes du Land Art travaillent les notions de nature et d'environnement et à la manière dont leurs œuvres d'art instaurent une relation particulière avec l'espace. Ces œuvres s'éloignent du règne de l'optique pour créer un sentiment de désorientation qui force le spectateur à s'extraire du cadre qui conditionne habituellement sa relation à l'environnement. Ce faisant, ces œuvres mettent en question la manière dont nous contrôlons la nature, ou la manière dont sont inscrits sur le paysage l'orientation et le sens, ainsi que ce qui relève de la manière dont nous utilisons la nature. Cet article vise à présenter les pratiques artistiques du Land Art non seulement par rapport à leur réflexion sur la matérialité de l'objet d'art mais également dans une perspective plus culturelle qui permet de les relier aux textes fondateurs qui inscrivent l'espace aux Etats-Unis comme moyen et objet de découverte, un thème qui est au cœur de la thématique américaine de la “frontière”.

INDEX

Mots-clés: vision, orientation, labyrinthes, observation, découverte, mythe, nature, espace

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