



Environment & Society Portal

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A Short History of Environmental Art

by Susanne Darabas
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“The only thing we have to preserve nature with is culture. . . .”
Wendell Berry

Environmental art is the umbrella term for an artistic movement that encompasses “both historical approaches to nature in art and more recent ecological and politically motivated types of work.”¹ The term is flexible enough to include

“the early history of this movement (which was often more about art ideas than environmental ones) as well as art with more activist concerns and art which primarily celebrates an artist's connection with nature using natural materials.”²

Based upon these two relatively popular definitions, it is worth looking at possible predecessors and recent examples in art history that dealt with natural and environmental issues and concerns. What influences and backgrounds led to the development of the emerging yet academically underexplored genre of environmental art?

Land Art and Environmental Art: Beginnings and Development

Over thousands of years, the relationship between man and nature has changed. In the era of hunter-gatherers and later during the Neolithic revolution, humans were dependent on natural factors as well as climatic and atmospheric conditions. However, during the last centuries the weight has shifted. Humans were not only able to explain large parts of nature, but also dominate it to become almost independent of its arbitrariness—and to finally enter a new dependency, one of man-made, society-related structures and their relations of interests and power.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Europe experienced a return to the natural world. The development of Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious and people's feeling of unease and fear regarding the immense changes in the modern world led artists to search for the pure and unsophisticated. “Primitive” and indigenous art from the Mideast, from India, China, Japan, or Polynesia were revalued and viewed as the remedy to peoples' estrangement from nature.

¹ “Environmental Art,” Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.

² Bower, “A Profusion of Terms.”

Due to the ever-expanding and all-embracing industrialization in the late 1950s and 1960s of the twentieth century, environmental issues became increasingly prominent in Western societies' discourses and an environmental scene for the protection of the environment arose. Accordingly, more and more artists began to deal with the changing relationship between man and nature and with urgent environmental problems. The paradigm shift becomes manifest in artists' criticism of mass society and its phenomena.

After World War II, the art scene in the United States was dominated by abstract expressionism, which emphasizes the spontaneously emotional, and pop art, an art form devoted to everyday culture, mass consumerism, and the affluent society. The range of artistic media broadened: an important shift towards concept art and photography took place, and body and process art developed. As a result of the wars and threats of this turbulent century, political art was on the rise. The awareness that each person has the potential and the power for change grew, and many artists (like Joseph Beuys and others) were drawn into political activism.

A few years after the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which had triggered the politicization of the American environmental movement and many organizations abroad, the first Earth Day took place in 1970, where activists paid tribute to the Earth and addressed environmental and peace issues worldwide. An increasingly international audience participated and demonstrated its awareness and support.

During the 1960s, land art evolved in the US due to its vast geographic spaces. It can be seen as a movement of the visual arts, dealing with geographical as well as natural spaces of all dimensions and materials, containing earthworks, landscapes, or biodegradable sculptures. Brian Wallis sees the emergence of land art as “part of a wider practice of spatial concerns”, that colludes with the “physical dematerialization of art” and the “geographical or economic decentering”³. Artists start to experiment with new art forms and left behind traditional media and their restrictions, along with established galleries and cultural activities. They started using performance and conceptual art—in Lucie-Smith's words, “works of art as patterns of thought, rather than as visual events”⁴—in order to achieve a unity between policy and action and not to create more and more consumption goods.

In 1968 Robert Smithson's groundbreaking exhibition “Earthworks” at the Dwan Gallery in New York City finally offered a public venue for land artists and their endeavors. Afterwards it was almost obligatory for creative minds to deal with politics and environmental issues. For the first time, open air and space-consuming art works were presented in an exhibition that dealt with the altered relationship between man and land. Artists used the city and uncultivated industrial land sites, as well as areas

³ See Kastner, *Land and Environment Art*.

⁴ Grande, *Art Nature Dialogues*, xiii.

abandoned to nature like in the desert or in the mountains, as stages for their experiments and aesthetic marks.

Whereas landscapes are traditionally depicted by artists, the relationship has now changed: artists go out into the landscapes and leave their signs and works there. Many of these works consist of particular materials originating directly from the natural surroundings of the work, or are brought there as explicitly new and unnatural in order to evoke contrasts and new combinations and perceptions (such as Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty," a huge stone spiral, heaped together by enormous machines; or Michael Heizer's earth work "Double Negative," for which gigantic amounts of earth were moved around).

In many cases, photographs are the only traces left of the changes and the deterioration of land art, which had often come into existence in cooperation with educators and scientists and the help of the local population, and was often left exposed to weather conditions and erosion. Only a visit to the artwork's site could make clear how time and natural forces shape things and processes, take possession of them, or ruin them (in this spirit, HA Schult created "Biokinetic Art" that consisted of and finally was destroyed by fungi and bacteria. In 2005 the artist group Geletin created their "Rabbit," a huge, still decaying mountain installation).

Moving out of the galleries and the established market into the "real" world helped artists create new concepts and new ways of presentation and documentation. They could leave the self-referential world of the "high arts" behind that in Sacha Kagan's view was responsible for the intellectuals' focus on art's exclusive "internal history, discourses, and overall languages" rather than on "their relationships with their environments."⁵

At the end of the 1970s and at the beginning of the 1980s, artists preferred public spaces and urban landscapes to localize their art works (Josef Beuys planted around 7,000 oaks in and around the city of Kassel and Alan Sonfist created the "Time Landscape" in New York, both following the approach of preserving living systems) thus entering directly into people's living environment and creating awareness.

Due to counter cultural tendencies and attacks, changes also took place amidst the civil society. Not only did the environmental scene flourish: more and more movements felt attracted by an increasingly sustainable lifestyle. Grassroots movements and NGOs emerged, and alternative and often spiritually regenerative lifestyles with origin- and nature-related practices developed, along with ecological production methods and field tests in grassroots democracy.

All in all, land art became a movement that also dealt with gender issues and the exploration of social differences. Its creative work opened up towards interdisciplinary

⁵ Kagan, *Art and Sustainability*, 67.

exchange with natural sciences, history, and social sciences as well as other art genres.

Environmental Art – Current State and Outlook

Environmental artists work with an inter- and transdisciplinary approach to create awareness for sustainability issues and the present and future compatibility of human lifestyles with other living creatures and ecological systems (see the pioneer works of Helen and Newton Harrison or more currently Tomás Saraceno's cooperation with the MIT).

During the 1990s, a global division into the rich North and the poor South became increasingly apparent, and artists and intellectuals began criticizing Western and Euro-centrism in art and thinking. Innovations and technologies were introduced into art, and the scope of artistic media diversified with an important purpose: “Because it frequently seems indistinguishable from engineering, gardening, farming, researching, educating, and so forth, eco art can tamper with the popular assumption that art engages the human spirit.”⁶

The artist's role has developed and still evolves: the former interpreter of his or her findings now more often behaves as advocate for the environment, defending and illuminating its interests. Weintraub talks of “utilitarian practices”⁷ that artists use in their works in order to uncover and fight deficits. Their ways of cultural production and critical approach adapt to their time. Numerous artists develop their own solutions to urgent problems by establishing their own programs, organizations, and even companies. For example the SUPERFLEX artist group invented and produced a Guarana drink and the complete production chain around it to draw attention to the unfair working conditions of and environmental damage caused by a real company. These artists expanded the armory of cultural technologies towards a collaborative, multicultural, and community-engaged political activity⁸.

While in former times land artists put up with the fact that enormous changes and remnants were the results of artworks in nature, most current eco artists are mindful of their effects on nature and try to leave as few traces as possible, or they operate with such traces on purpose in order to create awareness for humans' destructive impact on nature.

With globalization reaching and involving increasingly more landscapes and nations worldwide, word has spread that we have left the Holocene and have entered the era of the Anthropocene. Humans have finally succeeded in becoming more visible in the

⁶ Weintraub, *To Life*, 5.

⁷ Weintraub, *To Life*, 5–6.

⁸ See Kastner, *Land and Environment Art*.

geological and natural record than a millennia-long grown nature. For the development of environmental art, this means ever increasing internationalization, as artists from diverse backgrounds enter the “scene.” They dedicate their works and efforts to topics that often originate from their personal surroundings, and address problems and injustices that started there, such as artists like Bright Ugochukwu Eke who have used art as a form of activism towards clarification of global connections, cultures, and life forms, as well as change.

When we look at the variety and the multiplicity of current artistic approaches towards environment and society, we can clearly tell that individual playfulness and multiple meanings are the sources of inspiration for their creative work. It is also the will of many artists to save and inform about the all-encompassing relevance of nature and to reflect and communicate possibilities and alternatives for a sustainable future on this planet. This is an endeavor artists share with many other genres and disciplines nowadays (see for example Nicole C. Karafyllis' book about philosophical aspects of nature approach in the twenty-first century, as well as the large amount of published papers worldwide), even with a science as unreasonable as the established economics.

The Environment & Society Portal's Green Art Collection

In the age of the Anthropocene, past, present, and future environmental art can help us broaden our horizon in dealing with what is left of nature. The Green Art Collection on the Rachel Carson Center's Environment & Society Portal profiles a few of the most established and well-known environmental artists, both pioneers from the past as well as contemporary artists. It encompasses different thematic approaches and media.

The themes in this collection are as diverse as those on the Portal itself: environmental knowledge, landscape transformation, biodiversity, climate, disasters, environmental politics, infrastructure, resources, pollution, and population. Each of these themes coincides or coexists in the artists' work. As the purpose of successful art leaves space for new and differing interpretations, visitors are invited to discover their own associations and draw their own conclusions—and of course experience the artist's guidance, if any. This is one of the reasons why interpretations have been mostly left out and the art works are presented in a descriptive way.

Environmental humanities scholars, students, and the interested public can learn from the environmental artists' works and projects for their own research. Artists don't dread exposing themselves to fieldwork and to new, unknown tasks, contexts, and procedures. When they focus on something problematic and overwhelming, they do not retreat but instead try to develop or invent their own solutions. In order to realize

their visions, they cooperate with educators, scientists, politicians, and the community.

Through an inter- and transdisciplinary approach to their infecting and involving work, eco artists can open up new and unseen ways of dealing with environmental problems, and approach their solution from new and different perspectives. Art opens up our cognitive abilities and habits, helping every single one of us to no longer only “read experience in an informational way.”⁹

⁹ Grande, *Art Nature Dialogues*. xvii

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