Land art

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International art form that developed particularly from the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was part of a revolt against painting and sculpture and the anti-formalist current of the late 1960s that included Conceptual art and Arte Povera. A number of mainly British and North American artists turned their attention to working directly with nature, notably Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Walter De Maria, Michael Heizer, Dennis Oppenheim, Robert Smithson, and Richard Long. They created immense sculptures on the same scale as landscape itself, or exhibited written and photographic accounts of their excursions. With few exceptions, their works (also known as Earthworks) are almost inaccessible, situated far from human settlements in deserts or abandoned areas. Their lifespan was brief: little by little they were destroyed by the elements and often by erosion, so that for posterity they exist only in the form of preparatory drawings, photographs, or films. The works themselves were seen by only a small number of people and sometimes by only the artist.

In one sense Land art constituted a return to the landscape tradition, for many years a major category of painting (see Landscape painting). Instead of being represented, however, the landscape and the materials it contained served as raw materials for the construction of mainly sculptural works in nature. Land artists had a precedent in the prehistoric period. The tombs and megalithic monuments of Brittany and England (e.g. at Carnac and Stonehenge), the immense abstract diagrams composed of geometrical figures in Nazca, Peru, and the giant hill-figures drawn into the ground itself in England (see Hill-figure) had a considerable impact on artists tired of modernist influences and seeking new stimuli in ‘primitive’ sources. Land art was one of the most spectacular manifestations of the artist’s search for an escape from traditional painting and sculpture, and yet it was also a return to ancient practices whose significance is unknown. Land art was in this sense part of the pervasive ‘primitivist’ tendency of 20th-century art (see Primitivism).

Land art is not, strictly speaking, an aesthetic category. None of the major artists associated with it saw the whole of their work as Land art, considering it as only one approach among many in their complex artistic explorations. Christo and Jeanne-Claude, for example, should be considered separately. Originally exponents of Nouveau Réalisme, wrapping all kinds of objets trouvés, they soon
went on to wrap a number of historical monuments from which they logically progressed to landscapes. After working on such works as *Wrapped Coast—One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Sydney, Australia* (1969), they executed *Valley Curtain, Rifle, Colorado* (1970–72; for illustration see Christo and Jeanne-Claude) and *Running Fence* in California (1976), multiplying spectacular actions on a monumental scale and mobilizing all the forces of the media.

The immense, unexploited territories of North America played a major role in the development of Land art in the USA. De Maria, Heizer, Oppenheim, and Smithson are the principal American artists to have executed works using the deserts, mountains, and prairies of the American landscape. In 1968 De Maria executed his *Mile-long Drawing*, two parallel lines in the Mojave Desert, CA, followed by his *Las Vegas Piece* (1969), near Las Vegas, where the lines are perpendicular and cut into the earth in depth. His *Lightning Field*, created in New Mexico in 1977, comprises 400 steel poles arranged geometrically. It is one of the few permanently maintained Land art works. In 1967 Heizer also abandoned painting for the desert, where he realized some giant works: *Isolated Mass/Circumflex* (1968); *Five Conic Displacements* and *Double Negative* (1969–70). He moved large masses of earth and dug enormous trenches to make up monumental designs, some of which could be seen only from the air. He also designed a permanent work built in hard materials in the desert in Nevada: *Complex One/City* (1972–6). Oppenheim created a number of plans for intervening in the landscape and modifying natural processes. In *Time-line* (1968), he traced a representation of the International Date Line in the snow, while *Directed Seeding—Cancelled Crop* (1969) consisted of interruptions in the growth of wheat in a field according to a geometrical design. Finally, Smithson created some of the most important works of Land art before his premature death (1973): *Spiral Jetty*, Great Salt Lake, UT (1970); *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill*, Netherlands (1971); *Amarillo Ramp*, TX (1973). He invented the idea of the ‘Nonsite’, transporting fragments of nature in the space of the museum. He emphasized the idea of entropy, of the destructive potential contained in nature. Other American artists produced some examples of Land art including for example Robert Morris (ii) and James Turrell with his Roden Crater project. To these may be added those artists who constructed their sculptures in nature, such as Alice Aycock, Nancy Holt, and Mary Miss among others.

In Europe it was mainly British artists who involved themselves in Land art. Richard Long constructed works in nature using materials found on the spot and recorded them by means of photographs. Lengthy walks over the land form the basis for works by Hamish Fulton and David Tremlett. In the Netherlands, Jan Dibbets traced perspective drawings in the landscape. Other artists outside the USA who worked with Land art include the Dutch artist Marinus Boezem (b 1934), the English artist Peter Hutchinson (b 1930), and the Canadian artist George Trakas (b 1944).

Land art was also a return to nature, coming during a period of ecological debate on respect for the earth, the dangers of pollution, and the excesses of consumerism. Immediately before Land art, such
trends as Pop art had exalted industrial objects and mass production. In contrast Land art was an anti-industrial and anti-urban aesthetic current that isolated the work of art from the contamination of the great artistic centres, the capital cities. It was also a Utopian attempt to escape from the art system—the recuperation of art by the market—in that the work was immovable and far from galleries and museums. Yet none of the artists concerned could resist producing other works that conformed more closely to traditional exhibition spaces. The fact that it was distanced from the system contributed to Land art’s brief lifespan, from the earliest examples in 1968–9 to its near disappearance in the mid-1970s. Only a few artists, such as Christo and Turrell, continued to practise Land art after that time.

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