

# Land Art

## *Background Notes*

Beth Taylor – 3 May 2017



Robert Smithson *Spiral Jetty*, 1970.



**WAHG**

Winchester Art History Group  
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### ***What is Land Art?***

One of the difficulties in studying land art is that it is a very diverse form of artistic practice. It has been given a variety of descriptive names - Land Art, Earthworks and Environmental Art being the most commonly used. The art works made by artists working in this field from the late 1960s up to the present day have also taken a variety of forms and types. However, the key identifiers across the range of works made in the USA and Europe by the artists we will study is that the work is made in the landscape, not in a studio, using the materials of the landscape, and seeks to involve the viewer in the performative experience of the artist and the concepts behind the work. Land Art is often ephemeral and made in remote areas. It is known principally through photographs and text. Some has been made for gallery shows or sculpture parks but even these pieces are designed to decay as they would in the landscape.

### ***The context of Land Art: the Art World***

Sculptural practice and art schools in the late 1960s in both the UK and USA were dominated by formalist practice often using industrially made materials. Alongside this, Conceptualism - the view that it was the concept or thought of the artist which should be pre eminent, meant that, some artists showed ideas in place of traditional artworks. Performance art had developed involving the artist using his or her body, its placement and movement as a focus for ideas or emotions. Land Artists sought the opportunity to work outside the gallery system and made new forms of art in the landscape which brought together sculpture, concept, performance and photography.



**Richard Long *A Line made by walking* 1967**

### ***The context of Land Art: politics and society***

1960s Political concerns like the Cold War and the Vietnamese war impacted on society with outbreaks of student unrest in America and Europe. The assassination of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy in America raised further anxieties. The publication of Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring* the first photographs of Earth from space highlighted the interconnectedness of the planet and its potential fragility.

1970s-80s Environmental concerns impacted on artists who sought to work in an environmentally conscious way and to make clear the links between natural and political systems

1980s – 90s The Soviet Union was dismantled with the fall of the Communist state system. Capitalism and the pursuit of wealth appeared to over-ride concerns for the natural environment in some areas of the world.

2000s Perception of a widening gap between rich and poor, both between and within nation states together with its links to climate change became a world wide political issue.

### ***Some key Land Artists***

***Hamish Fulton, b.1946, London.*** Trained as a sculptor, known as a photographer and landscape artist. His black and white photographs are displayed in galleries and document his physical and emotional responses to the landscape. Walking is an essential part of this practice: "No walk, no work"

***Andy Goldsworthy , b.1956 Cheshire.*** Makes ephemeral sculptures in the landscape using twigs, leaves, petals and ice as well as more lasting works in stone. Changes in season and weather, growth and decay are an integral part of the works which are recorded in photographs which he publishes in books. He has also made work for gallery spaces.

***Michael Heizer, b.1944, California.*** Sculptor, painter and printmaker, best known for his large scale concrete and volcanic rock structures in western America. These act as mediations between natural and an-made environments.

***Richard Long, b.1942, Bristol.*** Sculptor, photographer and Conceptual artist. Much of his work consists of walks, including in remote parts of the world. His maps, photographs and textual descriptions record what are principally ephemeral markings and placements in the landscape. He also makes works in gallery spaces using natural materials.

***David Nash, b.1945, Surrey.*** Based in Wales, Nash is a sculptor and land artist who makes abstract work and land art which is time based. He works exclusively in wood. His best known works involve the growth and shaping of living trees over time and the commitment of wooden objects to chance circumstances.

**Robert Smithson, b. 1938 New Jersey, d.1973, Texas.** Painter and sculptor whose early works have links with Minimalism. By 1968 he began to produce “non-sites”, works in gallery spaces that referenced his involvement with urban, industrial and quarry sites. He is famous for his large scale work, *Spiral Jetty*, at the Great Salt Lake, Utah.

**James Turrell, b. 1943, Los Angeles.** Trained in psychology and mathematics, Turrell uses light as a material, creating perceptual experiences. His work involves complex architectural constructions which involve his audience in a progress towards the site, through doorways and passageways, leading to an experience of the changing skies.

### **Short Bibliography**

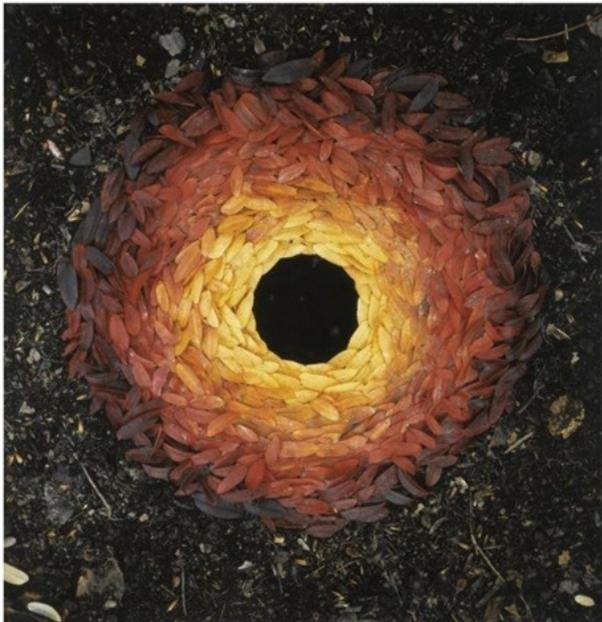
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**Andy Goldsworthy *Rowan Leaves around a hole, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 25 October 1987.***