

ATTITUDES TO NATURE IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH AND AMERICAN SCULPTURE¹

ELIZABETH H. NORMAN

Introduction

It is now not uncommon for the artist to feel comfortable working with material and using approaches which might seem more appropriate for the ecologist or landscape designer. At one time it would have seemed very curious for an artist to be involved with the land; with its features and life, and the play of natural change. These matters are far removed from the usual studio-based concerns of the painter and sculptor.

For the painter, the representation of nature has always been an attractive and important challenge. The landscape is a familiar subject in painting. The landscapes of Constable are internationally known as are the paintings of the American Hudson River School. Sculpture has its own memorable figurative representations, those which are suited to its three dimensionality and not to illusion. Curiously, its potential to convey and work with the substance of the natural world directly was not taken up in earnest until the mid 1960s and early 1970s. What is of interest here is not how this development occurred, though this period may be remembered as a time of early space exploration, developing ecological concerns and the environmentally threatening escalation of the Vietnam War, but how it was related to certain fundamental attitudes to nature which are held by the West, in particular, Britain and America.

The Western attitude to nature is not an entirely comfortable one. It is usually one of self-consciousness and distance. This feeling that nature is separate from man directed the way in which it was both viewed and used in this period by certain sculptors. Three main areas involving artist and nature will be examined.

nature as artist's material

nature as a means of attacking the traditional theoretical rationale of the practice

nature as an inquisitive rather than emotional response to the working of our world

¹ This paper is the development of a public lecture given at Hitotsubashi University in June 1990. The occasion allowed me the opportunity to bring together some new perspectives on a familiar area of study, land art, gained from a five month study leave from Sheffield City Polytechnic, England.

Nature as artist's material

When natural substances came to be used for art, many people were dismayed to be shown dirt and rocks, for example, in galleries. While the work might reflect an artist's expected interest in process, it appeared to be more about the artist's curiosity than his aesthetic imagination. Use of nature as artist's material, however, did release the practice from conventional expectations of scale and appearance, and the artist from restrictions of tradition upon his ideas. Thus nature could be accepted and employed by the Western artist on terms he identified with, expressing originality.

Many of the early explorations of working with nature as material took the safest route, that of going to where the material was. In America plenty of land and plenty of space could be found, especially in the West. Gallery display of natural material was more complicated. One of Robert Smithson's solutions was to place found rock in crate-like containers. Not surprisingly, it looked like refuse, not art. A fine art context for the material was difficult to establish, although the title, non-site, suggests awareness of the problem. Later land projects display such scale and confident use of material that one marvels at the initial timidity. In particular, Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* has become an icon of American land art. The jetty coiled into Great Salt Lake looking like a marvellous giant fossil. Constructed in the manner of a road, its gravel edges were just above water level and when this rose some years later, the piece virtually disappeared. It is famous partly because it has vanished, has become an unrepeatable, unique image. Smithson's idea as an artist seems to be of greater interest than his sophisticated ideas as an amateur scientist.

In Walter De Maria's best known work, nature was harnessed for the artist's own purpose. De Maria's intent is exposed in an explanatory article he wrote for an art journal. Located in a remote area, *Lightning Field* was created to capture lightning flashes. It was an installation, a rectangular field one mile long, permanently marked by 400 steel poles, each about 20' high. The description centers upon four verse-like observations reminiscent of conceptual texts.²

"The land is not the setting for the work but part of the work
The sum of the facts does not constitute the work or determine its esthetic
The invisible is real
Isolation is the essence of Land Art"³

De Maria wants to suggest that the work is not just about his own contribution, but in this statement the reference to an artist's heroic vision is unavoidable.

Other artists made equally egotistically dominating constructions in the inspiring spaces of the American west, (portions often bought by helpful art foundations). Michael Heizer's *Complex City I* was the first unit of a projected cityscape, eerily uninhabitable and inhospitable.

² These sentences, I think, bear some interesting resemblance to Sol LeWitt's seminal "Sentences on Conceptual Art," *Art-Language*, England, 1969. Both combine mysticism and prescription.

³ Walter De Maria, "The Lightning Field," *Artforum*, April, 1982, or Amy Baker Sandbach (ed.), *Looking Critically: 21 Years of Artforum Magazine*, Umi Research Press, Michigan, 1984, p. 225.

table. Heizer admitted it was made to withstand an atomic blast. While the piece's primary substance is earth, it is compressed into a man-made shape and held by concrete side walls. Primarily it evokes ancient tomb-like monuments. Heizer was impressed by professional archaeological trips taken with his father when a child. The structure has no intended reference to its forming material or to the natural site. Indeed *Complex City* is often discussed wholly in art terms, such as drawn lines and framing device.⁴ Heizer's other classic piece, *Double Negative*, has been given similar treatment.

These exceptional works, by a strange twist of over-exposure, are considered the ordinary face of land art. However, it is well known that Smithson chose to investigate and was inspired by the rather prosaic quarries of suburban New Jersey. Carl Andre, who probably would not consider himself a land artist, looked at railway tracks and the flat horizontal line of a pond with some personal insight. For the most part, it was the seemingly untouched land in America to which many artists were attracted. Britain, however, has recently been described as being merely rural and even then only in parts. "It is a construct, not Nature as such,"⁵ being shaped by man and more recently by machine. Many British artists are more widely known for work produced out of their country, but Americans have always felt there was plenty of nature at home. Their ancestors stripped trees and occupied land as they came upon it. In the 1930s, the face of Mr. Rushmore was carved to present the features of four American Presidents. Thirty years later Heizer still spoke as a conqueror of nature.⁶

"I'm doing what has to be done, and somebody has to do it. We live in an age of the 747 aircraft, the moon rocket—so you must make a certain type of art."⁷

Heizer was insisting that art have a modern reference. It needed scale and modes of construction presently possible and indicative of progress. Some suggestions of the unsettling Vietnam War may be communicated in his statement, but also a sense of excitement about using modern equipment and methods for art, though the use of trucks, bulldozers and cranes may not seem very adventuresome now. This method of working is the invisible side of such pieces as *City Complex*, *Spiral Jetty* and *Lightning Field*. Carl Andre was similarly interested in the issue of contemporary reference. Materials carried specific connotations. There was no reason, for example, why industrial materials could not be considered appropriate for art.⁸

The British artist, Richard Long, was influenced and stimulated by Andre's matter-of-fact presentation and placement of material, keeping it unchanged. On resemblance alone, one might construct an interesting relationship between Andre's identifying pavements and lines and Long's paths and circles. All have distinct topographical reference. Long saw the land as a new resource for the artist, conceptual rather than physical.

"In the mid-sixties the language and ambition of art was due for renewal. I felt art had barely recognized the natural landscapes which cover this planet, or had used

⁴ Peter Selz, *Art in Our Time*, Abrams, New York, 1981, p. 495.

⁵ Malcolm Miles, *Art for Public Places*, Winchester School of Art Press, Winchester, 1989, p. 135.

⁶ A comparison is made between Mt. Rushmore and a major work in progress by Heizer in a very recent publication, Douglas McGill, *Michael Heizer, Effigy Tumuli*, Abrams, New York, 1990, p. 41.

⁷ Michael Auping, "Notes from the land of the Electric Light," in *Camp Fire* by Hamish Fulton, Stedelijk, van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 1985, unpagged.

⁸ Lynne Cooke, "Between Image and Object: The 'New British Sculpture'," in Terry A. Neff (ed.), *A Quiet Revolution: British Sculpture since 1965*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1987, p. 52 (footnote 24).

the experiences those places could offer.”⁹

The key word is experience. For Long, nature provided an especially effective way of conveying both personal and universal experiences, the intent of any serious artist. Stimuli would be found in nature; stones, water, wood. Left basically unaltered, selection and placement would be Long’s identifying contribution. This is deceptively simple. In a gallery, for example, the installation is carefully worked out.¹⁰

“First, the perimeter of the circle is marked out lightly on the floor (e.g. in pencil).

The circle is then filled in stone by stone in a haphazard pattern. Each stone is placed on its longest, flattest, most stable side, not touching another stone. . . . All the stones must be used.”¹¹

Long’s use of water is equally direct. He has poured water down a dry rock face producing a slow realisation of line.¹² By contrast, Smithson’s pours look like landslides of industrial waste, impossible to erase.¹³ Intrigued by other concerns, Smithson wanted nature to act upon the material. Long showed water as itself, wanting only to control its course. His mud handprints demonstrate beautifully how water can be felt, used and still be visible.

Very little is actually made by many British artists interested in nature. The walk in particular has come to be an identifying feature. Hamish Fulton explains this kind of commitment.

“There is a strong relationship between your state of mind and your walking performance . . . my idea is always to attempt to empty my mind . . . by emptying your mind as much as possible, you can then let ‘nature’ in . . . ”¹⁴

This kind of thinking is fairly close to meditation. It displays a degree of introspection not commonly associated with Western art making. Explanations of such work are frequently self-conscious, employing terms over-used in the language of art criticism, like romanticism and idealism. Fulton and other British artists believe that man can feel in harmony with nature. American artists do not come readily to mind.¹⁵ Fulton was attracted to the land and original inhabitants of the American west, because he felt the Indians lived by direct knowledge of nature. Referring to his own philosophy, he states,

“My work is about nature and it seems proper to allow nature to determine events in route.”¹⁶

⁹ R. H. Fuchs, *Richard Long*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1986, p. 236.

¹⁰ The last command of the following set of instructions caught out a gallery in northern England a few years ago when a circle by Long was part of a travelling exhibition. The gallery found it could not re-form the circle using all the stones.

¹¹ Fuchs, op. cit., p. 135.

¹² The film was a promotional video for artists shortlisted for the first Turner Prize. The Turner Prize was established in 1984 by the Tate Gallery to recognize in a given year “an outstanding contribution to art in Britain.” Long eventually won the Prize in 1989.

¹³ Smithson’s *Asphalt Rundown* was a full-scaled pour, using an abandoned quarry. *Glue Pour*, Vancouver, was tipped out of an overturned bucket. The glue was discovered to be water soluble.

¹⁴ Michael Auping, “An Interview with Hamish Fulton,” *Common Ground: Five Artists in the Florida Landscape*, Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, 1982, p. 89.

¹⁵ James Pierce has worked on farm land, developing it over a number of years into a landscape specifically shaped and marked by many single images. Pierce calls it a “garden of history,” and each piece is intended to have both an historical and natural reference. The material is found on the site. A fairly extensive account of this long-term project can be found in John Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond*, Abbeville Press, New York, 1984, pp. 65–67.

Photography is the medium Fulton uses. The photographs are primarily of unpeopled landscapes and they document his private discoveries. Stark and without colour, they are said to resemble 19th century photographs of exploration. Indeed they convey an explorer's sense of wonder and his desire to record remarkable and new sights. Yet Fulton's photographs also evoke an element of presence and time. Because the photograph is the only evidence of a remotely sited experience, its tendency to be read as fact is an important feature in its use by artists.

David Nash's work is object based, but he too is concerned for an awareness of nature in our lives. He recognizes that for many people nature is a remote reality.

"I feel very removed from nature by the culture I am living in. . . . We have a culture that looks at nature through windows—mainly out of car windows . . . to me nature and reality are synonymous."¹⁷

Nash has constructed a rather harsh natural reality for himself, living in a small and remote Welsh village. He gathers and selects, but does not destroy living material to make his wood pieces. Recognition of a relationship between material and form is the governing factor in his work.¹⁸ He will let the features of the wood suggest and direct the action he takes. This is tempered by an interest in nature's determining role, in the making of the piece and in the passage of time. An interesting new project will not be sited in the forests, for example, of Japan or Wales, but in a somewhat dispoiled area.¹⁹ The Sheffield project involves a quarry and a planting scheme for a once industrially active site. As always, the work will be suggested by the material discovered on the site.

"The motivation of the work is 'how does an object come into being' and 'having come into being how does it continue to exist.' (how does it behave.)"²⁰

Nash's attitude of respect for nature gives his work its special quality. The Western artist often adopts a stand-off attitude, not caring to look too closely at the character of the material. For Andy Goldsworthy, however, both the concept and construction of his work depends upon an understanding of the material with which he works. Goldsworthy selects and arranges found material, not unlike Long, but he does not intend to suggest past and universal patterns found in Long's stones and sticks. Goldsworthy often gathers tiny natural particles such as feathers, leaves, berries and pebbles to build a construction dependent upon balance, ties and cementing, always within the capabilities of the material itself. This method of working requires sensitivity not only to the character of the material but to its scale. One might even say that reference is being made here, not to the sublime

¹⁶ Peter Turner, "An Interview with Hamish Fulton," *Landscape Theory*, Lustrum Press, New York, 1980, p. 81.

¹⁷ Cooke, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

¹⁸ In late May, 1990, the Gallery Kamakura in Ginza showed two of Nash's work in an interesting context of Lee U. Fan and a few other artists.

¹⁹ The scheme first came to my notice in 1989 when it was briefly and enthusiastically mentioned by the innovative conservation organization, Common Ground. Common Ground is unique to Britain and only recently has attracted interest in America. Broadly speaking, it enlists both artist and local citizen to draw attention to significant features of the countryside. Landmarks may be selected, such as trees or ancient pathways, and more recently sculpture has been commissioned to be placed in certain rural areas. A publication which discusses this latest project is Joanna Morland, *New Milestones: Sculpture, Community and the Land*, Common Ground, 1988.

²⁰ David Nash, "Time and Existence," printed in *David Nash*, Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts, Utsunomiya, 1984, p. 47.

in nature, but to the picturesque.

The site was possibly the most expressive feature of many of the major American pieces. The use of natural scale was crucial to the harmony between material and form. A visitor to Heizer's *Double Negative*, which displaced about 240,000 tons of earth, wrote soon after it was formed.

"The sun was down; we wound up slipping and sliding inside the piece in the dark. The piece was huge, but its scale was not. It took its place in nature in the most modest and unassuming manner, the quiet participation of man-made shape in a particular configuration of valley, ravine, mesa and sky."²¹

Double Negative refers to the negative space formed by cuts into the edge of two Nevada mesas. A familiar documentary photograph shows a man understandably dwarfed by each cavity, nearly 50' deep, facing its twin across a ravine. A project Heizer is currently engaged in is not "a place in nature," but a grouping of earthen mounds, representing quite easily identifiable and enlarged living creatures. Just as experimental are Heizer's installations adapting the scale of an outdoor piece to a gallery environment.²² They do not escape looking like models, but at least Heizer avoids being accused of defacing the land.

If, as it is now commonly believed, the massive earth pieces were ecologically harmful, development of permanent sites for the ever more sprawling and enlarged sculpture was a sounder approach than making over an entire landscape into art. Sculpture parks are now numerous, but some of the first were founded in the 1960s; Storm King in America, Hakone in Japan, and Grisedale in England.²³ Many parks were located in remarkable settings which functioned to display sculpture in an aesthetic environment. The predominant choice of pieces in non-perishable material also re-inforced the atmosphere of a gallery. Grisedale is exceptional in that its residencies require the artist to live on site and to use indigenous material, but frequently a sculpture park looks like a spacious gallery with a permanent collection.²⁴

By a curious inversion, some British sculptors are now producing gallery pieces to express man's mistreatment of nature using unaesthetic man-made material. David Mach has constructed installations using rubber tires and mountains of discarded magazines. Viewing the present day landscape as entirely marked by man, Tony Cragg has made work out of plastic and non-biodegradable fragments of common litter. Mark Boyle's *Journey to the Surface of the Earth* may appear to be particularized but nonetheless accurate fragments of land as it is often appears to man, an isolated surface. They are, however, only replicas of rocks, grass or paving. A plastic casting provides a slice of nature which is largely empty of meaning. The actual context scarcely matters; the site is known only

²¹ Philip Leider, "How I spent my summer vacation, or Art and Politics in Nevada, Berkeley, San Francisco and Utah," *Artforum*, Sept., 1970, or Sandbach, op. cit., p. 20.

²² Gallery weight 'stones' which Heizer fashions from modified concrete were seen in Pharmakon '90, Makuhari Messe Contemporary Art Exhibition, Tokyo, July-August, 1990.

²³ Histories of all three sculpture parks have been written.

Sam Hunter, *In the Mountains of Japan: The Open-air Museums of Hakone and Utsukushi-ga-hara*, Abbeville Press, New York, 1988.

John Beardsley, *A Landscape for Modern Sculpture*, Abbeville Press, New York, 1985.

Peter Davies and Tony Knipe (eds.), *A Sense of Place: Sculpture in Landscape*, Ceolfrith Press, Sunderland, 1984.

²⁴ Nash refers disparagingly to the carpets of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Nash, op. cit., p. 49.

by a pin-mark on a map. Boyle's defense of the work suggests a man oriented view of nature. "The most complete change an individual can effect in his environment short of destroying it is to change his attitude to it."²⁵

British and American attitudes to nature as artist's material are not without extremes and curiosities. In most cases self-expression dominates. David Mach's contribution to the 1990 Venice Biennale, for example, is a series of giant steel Bonsai trees, 20' tall, painted red on one side, green on the other. Truly this is an expression of what Westerners call the Post Modern era.

Nature as a means of attacking the traditional theoretical rationale of the practice

Nature came to be recognized as a theoretical force in the Post Modern re-examination of art. Western modern art was identified with a purposeful course towards some attainment of perfection in man and society. Nature was outside this perspective. Art was an expression of man's achievement and thus was appropriately concerned with its own uniqueness, if a painting by its surface and composition, if a sculpture by its mass. The inevitable revolt against this art based rationale for art came in the late 1960s.

While Minimalism is not usually considered a radical movement, I believe its theoretical position made it so. It attacked the very core of the then fashionable art practice, by turning to industry, its methods and materials currently in high profile. Minimalist criticism was directed towards art's accepted aims and ambitions and thus opened up theoretical discussions of the practice. The way forward was quite specifically delineated. New forms were needed, neither identifiably painting nor sculpture, to rid art of illusion and compositional artifice. The actual work looked suspiciously like industrial products, comfortable on the floor or attached to walls like shelves²⁶ The choice of industrial materials and fabrication made clear the points Minimalism wanted to make about art traditions. The work was to represent a new start, deliberately emptied of usual artistic concerns, those found in the working of material or in its expressive arrangement. A non-Western criticism of Minimalism presents a view relevant to our discussion. It suggests that the Western concern for surface, as expressed by "an enthusiasm for industrial materials, which are homogenized substances offering no qualitative distinction between, for example, front or back," can be "explained by the fact that American and European art had abandoned its tie to nature."²⁷ Certainly attachment to surface and an easily comprehended, given form produced work of no visible humanity. Much Minimalist work is physically as well as metaphorically empty.

The severity of Minimalist doctrine alienated many artists to the point of refusing to make objects. Long recalls,

²⁵ Arts Council of Great Britain, *Beyond Image: Boyle Family*, Hayward Gallery, London, Nov. 1986-Jan. 1987, p. 49.

²⁶ Donald Judd, in more recent years, has been making furniture which very closely resembles his sculpture. Indeed the pieces are treated as individual editions and are priced accordingly.

²⁷ Toshiaki Minemura, "A Blast of Nationalism in the Seventies," *Art in Japan Today II, 1970-88*, The Japan Foundation, 1984, p. 20.

“ . . . there was a feeling that art need not be a production line of more subjects to fill the world. My interest was in a more thoughtful view of art and nature, making art both visible and invisible, using ideas, walking, stones, tracks, water, time etc. and in a flexible way.”²⁸

Long's debt to Conceptual art is revealed by the words, 'using ideas,' 'making art both visible and invisible.' Freed from the necessity of actually making something, Long turned his attention to the ephemeral realm of experience, in particular, that stimulated by nature.

American artists broke with certain traditions by making 'new forms' in the land, away from gallery control, but which still had substance and a powerful presence. The British, by and large, felt easier with a more introspective position, working to capture and retain an experience, which could not be represented as an object. Both British and American artists, however, were challenged by the use of nature as site and stimulus for work, seeing it as a way of breaking away from the binding structure of gallery presentation and purchase. Long speaks for many artists working at this time.

“I like the idea that art can be made anywhere, perhaps seen by a few people, or not even recognized as art.”²⁹

The first work by Long which expressed this idea was *A Line Made by Walking*. A photograph is the only evidence of this experience, but the way it was produced represents a very great change from the usual conceptual documentation. The photograph was not of a path or grass, but of the experience of walking to make that line. The photograph was more than mere evidence of an idea, it was its expression. The precise location of the walk was necessary for its full appreciation and the viewer was informed by marked maps or descriptive words or both. The texts which Fulton provides for his photographs are marvellously economical and always evocative. They convey the experience in teceptively simple words.

“Cloudy water in the afternoon. Clear water in the morning. A four day walk in Central Hokkaido Japan 1983 starting on the day of May Full Moon and travelling by way of Oto Kuke Yama”³⁰

If Long's and Fulton's photographs and texts refer to nature compatible with human experience, American land art often attempted metaphysical grandeur. A year after Long's walk, Dennis Oppenheim made *Annual Rings*. It too consisted of maps and photographs. Oppenheim seems to have wanted to make a major statement, and so, like the artist deliberately chosing the grand scale of a salon painting, he chose a frozen river bed. Concentric circles were drawn to suggest growth rings and natural regenerative cycles. Documentation for work of this kind is a necessity. The piece cannot be displayed for a while in a gallery and then stored. It will simply disappear. American land artists' documentary photographs are often as dramatic as the pieces themselves, requiring the ethereal sky view. As mentioned earlier, a single photograph of *Spiral Jetty* is used over and over again to convey its complexity. Another danger inherent in photographic representation is the

²⁸ Graham Beal, "Richard Long: 'the simplicity of walking, the simplicity of stones,'" in Neff, op. cit., p. 112.

²⁹ Fuchs, op. cit., p. 236.

³⁰ Fulton, op. cit., unpagued.

altered reading of a piece if it is placed and subsequently photographed in another location. Long and Fulton seem to have recognized some of the dangers inherent in the use of photographic stills too. The experience is retained and viewed as art through an intermediary. Even word compositions stretch traditional aesthetic expectations when seen enlarged and under glass. Surely these forms bend the rules of the gallery system, founded upon the display of the hand-crafted, timeless object. Perhaps Judd's prophesy is accurate, that the new work need only be interesting.

Release from usual gallery expectations and commitment gave the artist a greater choice of places to work in than just the studio.³¹ Many of the British artists have interesting travel itineraries and live removed from London when at home. Some American artists, though firmly associated with land pieces in remote places, have worked in urban environments as well. It is no longer startling to see in cities large rocks, for example, respected as art. Heizer's *Adjacent, Against, Upon* playfully refers to the artist's hand, not the forces of nature, by title and position of three large stones in a public park. The piece was an early public art work for Seattle, the city which pioneered the placing of sculpture in contextualized outdoor settings. Private and public support for public art on some level can usually be found, for it is believed by many to be an answer to certain urban problems. Carl Andre's *Stone Field Sculpture* is often cited as a pioneering example of land art restoring a neglected site. It has become a respected feature of the city, though, initially, the field of stone markers seemed an unsatisfactory return for public money.

Public art can be cynically viewed as rearranging nature as surely as the great land pieces, but this is because the city has no natural space. Robert Irwin's *9 Spaces, 9 Trees*, as the title suggests, introduced planting into the city in an aesthetically controlled way. The sky blue plastic coating on the space's protective fence was another successful, but obvious artifice. In the courtyard of a country jail, a landscape garden was commissioned to contribute to the sparse reference to nature in a city, but it was not of living material. Its location dictated that it be non-destructible. The recent development of garden festivals provides some space for nature in urban surroundings. Mrs. Thatcher initiated the festivals in Britain as an urban renewal effort. The sites, however, have been of little permanent help to the cities, because they were treated primarily as an opportunity for temporary recreation and investment. Osaka's 1990 Festival seems to have a more uplifting purpose. Nature has a firmer place in its scheme, as the brochure states.

"(the festival) will be a forum for demonstrating that industry and life, civilization and nature are not adversaries but are destined to find harmony with each other."³²

A final point about the use of nature changing the practice of art can be made by looking at the work of an artist who intends to be highly visible wherever he works. It is not conventional fame he seeks but credibility with local people and politics. Some of Christo's projects are visually breathtaking. They transform a natural site. The work is neither permanent nor possible in a gallery space. Christo works for lasting impact, not upon his reputation or even the land, but upon human understanding. *The Umbrellas* project,

³¹ Nash's diaries made during his residency in Nikko beautifully capture that experience. They are marvellous records of his response to climate, time of day and place as well as to the work itself as it emerged from the found material of the site. Diaries seen by kind permission of the Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts, Aug. 1990.

³² *Expo '70, The International Garden and Greenery Exposition, Osaka, Japan, 1990*, p. 4.

sited in California and Japan and scheduled for realisation in 1991, represents an interesting complexity of ideas and preparations. The planting of umbrellas will take place in two countries on very different sites. Christo states that the work is about "the comparison of space in two cultures," in particular, "the quality and density of the spaces."³³ They will create a reference to topography and density of habitation as clearly as *Running Fence*. Christo's projects may look thrilling, but behind their impact lies a levelheaded enquiry into a selected environmental or political issue.

*Nature as an inquisitive rather than emotional response to
the working of our world*

Nature has long been admired by artists as a source of beauty and power, but its underlying governing functions and processes have been shied away from. Previously thought to be the domain of scientists, a few adventuresome artists in the period under discussion, began to think about natural phenomena. They were not mere dilettantes however.

A quite specifically focused investigation of the behaviour of material was undertaken by some sculptors. Eva Hesse, one of the principals of so-called Process art, observed that her own work was unpredictable and amusing. While her pieces explored the appearance of such unexpected combinations of material as rubber and resin-coated fabric, others by Robert Morris directed more attention to the action. In one of his most obvious experiments, ordinary heavy industrial felt was suspended in various ways. Left to fold and fall in its own fashion, it very nearly formed itself. In Morris' *Steam Piece*, steam was ejected into the atmosphere from underground jets, but the form it took was subject to temperature, wind direction and velocity. Not only was no lasting arrangement produced, but the natural process took over from the artist. Clues to Morris' thinking can be found in some key essays he wrote in the 1970s, particularly "The Phenomenology of Making."³⁴ He suggested artists question the traditional processes of making, which he identified as being arrangement and construction, and explore action. Another artist, Richard Serra, wrote down a list of behavioral commands—"to roll, to crease, to fold . . ." and corresponding conditions—"of waves, of tides, of time . . ." as a scientist might record observations.³⁵ A short film and some metal pieces were made to depict these possibilities; they are not to be judged on usual art terms.

Working about the same time, Smithson was involved with a different sort of phenomenological exploration. Smithson was interested in natural structures and systems, specifically that of entropy, the process of inevitable breakdown of organized form. This interest was expressed in the acceptance of the effect of natural decay upon his work. *Spiral Jetty* and a near twin, *Amarillo Ramp*, can thus be seen as very complex pieces. Both were deliberately sited on land already undergoing partial decay. Not surprisingly, Smithson was also interested as an artist in land reclamation. Too much of a pioneer and too ambitious,

³³ Patricia Phillips, "Christo," *Flash Art*, March/April 1990, pp. 134, 136.

³⁴ Robert Morris, "Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making: The Search for the Motivated," *Art forum*, April 1970, or Sandbach, op. cit., p. 92.

³⁵ The complete list can be found in Gregoire Müller, *The New Avant-Garde*, Pall Mall, London, 1972, Praeger, New York, 1973, unpaginated.

he was not very successful in realizing his proposals. Morris, in a later recovery commission more or less simply replanted derelict land, but retained the spiral formed by its earlier use as a quarry. Probably Smithson would have been interested in this image too, but Morris uses it without romance. Heizer's *Effigy Tumuli* is a monumentally scaled land reclamation project now several years under construction. It is perhaps the most singular example of such activity in either America and Britain today.

On a less heroic scale and displaying some native wit, a number of British artists have taken note of the working of the natural world. Goldsworthy sets himself constructional problems which are clearly dependent upon the vagaries of nature. Alterations will occur in material, in positioning that need constant fine turning. For example, ice will melt, leaves will wither or be dispersed by wind, twigs will dry out and snap. Goldsworthy and Nash are acute observers of natural processes and are respectful of natural form. Nash built a sculpture series upon an accident, that of wood splitting open as it dried.

Two California based artists have been fascinated by the way man perceives his environment.³⁶ It is quite obvious to them that man's view is limited to his own idiosyncratic reading. Robert Irwin works from the notion that man's senses, dulled or distracted by the complexity of modern life, often do not register what is actually seen or felt. He has conducted what one might loosely call experiments under quite controlled conditions. Frequently museum space has been used. Adjustments to a room have been so subliminal and yet significant that one visitor recalled that he "... imagined a place alive, transferring my vision of the scrim's damp light and dispersed shadows into illusions of air particles and movement in the 'empty' space."³⁷ Irwin has coined the term site-conditioned to differentiate his work from the widely used term site-specific, and its implications of an object based site change.³⁸ The artist contributes only that which will draw attention to the natural environment. As one might imagine, misunderstanding of this approach has blocked the realisation of many projects. An installation which can be seen was commissioned for a site of pastoral beauty. It was a surprisingly slight piece, a stainless steel fence only 1' high at the greatest point. Its hard metal edge served to complement the undulation of the land and its reflective surface caught movement of light.

The other artist is often identified with a single work still in progress, one involving his spectacular appropriation of an extinct volcano in Arizona. Neither site nor concept is timid. James Turrell intends the work to furnish a corrective to man's perspective of the universe. Chambers cut into the volcano itself viewing stations into space. Turrell is fascinated by light. He seems to think it can be forcibly noticed and appreciated if a focus, or more specifically a frame, is constructed for it. A volcanic window site may seem to lack humility with respect to nature, but in more normal architectural settings, Turrell's windows are simply delightful.

Long also bases his work upon fundamental sensations that will draw man's attention to the wonder of natural things.

³⁶ Irwin and Turrell are strongly represented in a private collection of work of the 60s and 70s. The collection is displayed and discussed in Christopher Knight, *Art of the Sixties and Seventies: The Panza Collection*, Rizzoli International, New York, 1988.

³⁷ C. L. Morrison, "Robert Irwin, Museum of Contemporary Art," *Artforum*, Feb. 1976, or Sandbach, *op. cit.*, p. 320.

³⁸ Robert Irwin, *Being and Circumstance*, The Lapis Press, California, 1985, pp. 26-27.

"My work has become a simple metaphor of life. A figure walking down his road, maffing his mark. It is an affirmation of my human scale and senses. . . . Nature has more affect on me than I on it."³⁹

The walk may appear to be a less than heroic activity for an artist, but Long believes that direct approaches and simple materials are carriers of lasting and universal meaning.

"I am content with the vocabulary of universal and common means: walking, place, stones, sticks, water, circles, lines, days, nights, roads."⁴⁰

Long is possibly the most prominent of a number of British artists who have committed views about nature. In America a still secure art market and the urgencies of certain social problems have their own particular hold on many artists. AIDS, housing, community welfare are some of the specific issues that draw artists' attention away from nature.

The early environmental and land based work may now seem domineering and insensitive, but I suggest that it can be viewed as a valid and courageous attempt to re-set priorities. We should not simply give credit to the Green Party, to back-to-nature movements, to protest groups concerned with acid rain or the disappearing ozone layer for our growing awareness of balance and conservation. Westerners are not generally very familiar or comfortable with systems of thought, rather than circumstances, which would lead them to an awareness of nature. An informal knowledge of some Eastern philosophies is claimed by a few British land artists. While a search for different perspectives on our place in the natural world has been undertaken by some, in the West generally, the sense of nature as eternal and separate persists. Fulton has spoken clearly about his own resolution.

"Being in nature for me is direct religion."⁴¹

This is a very personal belief. Others, without such conviction, might do well to look at a body of artists' work, theory and experimentation which emerged principally in the late 1960s and the 1970s in Britain and America. In ways we may not yet fully understand, this period has helped to arouse in the West a sense of man's commitments to and his dependencies in nature.

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³⁹ Fuchs, op. cit., p. 236.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Fulton, op. cit., unpagged.