A Sustaining Environment for Environmental Art

By RANDY MALAMUD

"They took all the trees, put 'em in a tree museum..."

"Big Yellow Taxi" kept running through my mind as I listened to artists, curators, and other cultural commentators last month at a fascinating conference, "Art + Environment," at the Nevada Museum of Art, in Reno.

Environmental art (aka land art, green art, earthwork) aims to interpret nature and to inspire audiences to re-envision our relationship with nature. Some artists see their work as a springboard for reclaiming and remediating damaged environments.

Art began keenly grounded in nature—think of cave paintings of animals, in charcoal and hematite, commemorating the intimate relationship between people and aspects of their environment. But since then, art has come to celebrate a domestication of nature. Although country landscapes and horses at rest abound as aesthetic subjects, today's green art grows from the premise that past traditions have inadequately confronted nature, relegate the environment to a bit role, a two-dimensional background. Much of what art museums display is, of course, points ground from minerals, marble shaped into sculptures, wood carved into frames. Yet those natural materials don't really convey nature; an artwork is stylized, laboriously changed into a product that seems far from its earthly origins. Its beauty lies in its transformation from, say, a jagged rock into a smooth, "unnatural" form.

Environmental artists today are trying to bring art back to a more direct and intelligent engagement with the natural world.

Joni Mitchell might be amused to know that the Nevadas conference did actually feature trees in the museum (nowadays they're charging the people way more than a dollar and a half just to see 'em), in an accompanying installation, "Old News (Ghost Forest)," by Katie Holten. A small grove of bare, stark "trees" made from newspaper, wire, and ink "inves-
ticates human impacts on the natural environment," the exhibition text informs. "Often made of recycled materials, her thoughtful renderings of ecological phenomena encourage dialogue about issues ranging from biodiversity to global warming." Holten's blurb fits well as a generic template for a great many works in the genre.

Noteworthy earthworks include Robert Smithson's 1970 "Spiral Jetty," a 1,500-foot-long coil of earth and rocks in the Great Salt Lake; Walter De Maria's 1977 "Lightning Field," a mile-long grid of 400 steel poles in New Mexico; and Michael Heizer's lifelong work in progress, "City," in the Nevada desert, perhaps the largest sculpture ever created: a series of earthen complexes inspired by Native American mounds and ancient Mesopotamian cities. (It's not coincidental that America's most prominent earthworks are in the West, a region infused with a rich, imaginative environmental sensibility, not to mention lots of vast open spaces.)

Certainly earlier artists, too, provided a range of thoughts in their depictions of nature: J.M.W. Turner, Ansel Adams, Thomas Cole, and Albert Bierstadt come to mind, among many others. But canonical art landscapes resonate with imperial greed and con

nivance, as W.J.T. Mitchell, a professor of English and art history at the University of Chicago who spoke at the conference, argues in a 1994 book that he edited, called Landscape and Power (University of Chicago Press). The canvas, "an instrument of cultural power" and "a site of visual appropriation," stakes out a breadth that the dominant culture claims as it occupies, exploits, and harvests. Traditional landscape painting provides a cover story for manifest destinies, constructing the land as an entitlement for the artist's culture, often overwriting the claims of its original inhabitants.

Land art is about the world we inhabit, with attention to its ecological dynamics: its air—water, air, dirt, plants, rocks—and the symbioses or tensions (usually the latter) accompanying human habitation. "We are part of nature," said the conference organizer, William L. Fox, in his opening remarks. "How do we react to this world?" The land art I admire most takes up this challenge by focusing our concerns about pollution, desecration, and other imbalances caused by people. Immersive and experiential, earthworks are often site-specific, consummately about place. The works may resist or subvert the institution of museums, though at the same time museums are potentially crucial players in promoting the movement. Early earthworks artists rejected the white cube of the art museum, but today we see better grounds for cooperation: "Museums must become more like laboratories than artistic temples," fostering interaction rather than passive aesthetic contemplation, said Ann Wolff, the Nevada Museum of Art curator.

Still, the question remains. Why bring land art into a museum rather than just leaving it outside? Doesn't that seem like a contradictory impulse? (I like De Maria's wry comment on the relationship between the art world and earthworks when, in 1966, he filled a Manhattan art gallery with dirt.)

There are inherent tensions in bringing land art into the museum. Doing so may belie the art, compromise it. But as the cliché goes, if a tree falls in the forest, does anyone hear it? If green artists want their work to connect with audiences and spark dialogue, museums might be good venues for that—maybe, ironically, better than forests. Museum-based exhibitions of land art are intended, perhaps, for those of us who don't venture into nature as maybe we should. Perhaps that makes the museum complicit in our inexpérience of nature. On the other hand, consider the environmental toll of hoarding trampled and polluted landscapes. Sometimes museums deal with the difficulty of importing land art by showing photographs of it, but then one worries that such installations become more props for photo shoots. Such conflicts are perhaps unsolvable, but deliberating about them raises the kinds of issues that environmental art means to highlight.

"ENVIRONMENT" is, of course, everything everywhere, from Yosemite to Yucca Flat, Sea World, Mall of America, Route 66, and LA smog, and "Art + Environment" embraced that diversity. In some environments, a striking ecosystem prominently inspires art. Not far from Reno, professional and amateur artists gather annually at Burning Man, a weeklong happening in the Black Rock playa, where 50,000 people create and enjoy a festival of temporary art constructions that are bizarre, surreal, ridiculous, amazing. Think Mardi Gras meets Monty Python. At the end of the week, they "release the man"—the large sculpture at the heart of the gathering—by setting him on fire. Burning Man's managing art director, Crim

son Rose, explained at the "Art + Environment" conference that the "release" signifies that we don't own art—it exists, after its brief moment, only in memory. She spoke about the relevance of living for a week in intense conditions (and cleaning up afterward); the art must be installed and uninstalled with no impact on the desert) as an important aspect of the aesthetics of radical self-expression and self-reliance. "When you come here, you leave all points of reference behind you and reimagine life," Rose said.

Other environmental venues are less obvious but still fascinating sites for aesthetic analysis and conceptual design. Fritz Haeg, whose canvas is the American front lawn, epitomizes the cleverly engaging potential of this movement with his "Edible Estates" project.

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pects, interactive art that's meant to af-
fect how we live.
America's roughly 30 million acres of
lawns, Haeg explained, isolate us from
our neighbors. To grow them, every
other form of life has to be displaced,
creating an unhealthy monoculture.
Mowed with polluting machines, lawns
are an obvious resource drain—with water taxed by pesticides
and herbicides that then flows into our
drinking supplies. All we do is create
our homes in the middle of all that!
Haeg travels the country removing
the no man's land of suburban front
lawns and replacing them with produc-
tive spaces that grow food. Most of our
food is grown remotely, invisibly, indus-
trially, and trucked hundreds of miles
to us (with a consequently enormous
carbon footprint). We don't think about
food production, because it's not present.
Haeg urges us to fill our neighborhoods
with evidence of life and of how life
functions, to see "what happens when
we start to welcome plants and animals
into our cities in more strategic ways."

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NOVEMBER 7, 2008