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 remedializing 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 are rest abound as aesthetic subjects, today's green art grows from the premise that past traditions have inadequately confronted nature, relegating the environment to a bit role, a two-dimensional background. Much of what art museums display is, of course, pieces found from minerals, marble shaped into sculpture, 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 Novembers 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 "invea-
tigates human impacts on the natural envi-
ronment," the exhibition text informs. "Often
made of recycled materials, her thoughtful
renderings of ecological phenomena encour-
geage dialogue about issues ranging from bio-
diversity to global warming." Holten's blurbs
well as a generic template for a great many
works in the genre.

Noteworthy earthworks include Robert
Smithson's 1970 "Spiral Jetty," a 1,550-foot-
long coil of earth and rocks in the Great Salt
Lake; Walter De Maria's 1977 "Lightning Field," a
two-mile 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
terrains inspired by Native American mounds
and ancient Mesoamerican cities. (It's not
coincidental that America's most prominent
earthworks are in the West, a region infatuated
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 na-
ture. J.M.W. Turner, Ansel Adams, Thomas
Cole, and Albert Bierstadt come to mind,
among many others. But canonical art land-
sapes resonate with imperial greed and con-
sciousness, 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, converting the land as an
entitlement for the artist's culture, often over-
writing the claims of its original inhabitants.
That is antithetical to the model of wise stew-
ardship that today's green art embraces.

Land art is about the world we inhabit, with
attention to its ecological dynamics: its elon-
ments—water, air, dirt, plants, rocks—and the
sympathies or tensions (usually the latter) ac-
companying human habitation. "We are part
of nature," said the conference organizer, Will-
liam L. Fox, in his opening remarks. "How do we
make this visible?"

The land art I admire most takes up this
challenge by focusing our concerns about
pollution, desecration, and other imbalances
casted by people. Immersive and experiential,
earthworks are often site-specific, consum-
ately about place. The works may resist or
subvert the institution of museums, though at
the same time museums are potentially cru-
cial 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 be
more like laboratories than artistic tem-
ples," fostering interaction rather than passive
esthetic 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 contradic-
tory impulse? (I like De Maria's witty comment
on the relationship between the art world and
earthworks when, in 1968, he filled a Munich
art gallery with dirt.)

There are inherent tensions in bringing land
art into the museum. Doing so may belittle 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,
thus far, too formal. 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 com-
plicit in our experience of nature. On the
other hand, consider the environmental toll of
hordes traipsing into rare species or frag-
ile landscapes. Sometimes museums deal with
the difficulty of importing land art by show-
ing photographs of it; but then one worries that
such installations become mere props for
photo shoots. Such conflicts are perhaps unsolv-
able, but deliberating about them raises the
kinds of issues that environmental art means
to highlight.

"Environmental" is, of course, every-
thing 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 eco-
system prominently inspires art. Not far from
Reno, professional and amateur artists gather
annually at Burning Man, a weeklong hap-
pening in the Black Rock plays, where 50,000
people create and enjoy a festival of temporary
art constructions that are bizarre, surreal, ri-
diculous, 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-
on Rose, explained at the "Art + Environ-
ment" 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 condi-
tions (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 ob-
vious but still fascinating sites for aesthetic
analysis and conceptual design. Fritz Haeg,
whose canvas is the American front lawn,
etymology the cleverly engaging potential of
this movement with his "Edible Estates" proj-
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Fritz Haeg's "Edible Estates" projects trans-
form suburban yards into consumable gardens.

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Edited by Tara Valenti and M.S. Vijay Kumar
Foreword by John S.W. Brown

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ISBN: 978-0-520-03571-8
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ecs, interactive art that's meant to af-
flect how we live.
America's roughly 30 million acres of
lawns, Haag 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 a waste of water and of resources
that are then poured into our drinking
water supply. And we sacrifice our
homes in the middle of all that!

Haag 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.
Haag 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."

ENDING vegetable gardens be-
comes very performative for the
family whose lawn has been repur-
posed, so a productive space becomes
a site that may bring people
together. Irresistably Haag's
gardening interventions beckon the
neighbors, sub-
verting the homogeneity of the Ameri-
can landscape with lush, unruly, usable
agricultural landscapes. He seeks
out sites calculated to engender the most
dissimilarity, channelling this resistance
to draw attention to his mission. Haag
films the transformations of these lawns,
arranges workshops on composting and
small-scale food production, and distrib-
utes promotional brochures at the site of
each "prototype garden project."
A timely creative energy surrounds
green art, manifested in other recent
conferences, books, and exhibitions that
tap into our heightened concern with
environmental issues. The University of
Chicago's Smart Museum of Art has a
gown showing the country called "Re-
beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art,"
and San Francisco's Natural World Mu-
seum recently sponsored "Art in Action:
Nature, Creativity and Our Collective
Future." Europe, a book that came out
do a 2006 show at New York's Interna-
tional Center of Photography, explains
how its images "examine new concepts of
the natural sphere occasioned by 21st-century technologies, images of
destructive ecological engagement; and
visions of our future interactions with
the environment. Considering nature
in the broadest sense, this exhibition
reflects new perspectives on the planet
that sustains, enchants, and—increas-
ingly—frightens us." Note how that
declines to those age-old fundamentals of
art—enchantment and fear—a third
term, sustainability, which increasingly
permeates our awareness.

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etic Animals and Animal Sounds (Palgrave

NOVEMBER 7, 2008