

KATIE HOLTEN

Katie Holten's "Old News (Ghost Forest)" recycles newspapers back into trees. Below: In 1970, Robert Smithson created "Spiral Jetty," a 1,500-foot-long coil of earth and rocks in Utah's Great Salt Lake.

## BOOKS & ARTS

# A Sustaining Environment for Environmental Art

By RANDY MALAMUD

**T**HEY 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, earthworks) 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, relegating the environment to a bit role, a two-dimensional background. Much of what art museums display is, of course, paints ground 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 Nevada 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-



DOUGLAS C. PIZAC, ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO

tigates 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 Mesoamerican 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, provoked 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 connivance, 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, construing the land as an entitlement for the artist's culture, often overwriting the claims of its original inhabitants. That is antithetical to the model of wise stewardship that today's green art embraces.

Land art is about the world we inhabit, with attention to its ecological dynamics: its elements—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 make this visible?"

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 Wolfe, 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 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, 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 com-

**Today's green art grows from the premise that past traditions have relegated the environment to a bit role.**

PLICIT IN OUR inexperience of nature. On the other hand, consider the environmental toll of hordes traipsing out into nature, especially to earthworks set in remote or extreme or fragile landscapes. Sometimes museums deal with the difficulty of importing land art by showing photographs of it; but then one worries that such installations become mere props for photos. Such conflicts are perhaps unresolvable, 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, Crimson 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.

*Fritz Haeg's "Edible Estates" projects transform suburban yards from toxic lawns into consumable gardens.*

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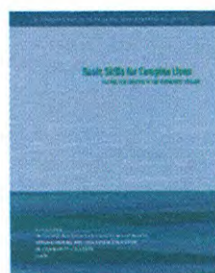
FRITZ HAEG

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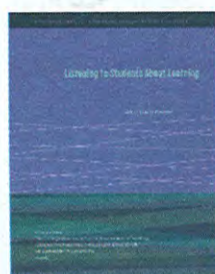
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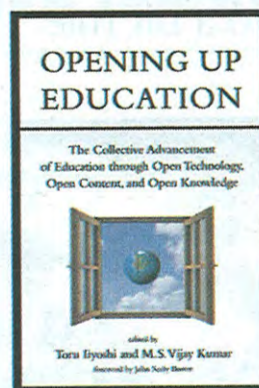
—Charles M. Vest, President Emeritus, MIT

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—Sir John Daniel, President & CEO, Commonwealth of Learning

"...the opening up of education is a bold approach, and one that will challenge the status quo and destabilize educational models, institutions, those who make them work, and who work within them... The three sections of the book put forward much to consider, illuminate many issues and, in the end challenge the reader to consider the possibility and the implications of open [education]."

—Susan D'Antoni, Director, Virtual Institute of the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning



ISBN: 978-0-262-03371-8  
500 pages / Cloth  
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ects, interactive art that's meant to affect 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 decimated, creating an unhealthy monoculture. Mowed with polluting machines, lawns are irrigated—an obvious resource drain—with water toxified by pesticides and herbicides that then flows into our drinking supply. And we situate 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 productive spaces that grow food. Most of our food is grown remotely, invisibly, industrially, 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."

**T**ENDING vegetable gardens becomes very performative for the family whose lawn has been repurposed, so a nonproductive space becomes a site that may bring people together. Invariably Haeg's gardening interventions shock the neighbors, subverting the homogeneity of the American lawn aesthetic with lush, unruly, usable agricultural landscapes. He seeks out sites calculated to engender the most dissonance, channeling this resistance to draw attention to his mission. Haeg films the transformations of these lawns, arranges workshops on composting and small-scale food production, and distributes 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 show touring the country called "Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art," and San Francisco's Natural World Museum recently sponsored "Art in Action: Nature, Creativity and Our Collective Future." *Ecotopia*, a book that came out of a 2006 show at New York's International 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—increasingly—frightens us." Note how that adds to those age-old fundamentals of art—enchantment and fear—a third term, sustainability, which increasingly permeates our awareness. ■

Randy Malamud is a professor of English at Georgia State University and author of *Poetic Animals and Animal Souls* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).