

"Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974"

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART,
LOS ANGELES
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GIVEN THE SEISMIC SHIFTS that rocked Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art over the summer, wandering through "Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974" felt a bit uncanny. The exhibition showcases intellectually voracious curating at its best; here the titular *ends* functions as a triple entendre, signifying at once artistic means of making, remoteness, and obliteration, with the show's ambitious international scope enabling a comprehensive exploration of all three. Whatever one might make of the sometimes unsettling parallels between recent upheavals at the hosting institution and the show's often apocalyptic overtones, "Ends of the Earth" is unquestionably an impressive effort to rewrite the story of the sprawling set of practices often called "Earth art." Organized by former LA MOCA curator Philipp Kaiser and art historian Miwon Kwon, it emphasizes previously occluded themes, such as urban transformation and the persistently central role of media in the documentation and dissemination of Land art, countering long-held assumptions that this work happened primarily in rural locations and was resistant to reproductive technologies.

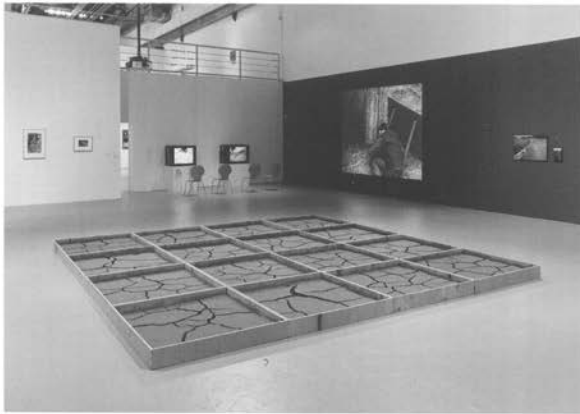
"Ends of the Earth" is hence much more than a survey. It is, bracingly, an academic exhibition with a theoretical

viewpoint, one honed by rigorous historical research. The show aims for a broad and inclusive definition of Land art by tracking its emergence within and alongside Conceptualism, performance, and global post-Minimal strains such as Arte Povera in Italy and Mono-ha in Japan. Hand-somely installed to highlight loose networks of affiliation, the show reveals that the best-known examples in the US (like Robert Smithson) are but one small subset of what was in fact an unusually robust and far-flung cluster of activities. Thus Yoko Ono's *Sky TV*, 1966, in which a television displays a live feed pointing straight up to the space above the museum, may not normally be considered next to large-scale Earthworks made by bulldozers, but as Kaiser and Kwon convincingly argue, it is precisely this sort of heterogeneity that propelled Land art from the outset. One might argue that by opening up Land art's umbrella to encompass any and all artistic attempts to grapple with "the elements," the show risks stripping the term of its specificity. Here, however, the relatively unfixed nature of the term *Land art* sharpens our sense of this work's complex development, illustrating that, historiographically, it has always been a slippery yet productive category.

Indeed, heterogeneity was visible even in the very first displays of Land art, as the curators demonstrate with small shows-within-the-show that focus on such historical precedents as Virginia Dwan's "Earthworks" (1968), Gerry Schum's televised exhibition "Land Art" (1969), and Willoughby Sharp's "Earth Art" (1969), which emphasize that Land art always included text-based pieces, sketches, video, photography, and process-based action. And yet by highlighting some of the original endeavors to name and market this genre, "Ends of the Earth" also reminds us of the problematic simplification that exhibitions often enforce, particularly for work so varied, and foregrounds the role of institutional framing and the significant art-world branding that molded this multifarious set of practices into a "movement."

The exhibit's challenge to accepted narratives begins with another, earlier set of historical precedents, a survey of works that contest the accepted wisdom that Land art

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From left: View of "Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974," 2012, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Foreground: Alice Aycock, *Clay #2*, 1971/2012. Photo: Brian Forrest. Vito Acconci, *Digging Piece*, 1970. Super 8 transferred to video, color, silent, 10 minutes. Photo: Electronic Arts Intermix. OHO Group, *Milenko Matanović Makes a Path*, ca. 1968-69, gelatin silver print, 10 x 8".



sprang fully formed from the experimentally rich ferment of the 1960s by demonstrating its roots in the first half of the twentieth century. Among the earliest examples on display is Isamu Noguchi's *Monument to the Plow*, 1933, a drawing of an unrealized proposal for a twelve-hundred-foot-tall pyramid in the midwestern US: one part tilled, one part planted with wheat, one part untouched, its apex crowned by a steel plow. With its monumental height, grandiose implausibility, and tension between human intervention and unspoiled nature, Noguchi's piece foreshadows some of what would come several decades later.

Elsewhere, geographic diversity brings a welcome thematic range, as rooms dedicated to Israeli, Latin American, and Icelandic art place both underrecognized and familiar pieces together, often underscoring local political constraints and circumstances absent from other surveys. In 1972, Micha Ullman transplanted dirt from one side of the Israel-Palestine border to the other, coordinating this soil exchange between youth living on a kibbutz and residents of an Arab village (*Messer-Metzer*). Gesturing to the brutal military dictatorship in Brazil, films and photographs by

Where, exactly, are these works located—far away in the desert West, or in a more discursive territory, one that can be effectively summoned with charts, maps, diagrams, photos, and words?

Artur Barrio show the artist placing bundles of flesh and bone near open sewers, where they await discovery by those who walk by (*Situação T/T*, 1970). Such pieces signal a nascent social and relational ethos in places where borders—both physical and political—were not easily transgressed, suggesting unexpected resonances with subsequent art practices.

At the same time, the show is not didactic about its regional groupings, and the repetition of some major motifs throughout multiple parts of the world indicates that something was in the air, so to speak, during the height of Land

art's prominence in the late '60s and early '70s. Walking, for instance, became vital as a form of nonproductive production for British artists Richard Long and Hamish Fulton as well as for the Slovenian OHO Group (*Milenko Matanović Makes a Path*, ca. 1968–69). The physical challenges of bracing one's body against the elements appears in Czech Jan Mlčoch's *Ascent of Kotel Mountain*, 1974—a solo climb in bad weather—and in American Joan Jonas's moving filmed performance *Wind*, 1968, an improvisational dance in collaboration with very strong gusts. There is digging and more digging, evidenced by many shots of artists carving trenches, burying objects, and wielding pickaxes and other devices. *An Earthwork Performed*, a piece by Mary Kelly from 1970, features a 16-mm film loop of the original performance of a man shoveling coke (a coal by-product) alongside an audio and video recording of a reenactment completed in 2012. Kelly's installation evokes political notions of feminist and working-class labor. Vito Acconci, by contrast, arduously forgoes tools and uses his legs to kick sand out of an ever-deepening hole in *Digging Piece*, 1970. And, as might be expected from all this digging, there are many piles, from Barry Flanagan's *Ringn '66*, 1966 (112 pounds of sand poured onto the floor, minus four handfuls taken to create a small crater at the top), to twelve tons of gravel heaped in a corner by the Japanese collective Group "I" in *E. Jari*, 1966/2012. Accumulations of matter also intersect with reflections on composition, with sod, dust, earth, and clay arranged in various geometric shapes, as in meditatively simple works by Alice Aycock, Pino Pascali, and Michelle Stuart.

Despite these similarities in form and process, however, starkly opposing tendencies emerge. Some artists are interested in scientific investigations of, say, color optics and receding perspective. One of the show's highlights, Patricia Johanson's *Stephen Long*, 1968, is a sixteen-hundred-foot-long red, yellow, and blue line laid along the ground to stretch "out of sight," as the artist puts it in the televised documentation on view. Others are riveted by questions of faith and the sacred, like Kristján Gudmundsson, whose

triangle of what she refers to as consecrated soil is hidden within a rectangle of otherwise identical earth. But this binary is challenged by other projects that are both scientific and tinged with the mystical-cum-trippy, as in Robert Barry's "Inert Gas Series," 1969, in which he released five of the noble gases into the atmosphere.

Perhaps the most striking difference evident in the exhibition is between the artists who approach "land" as a territory to be conquered and those who see it as a scarce resource to be protected. Take the destructive desire of Yves Klein, who writes circa 1960: "I will raze everything at the surface of the entire earth until it is flat. I will fill the valleys with mountains, then I will pour concrete over the surface of all the continents." This nihilism borders on hubris, and Klein's statement stands in contrast to the conservationist impulse to replenish what has been taken away. One persistent wish in some of this work is that the holes we make can be filled in and seamlessly smoothed over, that harm can be undone, that losses can be restored. Many artists in the show displace and then replace earth, as in Nobuo Sekine's *Phase—Mother Earth*, 1968, in which the artist dug a cylindrical hole, gathered up the displaced earth, and displayed it alongside his excavation. He later used the same material to refill the negative space he had created. Some try to actively ameliorate destruction, as in Yitzhak Danziger's *The Rehabilitation of Nesher Quarry*, 1971, an experimental attempt to repair environmental damage at an abandoned mine near Haifa. But other artists, like Klein, are insistent about the powerfully negative or injurious force of human action, and turn to harness that energy instead. Largely unfolding under the shadow of nuclear warfare and a growing awareness of man-made threats to the environment, Land art's dynamic of injury versus repair demonstrates that it was not always consonant with environmentalism. These contradictions put pressure on our current context, as well: the divisive politics of climate change, the increasing expectations of "sustainability" in design, debates about the politics of land use, and the reevaluation of suburbanization after the foreclosure crisis.

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From left: Patricia Johanson, *Stephen Long*, 1968, 16 mm transferred to DVD, color, sound, 5 minutes. View of "Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974," 2012, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Foreground: Giovanni Anselmo, *Direzione* (Directions), 1967-68. Background: Group "I", *E. Jari*, 1966/2012. Nobuo Sekine, *Phase—Mother Earth* (detail), 1968, six gelatin silver prints and documentary sketches, each 40% x 57 1/4".

