

Mark A. Cheetham
The Absent Objects of EcoArt
Strategies of the Remote & Ephemeral

Land and earth art have been with us for only about 50 years, but these practices have established a dense and increasingly important history. It is the relationship between the earthworks of the 1960s and 1970s and analogous work today that I want to begin to frame. Are there important differences between mid-20th-century land art and what we often now call Eco Art, especially given that many of the original practitioners are still active? Let's begin with Michael Heizer's monumental »Levitated Mass,« 2012. Heizer's giant boulder recently arrived at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art after an 11-day »progress« from the desert. Surely this is an unlikely example with which to start a discussion of the invisibility, absence, remoteness, and ephemerality of land art – itself arguably the most material of art practices – but I will claim that these qualities are fundamental to this type of art at its inception and today.

At 340 tonnes, »Levitated Mass« is one of the largest and most costly rocks moved in recent times. Apparently, Heizer had been looking for just the right boulder since 1968; he made a proposal in 1970 for a similar installation at the 1972 Munich Olympics site. His search invokes a much longer history, not only of geology but also of the longstanding human manipulation of natural forms. As Michael Govan, director of the LA County Museum, reminds us in a video about the project, Heizer's work is part of an »ancient tradition [...] of moving monoliths to mark a place.« For both artist and museum director, this resonance adds to the appeal of the project. Govan goes on to make a more controversial claim: that there won't be »a single adult from near and far who won't want to experience this sculpture.« Cleverly or unwittingly, Govan makes this claim while standing beside the boulder as it is being quarried. But his visitors now find it in the city, in front of the museum, suspended. And »experience« is the word; they will come not just to see a sculpture but to experience a spectacle.

I don't question the potential popularity of this and comparable works. Many artists stage just this sort of marvel now, bringing »nature« indoors. A memorable example is Olafur Eliasson's »Weather Project« in the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, 2003, in which he brought the sun inside, to the delight of over two million visitors. Govan rightly reminds us that most people see art in the city. Thomas McEvilley claims that »the museum, once a place cut off from public life, has become a place from which criticism is directed at the conduct of public life.«² I think we need to make a distinction between Eliasson's and Heizer's works as we try to think through the paradoxes of invisibility and ephemerality in this important genre of contemporary art. Eliasson's sun and atmosphere were purposefully and obviously artificial. They were supplemented by his characteristic emphasis on the social nature of the project, which he underlined with off-site surveys about the weather. Heizer's is a »real« boulder, now missing from the California desert. »Levitated Mass« moves a mountainous rock to the city but largely sidesteps the meta-discourse about how and where we understand the concept of »nature« these days, a concern that is central to Eliasson's projects in general.

It is tempting to think that Heizer and many other land artists from this first American generation took themselves and their projects out into the »wilderness;« now they are coming back. On this reading, remoteness once gained has been rescinded. While it is remarkable how much environmental art these days is to be found

in cities and specifically in galleries, this attractively simple thesis is incorrect; the story is more complex. There has since the inception of land art been a complex interplay between remoteness, absence, and massive physical presence. What compels inquiry is how Heizer's »Levitated Mass« in effect compacts and rewinds one strain in the history of the last 50 years of Land Art.

In situ, »Levitated Mass« sets up a dialectic between the relatively remote countryside – call it »nature« for now – and the urban environment that is reminiscent of early land art in the USA. The famous »Earth Works« exhibition in at the Dwan Gallery in NYC, in October 1968, makes this relationship clear. Instigator Robert Smithson's »Nonsite, Franklin, N.J.,« 1968, and Carl Andre's documentary photos of his work in Aspen, Colorado from the previous summer are typical of the time in that they insist on a gallery/non-gallery relationship. Sol LeWitt's »Buried Cube Containing an Object of Importance but Little Value« of 1968 takes the ephemerality of documentation in the show to an extreme: it displays photographs of his ritualistic burial of a hand crafted object in the Netherlands. As LeWitt said, it »was not visible – but known.«³ These works contrast with Robert Morris' »Earthwork,« 1968, which is completely if iconoclastically present. It shows the detritus of the city without dialectic. But Morris made many remote works, too. While these and many others artists were leaving the city and the gallery network to explore and mark faraway territories – a move that can be seen to have extended this gallery system considerably – there was a notable consistency in their ongoing reference to the circuit of city/country, culture/nature. To put this point another way, they had no intention of going off the grid of the artworld.

The most famous example of this site/non-site dialectic is Smithson's »Spiral Jetty,« constructed in 1970 at Rozel Point in the Great Salt Lake, Utah. Remote as it may be for most of us, Smithson chose this location in part because of its proximity to the Golden Spike national monument, which commemorated the final link between the west and east spans of the transcontinental railway on May 10th, 1869. He also appreciated the traces of industry at this spot, the remnants of now largely invisible but occasionally re-energized oil exploration. Let me note in passing that photos of this famous work typically edit out the traces of human activity, emphasizing instead the sublime remoteness of the Spiral Jetty. Smithson, however, was no such Romantic.

We can gain an overview of American land art in its efflorescence from c. 1965–1975 by thinking of its double urge, its play with resistance and relocation. Generally speaking, it resisted the Gallery System in New York City; the media-specific formalism of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried dead; monumental sculpture in public urban spaces; and traditional art materials and finish in sculptural work. Relocation promised benefits: moving outside the museum or gallery and thus (supposedly) its value systems; buying into American myths of exploration and wilderness; a connection to early environmentalism (for example, Jane Jacobs' 1961 »The Death and Life of Great American Cities;« Rachel Carson's »Silent Spring,« 1962; the first official Earth Day in 1970) and that encouraged by the outrage over the deployment of defoliants in the Vietnam War. Absenting art from galleries and urban settings – remoteness – was one practice. Temporariness, ephemerality, or outright invisibility as part of a conceptualist strategy, was another.

Just one example: Claes Oldenburg's »Placid Civic Monument« was a performance and creation of a negative space, a visible invisibility presented in clear view of Cleopatra's Needle and the Metropolitan Museum in New York's Central Park in the fall of 1967. Suzaan Boettger has noted that Oldenburg's earth work was a carefully orchestrated part of an exhibition called »Sculpture in Environment« curated by Sam Green (who had done a similar show in Philadelphia). Anti-monumentality, negative space, radically simple telluric materials, even a morbid reference to the increasing body count from the unpopular war in Vietnam (the hole clearly resembles a grave), all were part of this work. Whether rightly or not from our current perspective, Green saw the work as conceptual, given that it was a gesture begun and more or less restored to »normal« on a Sunday in Central Park.

There are many ways to make earth art ephemeral, whether within or beyond the gallery. In making this point specific, I want to emphasize in addition the international profusion of experimentation with earth works. Mapping is one sub-genre of potential ephemerality and even invisibility, as in early examples by the N. E. Thing Co., where the trace on a map is of a network that, on the one hand, existed for only the time of communication with a then – important new technology, the telex machine. It is conceptual and fleeting. On the other hand though, group founder Iain Baxter was also tracing the material existence of telegraph lines between cities, the cables that at this time physically carried the messages he was sending.

Another strategy is to curtail access to work temporally, as was the case with Paul Maenz's group exhibition »19:45–21:5« seen (briefly) at the Galerie Dorothea Loehr, Frankfurt, on September 9th, 1967. This was an international and communal exhibition that included Jan Dibbets from the Netherlands, Richard Long, Barry Flanagan, and John Johnson from the UK, along with German artists. Some works connected the conceptual and the material, such as Long's piece, which brought places and materials in England and Germany together through his instructions and with found elements from both locales. Dibbets' contribution invited direct participation as visitors walked through the sawdust that bounded his ephemeral negative space in the gallery's courtyard.

Early land artists employed these and other strategies of remoteness and ephemerality. They frequently made their work both

phenomenologically present and experientially absent, even invisible. Does this doubleness sound like a good description of an important idea in our discussion – the concept of »nature?« I am not suggesting that early or recent earth artists necessarily or always »intend« to emphasize the impossibility of defining, envisioning, or fully grasping nature with their frequent recourse to ephemeral, remote, or even invisible work. A counterexample is James Turrell's mega project at Roden Crater, one goal of which is to afford us an experience of the presence of light from impossibly distant stars. But exceptions aside, contemporary Eco Art, I would argue, takes our human relationship to nature as its theme more consistently than its predecessors did and underlines the necessary impossibility of adequately representing this concept. The urban vs. remote sitings of such work also remain in play.

Let me add detail to these claims with just three more examples. The first and third you may know; they are of work by internationally noted American artists Mark Dion and Roni Horn. The other, which I'll sandwich between the big names, is by a much younger and less recognized artist named Sean Martindale. Dion's »Neukom Vivarium,« 2007 in Seattle is another compelling case of the contemporary trend to bring nature indoors for examination that we saw with Eliasson's »Weather Project.« Here we see nature on life support, in the gallery. Dion is well aware of the technological artificiality of the situation and of the repugnance that we might experience in thinking that this is what nature has come to in our industrial society. For one thing, not unlike Heizer's boulder, the harvesting and installation of this magnificent tree from the nearby rainforest was a well documented ritual. In connecting forest and city and in selecting a »nursery tree« from which new life constantly emanates, Dion underlines the interconnectedness characteristic of ecological thinking. The work is both a lament and an ethical prod, a call to awareness.

Sean Martindale's piece »Nature« (fig. 1) is downright homespun by comparison. He simply constructed large cardboard letters spelling N A T U R E and placed them on the street for recycling, filming local reaction with a hidden camera across the street. If ecology can be defined as the science and humanistic perspective that studies the interactions between organisms and their environment, then this is an ecological artwork. The work is low tech, made of



Fig. 1
Sean Martindale, NATURE.
Intervention and documentation by
Sean Martindale, 2009



Fig. 2
Roni Horn, *Vatnasafn/Library of Water*.
Permanent installation since 2007,
Stykkishólmur, Iceland

recycled materials, and it disappeared within a few hours. Nature is not represented or pictured here in the typical mode of a landscape painting. Neither is the impossibility of its representation presented, as in the category of the Sublime. The work is conceptual to the extent that nature is presented as language, as a concept. What Martindale catalyzes (And with what? A work, a performance, a sculpture, an intervention?) is conversation about nature, at home and on the street, his home street. He suggests that nature is the ultimate local and global concern.

We can never see Nature, capital N, the stable and essential entity that we nonetheless have intimations of or at least hope exists to sustain us. As a concept it is invisible, and rightly so. An extensive work that underlines this thought is New York artist Roni Horn's »VATNASAFN/Library of Water,« from 2007 (fig. 2). It is in Stykkishólmur, on the west coast of Iceland. The building and site are so prominent that again we have to dwell on the physical presence of the work's main elements. The 24, double human sized glass columns hold glacial runoff gathered from sites around Iceland. They form a transparent but silent and inscrutable record in a space that used to house ranges of books. On the floor, weather words – adjectives in Icelandic and English – take us to the ever-emotive charge of the weather, the most overt sign we have of nature's presence and constant changeability. This textual element underfoot is called »You are the Weather« and can be exhibited separately. Finally, Horn includes a record of about 100 interviews conducted with Iceland-

ers in 2005–2006 about the weather. Titled »Weather reports you,« this component is available in the adjacent reading room and as a separate artist's book.

At the same time – and one really does need to experience an overlay here – much of the force of Horn's work comes from the concomitant absence or invisibility of the water, weather, and ultimately, Nature. Out the generous windows of the library we can see weather, we can see ocean, but neither is identical to the reports or the samples she has collected. This gap is important, because no sample or example exactly specifies nature or our relationship to this idea and reality. Like Mark Dion's tree, the glacial water has been taken from nature. In Horn's Iceland especially, one wonders if the same resources could be sampled in the same way and from the same sites today as only a few years ago. In fact, two of the source glaciers have disappeared in the interim. Like Olafur Eliasson's »Weather Project,« Horn includes testimony that is social and by nature ephemeral. Her »Library of Water« is also a potent example of the combination of remoteness and immediacy in contemporary Eco Art, a dovetailing that can help us to articulate and thus ameliorate our relationships with nature. Iceland itself is somewhat remote, yet Horn, who has been spending time there since 1975, makes it immediate through her local witnesses. The environmental issues that this work addresses – global warming first among them – show up first near the Arctic region but will of course affect the population of the planet as a whole. In Iceland as in much EcoArt, the future is now.

Notes

1 Michael Govan, »Levitated Mass,« URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLMZUpUBrOM> [23.08.2012].

2 Thomas McEvilley: *Art's Shifting Role in the Battle between Nature and Culture*. In: *Allocations: Art for a Natural and Artificial Environment*. Ed. by Jan Brand/Catelijne de Muynck/Jouke Kleerebezem. Zoetermeer 1992, p. 27.

3 Cited in Suzaan Boettger: *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties*. Berkeley 2002, p. 88.

Captions

Courtesy of the artists. Roni Horn: 2. – Sean Martindale: 1.