

Environmental Sculpture: Nature, Art, Ecology and Society

Although the concept of 'Environmental Sculpture' is an invention of the late 20th century, its focus on how human beings can creatively get involved with the natural environment has been a major concern of human beings for thousands of years. Prehistoric cultures and tribal societies venerated landscape - rivers, mountains and trees as well as wind, rain and the stars - as a symphonic whole animated by spiritual presence. Sculptural monuments like the stone circles and stone alignments of the megalithic culture were carefully integrated into this living fabric and orientated to specific landmarks and the movement of sun, moon and star constellations during the year.



Figure 1 Stone Row, megalithic culture (appr. 2000 BC), Isle of Lewis, UK

The nineteenth century and the Industrial Revolution brought almost total estrangement from nature. The artworks of western civilisation became detached from any living context, tucked away in sterile museums and galleries - homeless children of an intellectual and analytical consciousness which was no longer capable or even interested in grasping any living wholeness. Our current ecological crisis is a direct outcome of this mode of thinking which sees nature as a mere commodity and resource for exploitation.

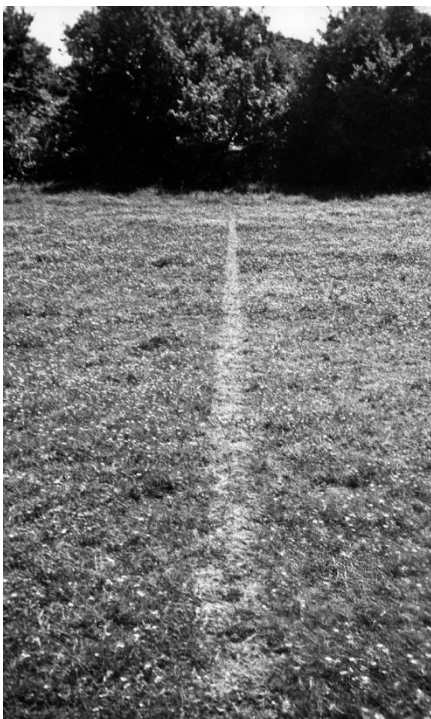


Figure 2 Richard Long - Line Made by Walking (1967)

Artists reacted to this loss of context by concentrating on the only kind of integrity they could still rely upon - the inner lawfulness of the artistic elements of colour, line, form and space. In an attempt to grasp the spiritual essence of colour and form, artists resorted to ever more reduced, minimalistic creations.

Land-Art, or Environmental Sculpture, was born at and out of this moment of utter reduction, as it were, on the edge of nothingness. One of the first and perhaps most pivotal works of Land-Art was 'Line Made By Walking', created in 1967 by the British sculptor Richard Long. It consists of a straight line, brought about by the artist repeatedly and intentionally walking back and forth on a South West England meadow. This seemingly banal work breaks with many well-honed art traditions. It replaces the narrow restrictions of studio and gallery

walls with the open natural landscape and, instead of presenting a refined aesthetic product, promotes the artist's primal, wilful activity of walking the land as a potent agent of creativity. With this it also reiterates Paul Klee's claim that "all creation derives from movement". From this pivotal point onwards, Richard Long has been walking the globe, over mountains and deserts, leaving behind him humble, ephemeral traces on the ground in the form of straight lines and circles. In these works an exciting (although not utterly new) realm of exploration opened up for him and the following generations of environmental artists: how many different ways are there to create a straight line in a landscape and how does each of these lines interact with the specific landscape setting, the topography, specific landmarks, changing weather conditions and so on? Just because the form is so simple and universal ("it belongs to everybody" as Long remarks), its 'site-specific' placement and orientation can speak in a very articulate way - not about itself, but about the place where it appears.

Andy Goldworthy, another British pioneer of Environmental Sculpture, started his career by escaping art school and becoming a naturalist: sleeping outside, waking with the dawn, walking bare-feet, splashing in the water and digging in the mud. He felt the urge to expose himself to the elements, explore and play like a child. "When I began working outside, I had to establish instincts and feelings for Nature. I needed a physical link before a personal approach and relationship could be formed." This immediate, physical, "hands-on" relationship to nature enabled him to develop new sensitivities and organs for nature.

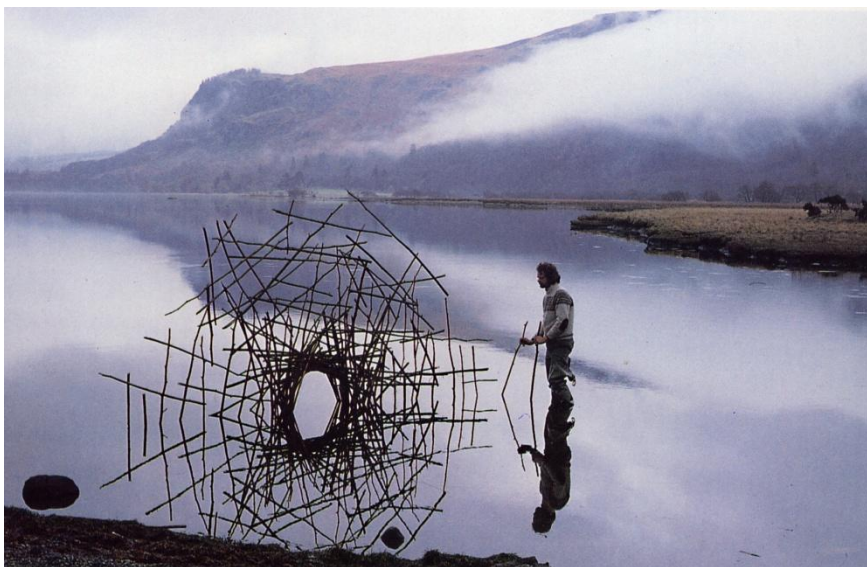


Figure 3 Andy Goldworthy - Willow Sticks with Water Reflection, 1988

"Willow Sticks with Water Reflection" (1988) is a good illustration of his working method. He often remarked, that, as an artist, he has no personal message to express. It is only by meeting the particular situation, that his artistic imagination begins to work. In "Willow Sticks", what we see is the result of a cooperation between the artist's creation and the reflecting properties

of water. This ingenious invention clearly was inspired by the place itself. So in one way, Goldworthy makes us aware of what anyway already exists in the place. On the other hand, he applies principles of composition, of centre and periphery, of straight and round lines in his delicate, ephemeral and aesthetically pleasing construction. With this he subtly offsets natural beauty with a creation penetrated by human consciousness, awareness and care.

Although the early masters of Environmental Sculpture did not explicitly place their works into the context of the growing environmental crisis, their research, their sensitivity and their careful interventions made a mayor contribution to a beginning shift in environmental awareness. They helped us to "see what is there" and provided striking examples of a more

empathetic relationship to nature and the possibility for a truly mutual cooperation with nature. In the last two decades many environmental artists have expanded their practice by more explicitly addressing ecological concerns. This included for instance the artistic design of ecological water treatment plants and projects creating bio-spheres in urban areas.



Figure 4 Axel Ewald - Forest Broom, Wales, UK, 1994

My own involvement with environmental sculpture started in England in 1989, when I attended a conference on "Sculpture and Landscape" which included as speakers all the mayor environmental artist of the time, including Andy Goldsworthy. I immediately identified in their search something akin to the holistic approach to nature introduced by J.W. von Goethe. Goethe,

whose scientific writings formed the epistemological basis of Rudolf Steiner's spiritual science, had pursued his scientific studies of nature by employing the whole tool set of human faculties, including what he called "exact imagination", in order to grasp the wholeness of nature. Parallel to conducting Goethean Science workshops together with the Biologist Margaret Colquhoun, I started to create my first environmental sculptures. Creating artworks in situ, in an ongoing dialogue with places, their history, their material and animated fabric, for me became an exciting artistic challenge and a fitting way of answering Rudolf Steiner's call to artists:

"Painfully our Mother Earth has become mineralized. It is our task, through the work of our hands, to transform her into a spirit-filled work of art."

Some of my projects attempted the "healing" of neglected places in more urban contexts, like the "Roundabout Project" in Kibbutz Harduf. The site was an empty "void", before it became transformed in the course of a communal environmental design project by a group of art students studying art in the "Derech Haomanut" training in Harduf. This project included a thorough research of the situation, interviews and community participation in the execution.



Figure 5 Harduf Roundabout - Student Environmental Design Project, Harduf, 2011-12



Figure 6 Environmental Workshop with the College of teachers,
Michael Hall Rudolf Steiner School, Forest Row, England

In recent years environmental sculpture for me has increasingly become linked with the question of community involvement and social processes. Two years ago I was invited by Michael Hall Rudolf Steiner School in England to conduct an environmental sculpture workshop with the college of teachers. This workshop led to an ongoing working process in which I guided a group of teachers in a communal design process, focussing on a problematic part of the school campus. During this process we arrived, by consensus, at various design solutions, including an environmental artwork which will be constructed in a community effort this coming autumn.

One of the striking feedbacks, repeatedly given by participants in such workshops, was that the communal effort, apart from restoring the individuals' bond to nature and nurturing understanding for the fragile fabric of landscape, seems to have a healing effect in the

social realm. Sharing our intimate observations and insights as well as participating with each other in creative work on the land can culminate in a first, humble hint of what is a lofty goal for the future of humanity - "Social Sculpture" - a non-material artistic form-creation between human beings.

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