

artistic practices. Rather, it is to suggest that the ethical awareness of the earth that emerged in the late sixties has continued to evolve as artists have conceived of new ways of perceiving and addressing the natural environment. The continuity between the generations lies in the artists' impetus to challenge definitions of both art and nature, to reveal the limits of human conceptions of nature, and to open art to the congregation of elementals that give rise to a sense of the earth.

ONE

Contemporary Art and the Nature of Site

Though the systematized exploitation of natural resources now seems unstoppable, there has been no lack of vision on the part of artists of how to reinvent our relationship to the environment. A plethora of strategies have surfaced with a view to, in Robert Smithson's now-famous phrase, "mediating between the ecologist and the industrialist."¹ It is therefore worth examining the diverse approaches that orient art toward an ecological consciousness, as well as the political, social, and aesthetic issues that these new forms address. My introduction to earth art through debates about site-specificity responds to the risk of reiterating a binary between the actual and the virtual—between earth and world—at a time when historians of contemporary art are accounting for the global mobility of ideas and the deterritorialization of subject positions. What must be established is that historically, an insistence on the materiality of the discursive sphere, and conversely on the discursive malleability of our earthly condition, was the basis of a rejection of positivist

definitions of both site and subjectivity through art. Since the late sixties, sculpture, site restoration, activist art, process art, and performance have advanced the notion of a dislocated artwork—art that is no longer defined by medium-specificity, objecthood, or an assumed position in the museum or gallery space. Thus, the paradigm of site-specificity does not lead to a strict dematerialization of art. Rather, it signals an upset in the dichotomy between the artwork's meaning and the material conditions of its production and reception, a shift that opened the door to a reconsideration of our ecological predicament.

Surfacing Sculpture: Phenomenological Encounters with the Earth

In the late sixties, the early earthworks movement lodged a critique of the modernist ideal that the artwork should transcend its literal environment. The first contemporary earth artists called upon the seemingly limitless horizon of the earth's topographic and temporal conditions in order to infiltrate the spectator's aesthetic engagement with the singular art object. Many of these early projects reenact or thematize the phenomenological experience of space, opening a reconsideration of the earth itself not merely as a spatial envelope for the art object but as an active component of it, and more precisely, as an assembly of volatile forces that pose a dilemma to the self-enclosure of the modernist art object and equally to the self-determination of the spectator's perceptual experience.

In his 1967 essay "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" Robert Smithson used the term "earthworks" to draw a parallel between the industrial debris of Passaic (a New Jersey suburb) and the ruinous landscape of the 1965 dystopian novel *Earthworks* by Brian Aldiss.² Not long after, the term "earthworks" was commonly used to describe an entire genre of immense sculptural objects built out of and into the land. Artists such as Smithson, Alice Aycock, Suzanne Harris, Michael Heizer, Nancy Holt, Walter De Maria, Mary Miss, and Richard Serra (among others) expanded the scale of minimalist sculpture, often situating their works in obscure, deserted landscapes. Because these projects were unwieldy in size and inaccessible to the museum space by design, they refused a straightforward cat-

egorization according to medium. The term "earthwork" was more suitable, or at least more descriptive, than "sculpture," "architecture," or "monument." The artists' evasion of traditional media and institutions demanded a theorization that would give precedence to new spaces of experience in lieu of a formal analysis of the artists' mastery of a particular medium.

The art historian Rosalind Krauss advanced such a theorization, examining the works of Smithson and Heizer in her book *Passages in Modern Sculpture*. Krauss reads earthworks as a continuation of minimalism's break from the Greenbergian model of aesthetic judgment that had been, during the prime of abstract expressionism, the philosophical foundation of modernism's valorization of the purity of medium and the distinctiveness of vision from the other senses. She argues that minimalist sculpture consistently propels meaning to the surface of the artwork rather than cultivating a sense of inherent significance from within. Minimalism, she argues, rejected the easy association between the meaning of an artwork and the interior life of the artist, posited by the sense that the artwork houses its own quasi-psychological interior. A key aspect of Krauss's project was to sever a patrilineal history of art indebted to the mythology of the artist's "inner, inviolable self." In denying the private life of the artist, the minimalist art object reveals meaning as originating from a public audience.³ This conclusion led Krauss to borrow from two theoretical frameworks in her later interpretations of earthworks as a postminimalist movement. First, she understands the proliferation of new hybrid forms of art-making in semiotic terms, a point to which I shall return. Second, she draws from phenomenology, since in the excision of interiority and the embrace of surface, minimalist and postminimalist art invites a direct relationship to the viewer's body and to the surrounding space.

Phenomenology inspired artists and art historians alike to view artworks in terms of the contingency of the body and the surrounding space of exhibition. A central part of the critique of modernism that earth art inherited from minimalism was the way in which it rooted the aesthetic experience in bodily perception. According to Krauss, minimalism assimilated the principles of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, so that artists revealed what sculpture had previously hidden: that the perceived stability of a sculpture happens not in spite of the variability of the spectator's perspective but precisely through that variability.⁴ Minimalist sculpture, for

Krauss, foregrounds the idea that apprehending an object is synonymous with inhabiting the entire space around it, so that the object is perceived as thoroughly instantiated in that space. Minimalism's project was therefore to divest the object of interiority and to see it in relation to the space that it occupies.⁵

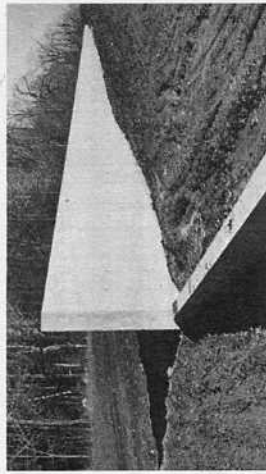
In the late sixties, earth art also collapsed the boundaries between the object and space but did so by producing works that would break out of the limited space of the museum or gallery. Instead of producing a discrete object designed for visual apprehension, earth artists constructed works that required the spectator to be fully immersed in them in order to perceive their dimensions, thereby exemplifying Merleau-Ponty's argument that vision and orientation stem from the body's motility, actions, and tactile senses, which produce a "lived experience" of being absorbed in the spaces and intertwined with the objects one sees. In expanding the boundaries of the art object into the broader space of bodily experience and in changing the conditions of that experience from the museum to the infinite horizon of the desert panorama, earth art finalized minimalism's departure from the disembodied visual mode of modern aesthetic judgment.

For Merleau-Ponty, embodied sight entails a reciprocal relation between oneself and the object or other person in the visual field, and this relation constitutes perception. He explains:

The perceived world is not only *my* world, but the one in which I see the behaviour of other people take shape, for their behaviour equally aims at this world, which is the correlative not only of my consciousness, but of any consciousness *which I can possibly encounter*. . . . It is true that I see what I do see only from a certain angle, and I concede that a spectator differently placed sees what I can only conjecture. But these other spectacles are implied in mine at this moment.⁶

Early earthworks demonstrate two essential aspects of perception as explained by phenomenology: first, a visual field is informed by the bodily sensation of being surrounded in a space, and second, one is equally constituted within that visual field from other perspectives that inform one's own perceptual experience. To simulate a Merleau-Pontian model meant that earth artists had to simultaneously

FIGURE 5. Richard Serra, *Shift*, 1970. Cement, six rectilinear sections, each 60 x 80 inches. Copyright 2009 Richard Serra/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



locate the spectator in a space and arrange her or his visual field in relation to that space, which resulted in a decentered spectatorial experience.

Richard Serra choreographed a performance-sculpture that demonstrates this kind of sited vision by enacting the formulation of perspective through the interlocking of looks between two people moving across the land. In *Shift* (Figure 5), Serra and artist Joan Jonas positioned themselves on either end of a three-hundred-yard-long field and walked across the land on opposite ends, always keeping each other in view despite upsets in the topography, from swamps to hills and trees. As Serra explains, "The boundaries of the work became the maximum distance two people could occupy and still keep each other in view. . . . What I wanted was a dialectic between one's perception of the place in totality and one's relation to the field as walked."⁷ Short concrete walls were placed at the points where the artists' eye levels were aligned, functioning like orthogonal lines leading toward a horizon. However, in contrast to the fixed orthogonal of a centralized Renaissance perspective, these stepped elevations confirm that one's horizon is continually shifting, or

