

Landscape and Art FS 2020 V09

Landscape and art have been intertwined in our culture since time immemorial, but from the early cave paintings of Lascaux depicting wilderness scenes, to contemporary art forms underscoring the demise of the planet, there is a world of difference. Western art built an idealized representation of landscape derived from literary constructs based on Alberti's perspective. The one-point perspectives of Nicolas Poussin and the two-point perspectives of Claude Lorrain nurtured our imagination of nature in both the Baroque and Picturesque periods, with allegorical references supporting these points of view. The intellectual effort behind these carefully crafted constructions mixed Christian symbolism with earlier Greek mythology seamlessly. This particular period created a durable aesthetic framework for landscapes that prevailed through the 19th-century Romantic period to this day. Whether Post-Romantic landscape aesthetics still matter in our strongly de-idealized, systemic and pragmatic world remains doubtful. But the absence of a valid alternative vision poses a serious problem for landscape at present. This absence has yielded a dislocated aesthetic for landscapes, in which the founding concepts of landscape and art are continually confused. This should not, however, be understood as a plea for a return to some foregone Classical period, but rather as a general comment on the facile image production of our age, as well as on how unreflected and unimaginative we have become with the landscapes that surround us.

A double inversion occurred during the course of the 20th century: landscapes were no longer the result of some carefully studied pictorial construct, but rather the result of a highly mediated artistic intervention. Landscape aesthetics as a subject in itself was put aside, to the benefit of an art form based on world awareness and ecology. This was best exemplified in post-war America by the Land Art movement in which the significance of human action in the landscape accompanied the production and mediation of images. This was further underlined by the careful documentation of the making-of ephemeral Land-Art pieces, by artists such as Walter De Maria, Christo, Carl Andre, Robert Smithson, Richard Long and many others. Remaining documentary photographs and films helped finance their work. This kind of personification through Land Art seriously altered the aesthetic appreciation of landscape, which was no longer allegorical but simply factual. Although the industrial age had already struck a strong blow on the old Arcadian ideal, it is clear that the subjective transposition of landscapes under the rubric of Land Art further blurred our perspective on the world. Robert Smithson, through his work on «non-sites», opened up a new aesthetic trend in landscape observation, which was essentially based on an iconoclastic praise of the prevailing situations; this led to an increased acceptance of our everyday reality



Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665), *Paysage avec un homme tué par un serpent*, 1648, National Gallery London.



Richard Long, *Touareg Circle*, Sahara, 1988.
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Christo & Jeanne Claude, *The running fence*, Project for Marin County, California, collage, 1975.
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regardless of its inherent landscape qualities. This kind of aesthetic ambivalence about the built environment was further prolonged in Europe by the famous photographic works of Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss, which documents some of the most banal suburbs of Zurich. Although Land Art did not really catch on with the same scale in Europe as it did in America, European artists such as Joseph Beuys with his tree planting initiatives, Hans Haacke with his Rhine water installations, and Andy Goldsworthy with his “candid frame” – not to say fragile portraits of staged nature – played a significant role in the “ecological” awakening of society. In this sense, both ecology and Land Art in the 1970’s took on key roles in the rapidly changing perception and appreciation of common places to the point of a general aesthetic denial in landscapes.

Landscape architecture suffered from this double inversion, was consumed by both Land Art and ecological systems thinking. It lost any sort of reference to a credible and culturally specific landscape aesthetic. Both ecological design and environmental art have become global, erasing many kinds of cultural specificity. The landscape of a new wetlands reserve, for instance, looks exactly the same whether it is located in Korea, Canada or France, and as such can be understood as a globalized representation of nature devoid of cultural specificity. The ambivalence toward the role and place of local culture in the ecological debate has had dramatic consequences on the secular culture of landscape. During the 1980s there was briefly a landscape architecture and art movement in North America led by people like Peter Walker, Martha Schwartz and Ken Smith; these professionals designed a series of “artsy” landscapes understood as counterpoints to the then prevalent ecological conservation movement. Except for a few cases, the so-called artistic landscape production yielded mediocre work, and finally the trend did not catch on. What was missing, in fact, was a strong aesthetic framework to refer to, and it is from this absence that we still suffer today. The trend then moved from landscape architecture as art to the present global trend in ecological design and sustainability. The same professional protagonists who opportunistically defended an artistic position in landscape architecture at that time, defend a so-called “ecological” position today. This shows precisely how Land Art and ecology have contributed to a general confusion about aesthetic appreciation in landscape. The latest ecological trend, expressed through “landscape urbanism” or “ecological urbanism” have in some respects claimed the rebirth of a new kind of global landscape architecture; however, one that is far removed from any sort of cultural or aesthetic reference and precedent. Ironically, it is the complete absence of cultural reference, under the ecological pretense of a planetary return to deep ecology (meaning an original state of nature), that allows us to question the validity of this new trend in landscape architecture. Without a clear understanding of cultural tropes and the particular aesthetics in landscape that they generate, neither art nor ecology can really help infuse the incredibly confused and disorderly landscapes we presently live in with any clarity, let alone with any kind of lasting meaning and desire.

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Dani Karavan, *Passages - Walter Benjamin Memorial*, Portbou, 1994. ©Christophe Girot



Ian Hamilton Finlay, *The present order is the disorder of the future (St Just)*, sculpture in the garden *Little Sparta*, Scotland, 1966-90. ©Ian Hamilton Finlay