

Sculpture



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Sculpting the Land
Meret Oppenheim
Can Sculptors Make a Living?

Sculpting the Land



Today's earth artists do more than work outdoors—they consider the social and environmental impact too.

by John Beardsley



“What on Earth!” *Life* magazine demanded to know in 1969. “It’s Called Earth Art—and Boulderdash,” the *New York Times Magazine* reported the next year. And in 1976 the *Wall Street Journal* announced, “Earth-shaking News from the Art World: Sculpturing the Land.” They were reacting with bemusement to what must have seemed at the time like just the latest art world fad or folly: the creation of sculpture from the landscape itself.

But earth art, or environmental art (as it is now more generally known), has proved a remarkably durable phenomenon. Born of an ambition to stretch the limits of art, it was nourished by a burgeoning concern for nature that left many artists groping for a way to demonstrate their concern not just for the future of sculpture, but also for the fate of the earth. As the 1970s have yielded to the 1990s, so too have the forms of environmental art evolved. Once associated with monumental

works in the western deserts such as Michael Heizer’s *Double Negative* (1969–70) and Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (1970), environmental art now is just as likely to take the form of temporary, didactic, ecologically and socially engaged interventions in imperiled

Above: George Hargreaves, Peter Richards and Michael Oppenheimer, *Byxbee Park*, 1988–92. Earth, landfill and wooden poles, 30 acres. Courtesy of Hargreaves Associates.

landscapes. By expanding sculpture's turf, artists have begun to encroach on grounds usually reserved for garden designers and landscape architects.

The ecological imperative has been an undercurrent in environmental art from its beginnings in the late 1960s, especially in Europe. The German artist Joseph Beuys provides the model of the artist as environmental activist, planting trees, protesting forest and wetland destruction and even running—unsuccessfully—for a seat in the European Parliament in 1979 as a candidate of the Green Party. In this country artists such as Helen and Newton Harrison, Michael Singer and Alan Sonfist have been associated with environmentally constructive forms of earth art. They have been joined in recent years by a new generation of artist-activists, including Mel Chin, Meg Webster and Mierle Laderman Ukeles.

But earth art has diversified as it has evolved, and these examples alone cannot do justice to the full range of attitudes that characterize today's environmental artists, who often mix historical and cultural references with expressions of ecological concern. The work of Kansas City artist Karen McCoy might be taken as representative of the subtlety and intellectual complexity of recent sculpture in the landscape. "I always try to let a sense of place shape my work," McCoy says. But that involves more than just topography or ecology. "It involves a process of remembering, imagining and contemplating historical and present-day uses of the land."

A 1995 project for Roger Williams Park in Providence, for example, *Floating Pyramid*, was subtitled *A Consideration of Cultural Notions of Wealth and Value*. Ten feet square and eight feet high, the pyramid was made of clam shells piled on a steel float. For McCoy, the shells were an allusion to wampum, strings of white and purple beads made from whelk and quahog shells that were the traditional currency of Native Americans in the region. At the same time, they suggested the continued importance of shellfish in the contemporary economy of New England. The pyramid,



Is It Landscape Design or Sculpture?

Just as sculptors have begun to work like garden designers or landscape architects, so have designers begun to work like sculptors. Two San Francisco Bay Area landscape architects, for example, Peter Walker and George Hargreaves, are shaping landforms like earth artists. Walker's commitment to the artistic dimensions of landscape architecture dates back at least to his *Tanner Fountain* (1984) at Harvard, a circular composition of stones that recalls the work of Carl Andre and Richard Long. More recently, Walker has designed the landscape at the Center for Advanced Science and Technology at Harima, a new town in the mountains near Kobe, Japan, built as a center for scientific research. It includes several "homages to mountains," a wry commentary on the hills that were leveled for development. There are large turf and stone mounds, and a cluster of smaller hillocks, each with a juniper tree planted on the top to suggest a plume of volcanic smoke. Ironically, these hills are highly engineered, even as they evoke ancient Japanese prototypes: Walker calls them "Japanese gardens made in a scientific way, using modern technology."

Hargreaves acknowledges the work of sculptors such as Robert Smithson and Robert Irwin as inspiration for his approach, which he has demonstrated in several Bay Area projects. Both *Byxbee Park* (1988–92), built on a landfill in Palo Alto, and *Guadalupe River Park* (1989–90), a flood control project in San Jose, include sculpted earthen forms. But Hargreaves has avoided the geometry of minimalist-inspired sculptors, opting instead for a language that is derived from nature.

she says, made multiple references. It recalled the shape of a shell mound—presumably a burial—found by archaeologists at nearby Warwick. It also referenced the "triangle trade" in colonial Rhode Island in which slaves were brought to the Caribbean and traded for molasses that was made into rum in the colony, which was in turn traded for slaves in Africa. And it alluded to a triadic theory of property

value, in which the landscape is appraised according to who owns it, who uses it and who profits from it. "Not all these references are something the casual observer will take in," McCoy acknowledges. But they lurk beneath the surface of this beautiful enigma, ready to reward anyone who might use it as a way to contemplate cultural differences in the perception of worth.

While *Floating Pyramid* led from

Left: Martha Schwartz, *Miami Sound Wall*, 1996. Reinforced concrete and colored glass, 34 ft. high x 1 mile, 1,000 ft. long.

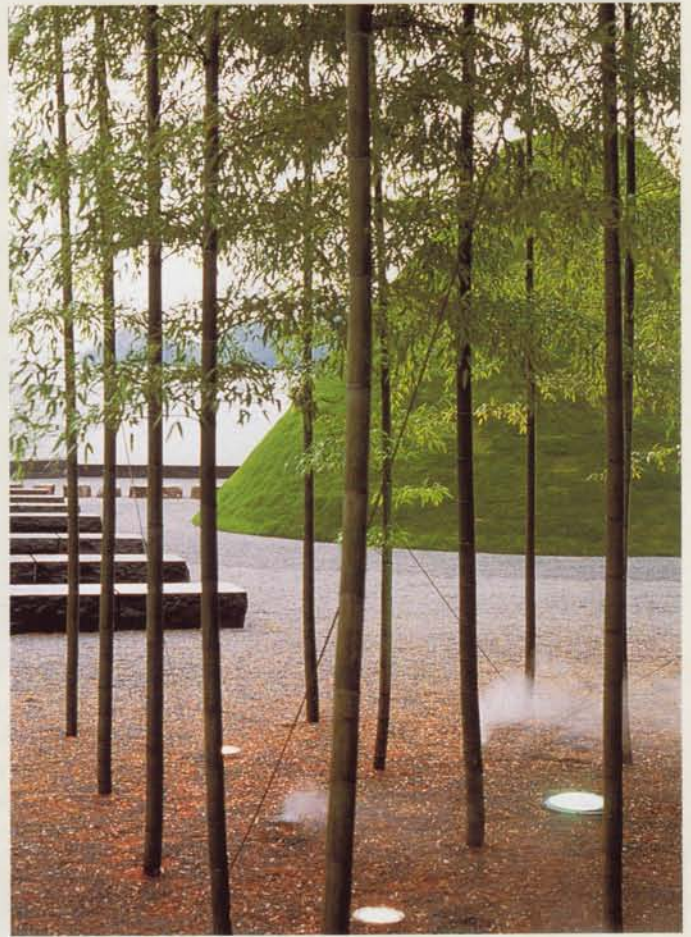
Right: Peter Walker, *Harima Science Garden City* (detail), 1993. Moss, stone, gravel, timber and bamboo. Photo: Pamela Palmer.

Byxbee Park, designed in collaboration with sculptors Peter Richards and Michael Oppenheimer, includes teardrop-shaped hills that seem to have been formed by the wind, an interrupted earth berm that divides the windward from the leeward side of the site, and a field of wooden poles that intensifies awareness of topographical shifts. The landscape along the Guadalupe River was marked with interlocking hills that evoke the braided character of western streams. Hargreaves describes these designs as “theaters of the environment,” which are meant to make people more aware of the dynamic processes of nature.

The hybridization of sculpture and design is also evident in the works of Maya Lin and Martha Schwartz. Lin is the designer of the famed 1982 *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* in Washington and the 1989 *Civil Rights Memorial* in Montgomery, Alabama. The *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, in particular, has a sculptural quality, recalling the work of Richard Serra. Lin’s sculptural ambitions have grown in recent years. *Groundswell*, a 1992–93 installation at the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University in Columbus, was made by pouring 43 tons of shattered glass into three of the building’s exterior spaces. Its mounded forms are evocative both of ancient Native American earthworks and of raked gravel temple gardens in Japan. Lin’s *Wave Field*, completed in 1995 at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, is an undulating grassy quadrangle outside the aerodynamics building. Inspired by a photograph of choppy ocean waves, the piece is a grid of dense, low mounds, each slightly different from the other; it translates fluid dynamics to a growing medium.

Martha Schwartz, who teaches at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design, has recently completed a project at the Miami airport for the Metro-Dade Art in Public Places program. Called *Miami Sound Wall*, the piece replaced conventional sound buffering proposed for the edge of the

airport with an artistically-improved product. Schwartz took the prefabricated concrete panels, had holes punched in them, and filled the holes with colored glass that is illuminated by the sun from behind the north-facing wall. She also scalloped the top of the wall and landscaped an undulating pattern in front of it, creating wave-like patterns that stretch for about a mile between the airport and a neighboring residential community. Schwartz could be speaking for a number of her colleagues when she asks, “Am I an artist in the realm of design or a designer in the realm of art?” **S**

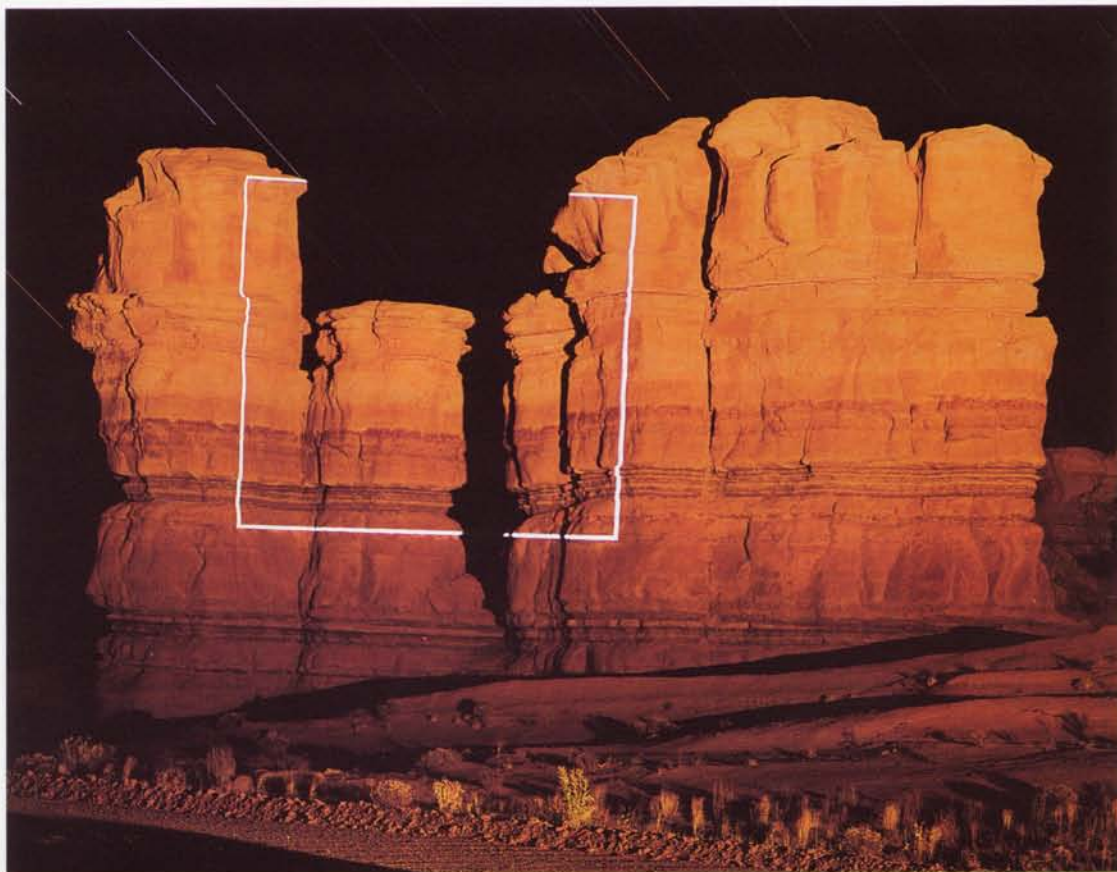


nature to culture, a project called *Ear Mapping, Edge of Town* (1995–96) led from culture to nature. For the art school at the University of Hartford, McCoy made a trail of 17 ear trumpets that led from the Joseloff Gallery across campus to the nearby Park River. Each trumpet was tethered to a brownstone boulder; each was three feet long and was made of paper mucilage over steel mesh, tinted with crushed hematite and

clay slip and sealed with tung oil, varnishes and resins. The last trumpet was at the edge of the river, where “the space opens up like a strange outdoor room with a buckled stone floor.” The aural qualities of this space were the specific inspiration for the piece—water flowing over the rocks makes a variety of musical sounds. But the trail of trumpets heightened the experience of listening throughout the campus environment and

revealed the alteration of sounds from the built to the natural environment.

McCoy’s work suggests another aspect of recent art in the landscape: it is increasingly made by women and it often involves some kind of environmental remediation. This is exemplified by the work of Lynne Hull, who lives in Fort Collins, Colorado. Hull specializes in sculpture that doubles as wildlife habitat. She has made roosts for raptors in



Above: Jim Sanborn, *Implied Geometries* (Notom, Utah), 1995. Projected light, 120 ft. square. Below: Karen McCoy, *Notions of Wealth: A Consideration of Cultural Notions of Wealth and Value*, 1995. Clam shells, wood and steel, 10 x 10 x 8 ft.

Wyoming, butterfly hibernation sculptures in Montana, salmon-spawning pools in Ireland and nesting sites for wild ducks and geese in the Grizedale Forest Sculpture Park in England. In an abandoned swimming pool at Art Awareness in Lexington, New York, in 1993, she even made perches for frogs, toads and newts, who were having trouble climbing out of the water. She moved rocks for shelter and basking, planted aquatic vegetation, created a large island out of driftwood and wittily titled the project *The Uglies Lovely*. More recently, Hull has made art out of environmental education, making colorful wooden sculptures and viewing stations along a nature trail for children at the Giraffe Center near Nairobi, Kenya. She is currently work-

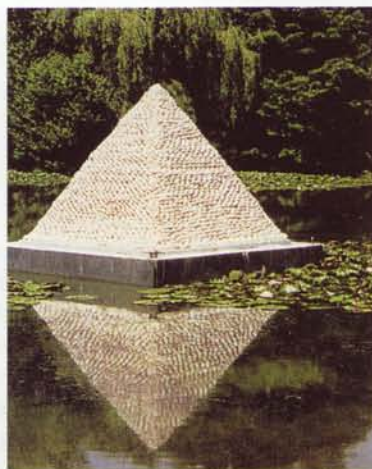
ing on a project for the Salina, Kansas, Parks and Recreation Department, with assistance from the Land Institute, a regional conservation group. She is designing a park to be called *The Exiled Oxbow*. It will feature both native prairie and wetlands restoration along a bend in the Smoky Hill River that was cut off from the main channel by the massive dikes built to protect Salina from flooding.

A similar effort at remediation lies behind a continuing project by Winifred Lutz, *A Reclamation Garden*, begun in 1992 at the Abington Art Center near Philadelphia. The art center grounds include the remains of a long-neglected arboretum. Lutz's work revolves around repeated tasks—clearing, gathering, sorting and framing. She cleared overgrown trails, removed

follow this modest interference."

The prominence of women in recent environmental art has prompted speculation that there might be a feminist approach to landscape, in which the ideal of an ethical partnership with nature would replace more traditional notions of control, perceived to be masculine. (This

was the subject of an exhibition and symposium called "Women, Land, Design" at Radcliffe College in 1993.) There is no question that current work by women presents a challenge to the large-scale, even aggressive earth-works of a generation ago. But there is a risk that the association of



women with gentle nurturing will simply replace one stereotype with another and reinforce a hierarchical duality in which

women are identified with nature, and men are allied with culture, which presumes to be superior.

Moreover, there are no clear demarcations between works by women and men. Jim Sanborn, for example, a sculptor who lives in Washington, D.C., has tried to remain true to the spirit of the original earth artists, grappling with the particular scale of the American landscape and the magnitude of the geological processes it reveals. At the same time, however, he has tried to be mindful of the disruptive potential of art, especially in delicate ecosystems. Prompted by this particular conjunction of concerns, Sanborn has recently completed a series of very large-scale, but temporary, light installations in the Utah desert.

Using a 2,500-watt projector he built himself, powered by a mobile generator, he directed beams of light through films bearing computer-generated designs, spreading an image up to 3,000 feet wide and 2,000 feet high onto darkened mountain ranges a half mile away. Sometimes these images were words, but more often they were grids—an allusion to the cultural patterns so frequently imposed on the landscape, regardless of its true topography.

In the spirit of Smithsonian's *Non-Sites*, Sanborn has also brought his sculpture indoors, where he tries to evoke both the microscopic and macroscopic dimensions of nature. A recent installation for the biology building at the MIT, for example, features layers of red slate and limestone



(both sedimentary rocks), a column of petrified wood and fragments of green quartz, all expressive of vast and inexorable but unseen natural processes. The installation also includes an overhead projector that casts interchangeable images of microscopic plant life on the floor, selected by

microbiologists from material currently being studied in the department.

Whatever the gender implications of

recent art in the landscape, environmental artists are charting an increasingly complex course into nature. While the newest of them are overwhelmingly green, they are impelled by more than ecological concerns. They demonstrate an awareness of the intricacies of landscape as a product of sometimes overlapping, sometimes competing natural and cultural systems. What is at stake in their work, as in society at large, is whether we can construct a culture of nature that will take us safely and sanely into the next century. **S**

John Beardsley is a writer and curator whose most recent book is Gardens of Revelation: Environments by Visionary Artists.



Above, right: Winifred Lutz, *A Reclamation Garden (detail of Black Walnut Register)*, 1992-96. 7½ x 44 x 7 ft. Courtesy Abington Art Center, Jenkintown, Pennsylvania.
Above, center: Lynne Hull, *The Uglies Lovely*, 1993. Natural materials. **Right:** Maya Lin, *Wave Field*, 1995. Earth and grass, 1,800 sq. ft. Courtesy of University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.