

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



**All the world's a gallery:
The first major museum survey of 'land art' gives evidence of its undiminished power –
even when viewed indoors**

By Jane Ure-Smith



'Spiral Jetty' (1970), Robert Smithson's installation on the Great Salt Lake in Utah, pictured in 2008.

Isolation is the essence of land art," wrote Walter De Maria in 1980, three years after completing his most famous work "The Lightning Field". Comprising 400 polished steel poles placed at precise 220ft intervals on a grid measuring one mile by one kilometre (and six metres), the work is an exemplar of an era when US artists went beyond the white cube of the gallery to create monumental sculpture in the great outdoors.

Earlier this month I went to New Mexico to see it and, following De Maria's prescription that the work "be viewed alone or in the company of a very small number of people over at least a 24-hour period", I spent the night in the log cabin adjacent to the field. I wasn't expecting lightning: summer is when the storms scud across this arid high plain. It was enough to wander the scrubby landscape, inspecting ant hills, and to breathe in the immensity of the place. At dawn and dusk the poles light up and seem to stake out the territory's vastness.

Thirty-five years after it was unveiled, "The Lightning Field" still draws visitors from across the globe, if anything in greater numbers than before. And this year, land art is back on the agenda in other places too.

Michael Heizer, whose huge trench "Double Negative" (1969) also helped define the genre, has at last found the 340-ton granite boulder he's sought for more than 40 years for a piece called

“Levitated Mass”. The rock brought crowds on to the streets – in Long Beach, it prompted a street party – as it trundled across California from Riverside County to Los Angeles, where it is now drawing mixed responses from visitors to the LA County Museum of Art.

In London this year, Nancy Holt had her first UK exhibition at Haunch of Venison. Holt helped her late husband, Robert Smithson, create the magnificent “Spiral Jetty” on Utah’s Great Salt Lake in 1970, and her own “Sun Tunnels” (1973-1976) still lures people to that state’s remote northwest corner. And in Munich, a show entitled Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974 has just opened at the Haus der Kunst.

A joint venture with the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Ends of the Earth is the first major museum survey of land art. Recreating numerous works from the late 1960s (including one involving a live pig), the show takes issue with the notion that land artists were American romantics rejecting the modern world.

Land art, it argues, was part of a moment when sculpture took a radical leap forward, eclipsing painting and challenging assumptions about what it could be. Focusing on both earth (the material) and Earth (the planet), land artists emerged alongside minimalists, conceptual artists, performance artists and exponents of arte povera. All these artists pursued similar ideas, delving in the same dirt, so to speak – not only in America, but also in such far-flung places as Iceland, Japan and Brazil. They were politically engaged; they used the media; they worked inside the gallery as much as outside it. But by 1974, three years before “The Lightning Field”, the moment was past. After that, argues Haus der Kunst’s chief curator Ulrich Wilmes, artists such as Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke and Lucian Freud returned painting to centre stage.

In Room One, a film entitled Study for an End of the World, No 2, plunges you straight into the argument. In 1962, NBC television followed Jean Tinguely, maker of mad machines, and performance artist Niki de Saint Phalle as they built a huge kinetic sculpture in the desert near Las Vegas – and blew it up, not far from an atomic test site. A seemingly innocent caper with a political edge, the film, broadcast alongside news of arms talks, had the support of the county sheriff, who supplied the dynamite.

“When 18 sticks of dynamite refused to go,” notes the folksy narrator, “the artist stepped in and set them off by hand. There were no injuries: they managed to blow up the world without anybody getting hurt.”

It’s a great piece but I’m not sure we understand the art of Tinguely or de Saint Phalle any better by calling them land artists. Indeed the exhibition doesn’t conceal the fact that not all the artists it includes want to be so defined. Alongside a work by the British conceptual artist Richard Long is his comment: “For me the label ‘land art’ represents North American monumental earthworks and my work has nothing to do with that.” Another note indicates that minimalist Carl Andre later distanced himself from land art.

Sadly, given their status as giants of the genre, neither Heizer nor De Maria could be persuaded to participate in the show – the latter suggesting, according to Wilmes, that, as a contemporary artist, he didn’t want to be seen as history.



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'Hog Pasture: Survival Piece #1' (1970-71)

by Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, recreated in the Haus der Kunst, Munich

Smithson's film of "Spiral Jetty" is there, however. Having been to the Great Salt Lake in 2007 to see the real thing, re-encountering it on film was a powerful experience: the salt-encrusted spiral, the pinkish-mauve water, the fiercely blue sky.

There may be many sides to land art, as the Haus der Kunst show argues, but the essential part is surely out there in nature. And the nature of the nature matters. It doesn't have to be wilderness ("The Lightning Field" has cattle ranchers for neighbours) and it doesn't have to be American – but it helps.

Europe can't compete. In the summer I walked part of a 150km trail in Haute-Provence, where the British artist Andy Goldsworthy has been making art in ruined farmhouses. You can walk for hours without meeting a soul yet the landscape feels crowded with ghosts – from second world war resistance fighters to 19th-century peasant farmers. It's just not possible for Goldsworthy, one of the finest exponents of land art today, to make land art in a European setting like that of De Maria, Heizer and Smithson. Haus der Kunst is right that the three are not and were not romantics – Heizer, in particular, stresses that the desert only interests him as a source of material for his sculpture – but their works nevertheless exemplify the American sublime. If land art is finding a new generation of admirers, part of its appeal is in the fact that you can only experience it fully if you seek it out, in its lonely place – there is no virtual alternative. And the setting is part of the work, as De Maria has said of "The Lightning Field". Which brings me back to Heizer's boulder. Suspended over a concrete channel behind the museum, "Levitated Mass" disappoints as land art because, transposed to LA's urban environment, it simply has no aura.

'Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974' is at Haus der Kunst, Munich, until January 20
For information about 'The Lightning Field', go to www.diacenter.org