

The Experience of Landscape

Three Decades of Sculpture

**Whitney Museum of American Art
Downtown at Federal Reserve Plaza
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Traditionally, the representation of landscape in art has been the domain of the pictorial. Paintings, drawings, prints, and more recently photography, film, and video have been the media through which the seemingly endless extension of the land was most effectively conveyed. It appeared that only the two-dimensional picture surface could produce the illusion of both spatial depth and lateral extension beyond the limits of the visible. It was not until the middle of the twentieth century that sculpture began, vividly and dramatically, to engage the experience of landscape as a valid subject matter. Sculptors rejected pictorial illusion as a concept valid only within the boundaries of the frame. They attempted not merely to embrace the visual forms of landscape but to embody the experience of that which could not be contained — the common topographical experience of encountering one thing after another. Eschewing conventional anthropomorphic or vertical orientations and opening up the monolithic mass, the various sculptural manifestations of landscape paralleled and even promoted the emergence of artistic practices such as installations and site-specific works.

In the 1950s, **Louise Nevelson** began to use the debris of material culture — discarded architectural ornaments, mundane found objects, and mere junkyard refuse — as the components of sculpture. In a pioneering critique of inflated commercialism within the art world, Nevelson insisted on an art composed of worthless materials. (In this sense, she anticipated later developments such as Conceptualism and Earthworks.) And by assembling disparate parts, Nevelson also eradicated traditional concepts of unified sculptural form. Her large wall constructions and clusters of freestanding totems filling entire rooms replaced the self-contained object with sculptural environments reminiscent of natural surroundings, as is evident in the *Rain Forest Column* series (1962–67), with its references to the dark density of a tropical jungle.

Nevelson's multiplication and dispersal of objects throughout gallery interiors was paralleled by **Isamu Noguchi**, who created architecturally defined, outdoor spaces as entire sculptural sites. From the mid-1930s on, when he designed stage sets for Martha Graham and made proposals for urban

playgrounds, Noguchi produced sculptures that are, in both scale and extension, synonymous with the places they occupy. *Sunken Garden for Chase Manhattan Bank Plaza* (1961–64), located one block south of the Whitney Museum, Downtown, represents Noguchi's transformation of a public, space into an entire landscape of sculptural form. Visible from both the outdoor plaza and the bank interior below, *Sunken Garden* is clearly informed by the ancient Japanese tradition of Zen rock gardens in its use and aesthetic placement of large, stones carved only by the natural forces of wind and water erosion. With an eroticism common to Surrealist visions of the landscape, the undulating ground, dotted with circular pits and formed of bricks laid in concentric or striated patterns, suggests flowing currents of water, an effect that is actualized during the summer months, when the work becomes a fountain.

In a different way, Minimalist sculptures also operate within real time and space, rejecting the idea that art exists in an autonomous realm separate from ordinary life. **Carl Andre** used standardized, industrial units systematically arranged and coherently ordered to explore the horizontal dimension of sculptural form. His floor compositions of the early 1960s invite the viewer to walk upon or among its parts, virtually reconstituting everyone's common, physical interaction with the ground. The conceptually infinite repetition of identical units suggests the seemingly boundless extension of landscape itself. This allusion is made explicit in Andre's *8 Blocks and Stones* (1973), which incorporates mineral specimens from the area around Portland, Oregon, where the work was originally installed as part of a larger array of 144 units. Through the use of space and abstraction, Andre focuses the viewer on the everyday experience of being situated in a particular place in a clearly definable relation to the physical surroundings.

Other sculptures employed not only parts of a natural landscape as raw materials but the earth itself. Less rigidly geometric and more casually composed, Earthworks and site-specific projects of the late 1960s merged art and site. *The New York Earth Room* (1977) by **Walter De Maria** is situated on the second floor of a building in the middle of New York's SoHo district. Two hundred and fifty cubic yards of earth, 22 inches high, are spread over 3,600 square feet of space. The usual dichotomies of architecture and site, inside and outside, are collapsed, making us hyperconscious of our contact with the work of art. In **Robert Rauschenberg's** *Gravel Mirrors with Cracks and Dust* (1968), the reflective properties of mirrored glass, held in place by simple piles of crushed rock, manifest the spatial

expansiveness of natural sites. The mirroring effect, moreover, not only reminds spectators of their actual physical position in relation to the work, but symbolically "reflects" their transference to another place. Smithson often adopted the term "nonsite" to describe his gallery-situated works, which redirect attention from what is seen in the gallery to what is known to exist elsewhere — in this case the area near Bergen Hill, New Jersey, from which the rock fragments were gathered.

Although many of the works in this exhibition reflect the material solidity and unlimited space of the landscape, others reveal landscape's temporal qualities — its historical duration and unceasing permutation. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was an expanding emphasis on process and the activity of making art. Works were seen as the residue of specific actions and the expenditure of identifiable effort. A greater sensitivity to the element of time emerged, not only in the frequent representation of phenomena that were themselves non-static or evolutionary, but also in the physical mutations and real transformations apparent within a work itself.

The merging of paper and earth, of culture and nature, the man-made and the prehistoric permeate the art of **Michelle Stuart**, which lucidly suggests that place exists as a record of time. The scroll-like panels of Stuart's (1976), buoyantly arching out from the wall, are densely saturated with soil and mineral *Sayreville Strata Quartet* deposits from a quarry in Sayreville, New Jersey. Stuart achieved the variety of intense color and hue by repeatedly rubbing and pounding different layers of sedimentation into each panel. The deeply ingrained and highly textured papers thereby provide both a testament to the arduous physical task of their making and a reference to entire epochs of geological events recorded in the earth's crust. The seemingly scattered disposition of meticulously crafted skeletal remains "found" in **Nancy Graves'** floor piece *Phoenix* (1969–81) evokes archaeological excavation sites with their evidence of primordial existence. The title's reference to the mythological bird consumed in fire yet resurrected from the ashes adds to the sense of decay and the regeneration of the earth.

Many other artists employ random dispersal to allude to the variation and dynamism of natural sites. In *Black Falls* (1968, reconstructed 1989), **Alan Saret** exploits the flexible qualities of latex rubber sheets rolled out across the floor to imply the dynamic flow of water over the terrain. Saret enjoys working with materials such as rubber — or wire mesh or mineral powders — which have no fixed configuration. Like the changing forms of nature, each work can take on a

slightly different shape as it conforms to the specifics of an installation or settles over time. In contrast, **Bryan Hunt** ironically employs the traditional medium of cast bronze to fashion the image of cascading water in *Step Falls* (1978). The antitheses of solid and fluid, rigid and mobile, are effectively combined in a single entity. The visual isolation of elusive form inevitably implies a larger context, since we almost automatically "fill in" the land formations that would contain and produce such a cascade of falling water.

Meg Webster also creates a dialogue between inert and permuting entities. In her work, organic materials, initially composed into loosely geometric configurations, are allowed to age and decompose. The processes tracked by Webster's living vegetation encompass stretches of time that can only be encountered theoretically. Works such as *Soil Ball* (1989), made up of packed earth from New Jersey spotted with patches of moss, address periods of biological, seasonal, and generational change involved in the life cycle of living organisms. Webster encourages an understanding of the delicacy of ecological systems and of the abuses that today threaten the balance of natural environments. The free, random growth of natural landscapes is the subject of **Alan Sonfist's** *Time Landscape* (1978–89), a plot of land on the corner of La Guardia Place and Houston Street in Manhattan that he planted with trees and shrubbery native to the region in pre-Colonial times. Allowed to mature without the intervention of man, the site has developed into a luxuriant thicket filled with the sound and movement of birds that have gravitated to this small haven. In a world of accelerated urban sprawl, a visit to this micro-wilderness in New York's asphalt jungle generates a sense of our historical detachment and physical distance from untouched nature.

Sculptural explorations of landscape conspicuously expanded the conceptions of sculpture itself. Sculpture not only became an aesthetic experience that persisted in time and demanded an ongoing interaction between viewer and object, but it also began to cross traditional boundaries between media. **Jennifer Bolande** consciously challenges the traditional separateness of sculpture and photography, producing idiosyncratic hybrids that often belie simple interpretation. *Big Orange Photo* (1987) refers as readily to the immense scale of urban advertising billboards as to the rather romantic image of a sunrise over mountain peaks that is printed on it. Bolande recounts walking beneath a huge, back-lit photomural in Times Square as it was being reinstalled and seeing this massive

plastic emulsion fall from soaring heights onto the teeming street below. Like a souvenir from some awe-inspiring natural site, Bolande's photo-object revives and reformulates the worn-out cliché about Manhattan streets echoing the majesty of great canyons. The nineteenth-century spectacle of the romanticized landscape is here reincarnated as the ultimate theatrical event, staged in lights. It conjures up, with ironic fallacy, the vision of a truly contemporary "natural site."

If Jennifer Bolande exploits the photograph as a three-dimensional object, **Robert Lobe** creates sculptural forms that can be said to possess many qualities associated with traditional photography. The labor-intensive method by which Lobe hammers large sheets of aluminum over tree trunks and rock formations gives his sculpture the direct, imprinted relationship to reality characteristic of more mechanical, photographic processes. The photograph is an apt and revealing metaphor for works such as *Facial Structure* (1986), which seems to "capture the moment" in its highly illusionistic reproduction of the surface and texture of objects. Lobe's sculpture, too, seems to have been torn from its larger natural context in the same way that a photograph isolates a fragment of the world. Recalling the precious metal encasements which in medieval times held holy relics, Lobe's empty volumes, devoid of mass, suggest the increasing rarity and preciousness of today's natural wilderness.

The boundaries between media were also crossed in collaborative projects. *South Cove* (1988), for example, is an ambitious integration of sculpture, architecture, and land situated in the residential section of lower Manhattan's Battery Park City. It is the work of landscape planner **Susan Child**, architect **Stanton Eskstut**, and sculptor **Mary Miss**. This ambitious collaboration attempts to integrate the natural topography of the shoreline, the historical maritime industry of New York harbor, and the contemporary engineering of a newly formed land development by juxtaposing indigenous plantings, naturalistic rock embankments, picturesque pilings, curving wharves, and the exposed landfill infrastructure.

Other contemporary sculptural projects reveal a far more contentious relationship between the landscape and man, between the realms of the natural and the cultural. **Vito Acconci's** works of the past decade, such as *Garden Chair* (1986), explore the subtle ways in which the objects used, spaces visited, and language employed in everyday life implicitly embody specific social and political attitudes. With a witty sense of humor, the expression "garden chair" — a place of repose amid the enveloping forms of the landscape — is literally given "concrete"

form in Acconci's object of jagged cement rocks decorated with live plants. This wordplay is extended to the seat, composed of a car tire, thus punning on the idea of resting when tired. As is characteristic of Acconci's work, this play on words and objects remains ambiguous, for a discarded tire would also suggest a man-made intrusion on the garden or any natural environment. Acconci's sculpture embodies the viewer's "deep-seated" pleasure in natural sites even as it confronts unthinking, utilitarian attitudes toward the environment.

Vikky Alexander's *Interior Pavilion #1 (Tropical)* and *Interior Pavilion #3 (German)*, both of 1988, "bring home" the way in which our experience of the natural landscape is commodified — industrially produced and packaged for commercial distribution and mass consumption. These freestanding, hexagonal constructions, made up of door panels alternately covered with photo-murals of picturesque landscapes and fake wood-grained paneling, boldly draw attention to the taste for the great "out-of-doors" within domestic interiors. There is in these pavilions an utter confusion between indoor and outdoor, surface and depth, illusion and reality. We are confronted with a world divorced from direct, authentic experience, a world in which concepts of the natural are diluted or irretrievably lost through the artifice of representation and the mediation of surrogates.

The imagery of landscape has been instrumental in efforts to shift sculpture away from discrete objects and unitary forms. Engaging the real space and time of the landscape, sculpture more directly confronts the sphere of lived experience. Within a world of pervasive ecological self-destruction, contemporary sculpture can now address broader social and political issues concerning the environment.

Karl Emil Willers

Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth.

Vito Acconci (b. 1940)

Garden Chair, 1986

Rubber tire, concrete, wood, plexiglass, fluorescent lights, and plants, 72 x 66 x 72

Collection of the artist; courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

Vikky Alexander (b. 1959)

Interior Pavilion #1 (Tropical), 1988

Mixed media on 6 wood panels, 84 x 36 each

Collection of the artist

Interior Pavilion #3 (German), 1988

Mixed media on 6 wood panels, 84x36 each

Collection of the artist

Carl Andre (b. 1935)

8 Blocks and Stones, 1973

8 concrete blocks and 8 river stones, approximately 19 x 12 x 348 overall

Virginia Lust Gallery, New York

Jennifer Bolande (b. 1957)

Big Orange Photo, 1987

Color photograph on plastic, 173 1/2 x 73 1/2

Metro Pictures, New York

Nancy Graves (b. 1940)

Phoenix, 1969–81

Vertebral column, skull, pelvis, wax, marble dust, steel, aluminum, and acrylic,

8 x 72 x 96 overall

Charles Cowles Gallery, New York

Bryan Hunt (b. 1947)

Step Falls, 1978

Bronze, 114 x 12 x 12

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase,
with funds from Edward R. Downe, Jr. 78.68

Robert Lobe (b. 1945)

Facial Structure, 1986

Hammered anodized aluminum, 8 units, 118 x 15 1/4 x 109 overall

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase,
with funds from the Louis and Bessie Adler Foundation, Inc.,
Seymour M. Klein, President 87.43a-h

Louise Nevelson (1899–1988)

Rain Forest Column VII, 1962–64

Painted wood, 111 x 14 1/8 x 14 1/8 including base

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of the artist 69.216

Rain Forest Column XXIII, 1964–67

Painted wood, 93 x 12 x 12 including base

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of the artist 69.218

Rain Forest Column III, 1967

Painted wood, 113 1/2 x 10 x 10 including base

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of the artist 69.158

Rain Forest Column VI, 1967

Painted wood, 130 1/2 x 10 x 10 including base

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of the artist 69.215

Rain Forest Column XII, 1967

Painted wood, 88 x 10 x 10 including base

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of the artist 69.217

Alan Saret (b. 1944)

Black Falls, 1968, reconstructed 1989

Rubber sheeting over wood, dimensions variable,
approximately 30 x 120 X 156 overall

Collection of the artist

Robert Smithson (1938–1973)

Gravel Mirrors with Cracks and Dust, 1968

Gravel and 12 mirrors, 36 x 216 x 36 overall

The estate of Robert Smithson; courtesy John Weber Gallery, New York

Michelle Stuart (b. 1940)

Sayreville Strata Quartet, 1976

Paper and earth, 144 x 266 overall

Collection of the artist; courtesy Fawbush Gallery, New York

Meg Webster (b. 1944)

Soil Ball, 1989

Soil, 36 diameter

Collection of the artist; courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

*Site-specific works located in the vicinity of the Whitney Museum of American Art,
Downtown at Federal Reserve Plaza*

Susan Child (b. 1928), **Stanton Eskstut** (b. 1942), and **Mary Miss** (b. 1944)

South Cove, 1988

Tower, wooden construction with painted steel railings, and landscaping,
2,000–square–foot site

Battery Park City Authority, New York

Located at the Hudson River off West Street at Second Place, Battery Park City

Walter De Maria (b. 1935)

The New York Earth Room, 1977

250 cubic yards of earth spread over 3,600–square–foot space at a depth of 22 inches

Commissioned and maintained by the Dia Art Foundation, New York

Located at 141 Wooster Street

Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988)

Sunken Garden for Chase Manhattan Bank Plaza, 1961–64

Granite and rocks, 720 diameter

Chase Manhattan Bank, New York

Located at 1 Chase Manhattan Plaza

Alan Sonfist (b. 1946)

Time Landscape, 1978–89

Re-creation of a pre-Colonial forest on an 8,000–square–foot site

Made possible through the cooperation of the artist, Local Planning Board No. 2,

505 La Guardia Place, and numerous private and corporate sponsors

Located on La Guardia Place, between Houston and Bleecker Streets

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**Whitney Museum of American Art
Downtown at Federal Reserve Plaza**

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