

An abstract painting with a dark, textured background. The composition is dominated by bold, expressive brushstrokes in various colors. On the left, a vertical stroke of yellow and white is prominent. In the center, there's a large, irregular shape in shades of blue and green, with a small red detail. To the right, a vertical stroke of green with red spots is visible. At the bottom, there are several red, rounded shapes that look like stylized flowers or leaves. The overall style is gestural and expressive, reminiscent of modernist or expressionist art.

trame

*di letteratura
comparata*

NATURA SELVAGGIA

a cura di
Maria Teresa Giaveri e
Roberto Baronti Marchiò

trame

di letteratura comparata

*Natura
Selvaggia*

*a cura di Maria Teresa Giaveri
e Roberto Baronti Marchiò*



Nuova Editrice
Universitaria



trame di letteratura comparata

Aut. Tribunale di Cassino n. 2 del 2000

ISSN 1720-5417

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Editore: Nuova Editrice Universitaria



Via Colonnello Tommaso Masala, 42 – 00148 Roma

e-mail: nuovaeditriceunivers@libero.it

web: www.nuovaeditriceuniversitaria.it

ISBN 978-88-95155-59-3



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di letteratura comparata



Rivista annuale a cura del
Laboratorio di Tecnologia, Narrativa e Analisi del Linguaggio
Dipartimento di Scienze Umane, Sociali e della Salute
Università degli Studi di Cassino e del Lazio Meridionale

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LA VOCE



Pedro Reyes

Palas por pistolas, 2008-present

1527 weapons destroyed and made into 1527 shovels to plant 1527 trees.

Special thanks to Jardin Botanico Culiacan and The Coppel Collection

Courtesy the artist and Ballroom Marfa

Photography © Fredrik Nilsen

JO ANNA ISAAK

Man in the Open Air: The Role of Writers and Artists in the American Environmental Movement

Abstract

Walt Whitman asserì che ciò che caratterizzava gli artisti della sua epoca fosse il loro rapporto con la terra: «mai prima d'ora abbiamo visto l'essere umano all'aria aperta». Egli sentiva che un'arte capace di esprimere l'identità americana dovesse provenire direttamente dalla terra: «Lo spirito futuro della nostra arte dovrà essere intrinsecamente vasto, al pari delle nostre pianure occidentali, maestoso come le nostre foreste, generoso come i nostri fiumi». Dall'epoca del Manifest Destiny fino a quella del riscaldamento globale, gli artisti che si sono confrontati con la terra hanno giocato un ruolo importante nel plasmare gli atteggiamenti nei confronti della natura, e nell'influenzare le politiche ambientaliste e sociali. Questo saggio offre una breve quadro del ruolo rivestito dagli artisti e dagli scrittori nel movimento ambientalista americano, dal diciannovesimo secolo all'epoca odierna.

L'evoluzione e la maturazione dell'America nell'Ottocento coincide con un crescente interesse, e preoccupazione, per la natura selvaggia e l'ambiente; i due movimenti si svilupparono in tandem, in una relazione di reciproco supporto. La connessione tra arte e terra è stata riformulata in modalità e tempi diversi. Negli anni sessanta del Novecento, un gruppo di artisti provenienti dalle città iniziò a traghettare la propria pratica artistica dai musei e dalle gallerie all'aperto, allo scopo di creare arte nella terra e con la terra – un'arte nota come Earthworks. L'impegno di questi artisti li condusse, come era già accaduto ai loro omologhi del diciannovesimo secolo, a preoccuparsi per i danni ambientali che venivano compiuti contro la terra. Seguendo questa traiettoria, numerosi artisti contemporanei non si sono limitati ad elencare problemi (come accaduto nella lunga tradizione di fotografi, pittori, scrittori, e documentaristi impegnati nel risvegliare le coscienze e nell'ampliare la consapevolezza comune su questioni ambientali, sociali e sui diritti umani), bensì hanno trasformato questa attività nel proprio lavoro per poter giungere a soluzioni certo immaginative, ma fattibili e praticabili. In questo modo, essi hanno riscoperto l'importanza del loro ruolo nella tutela dell'ambiente.

Introduction

«Postmodernism», wrote Fredric Jameson, «is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good»¹. The story of modernism's long goodbye to nature has become one of the standard narratives in the history of modern art. Modernism's attenuation of the external world is often associated with aesthetic freedom, the breaking away from an overpowering precedent, an artistic provinciality. «No artist tolerates reality», Nietzsche announced. Art's task is *its own*

self-realization. These basic tenets of modernism – that it is an era of aesthetic self-consciousness in which art turns from away from the external world toward style, technique, or form – are repeated in the mid-twentieth century by Clement Greenberg in his account of what he describes as the «genesis of the abstract»: «In turning his attention away from the subject matter of common experience the poet or artist turns it in upon the medium of his own craft»². However, this freedom has resulted in the disenfranchisement of art. As the artist Hans Haacke noted in the 1970s, «the rallying cry of ‘Art for Art’s Sake’ that proclaimed art’s freedom from meaning and purpose has long ago lost its emancipatory ring. Artistic freedom has been translated to mean that art has no responsibility to anything other than itself»³. This artistic solipsism, so central to modernism, has diminished the capacity of artists for constructive thought and action, leading to cultural powerlessness as artists’ relationship and connection to their community has become more and more attenuated.

There is, however, a concomitant and contrary impulse at play in modernism. It is this “other story” of modern art’s relation with its environment that I would like to trace in this essay. I propose that modern art’s connection to nature was a key component in its evolution and that this connection has played, and continues to play, an important role both in the environmental reform movement and in the current trajectory of some of the most progressive practices of contemporary art.

Art in the Open Air

From the moment the Impressionist painters and artists of the Barbizon area started painting *en plein air*, that is, out in the open air, rather than in their studios, they recognized that the air was not so plain. Monet was so absorbed with the recording of light and air that Degas once commented that his paintings made him want to turn up his coat collar. While Monet’s paintings are precise records of light and atmosphere, they are also records of the pollution in the air – as in the smoke from the ships on the horizon in *Jardin à Sainte-Adresse* (1897), or in the paintings he did of the Thames during his visit to London, or the grey polluted haze that envelops the workers in *Les déchargeurs de charbon* (1875). One could even wonder if Georges Seurat’s Pointillism doesn’t owe something to the particulate

matter or particle pollution being produced by the factories of the industrial Paris suburb of Asnières that is mixing with the hot, still summer haze in which his bathers in *Une baignade à Asnières* (1884) are suspended. Camille Pissarro did a series of paintings during the 1860s and 1870s documenting the way factories were overwhelming his small home town of Pontoise, and he became involved in anarchist politics in order to try to stop rural agrarian communities from being overwhelmed by the encroachment of industry. And Henri Rousseau, a painter we normally think of in terms of a naïve primitivism, also became politically involved in environmental conservation. Moreover, he was very effective: in 1853 he managed to establish land preserves in the forest near the village of Barbizon.

In America the connection between art and the land has always been close. From the age of so-called Manifest Destiny to the age of global warming, artists and writers have played an important role in the stewardship of nature and in environmental protection. The American landscape has come to form an important part of the American identity due in large part to the way it has been represented by writers and artists. As Conrad Aiken put it: «The landscape and the language are the same / And we ourselves are language and are the land»⁴. Walt Whitman felt that an art expressive of American identity had to come from the land itself: «The future spirit of our art must be inherently vast like our western plain, majestic like our forests, generous like our rivers»⁵. And almost as if in answer, artists such as Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Cole, Asher Brown Durand, Frederic Edwin Church, Alfred Thompson Bricher, and John Frederick Kensett, among others, went outdoors (in some cases, on extensive explorations into the wilderness) and brought back eloquent images of the vast American landscape, images that would shape the way the nation would come to see itself.

America's cultural coming of age in the nineteenth century coincided with its growing interest in and concern for the wilderness and the environment; the two movements developed in tandem and formed a mutually supportive relationship. The connection between art and the land has been reformed in different ways at different times. In the 1960s, a group of urban artists began taking their art practice out of the museums or galleries and into the landscape to make art in and with the land – art that became known as Earthworks. The engagement of these artists *with* the land led them, as it

had their nineteenth-century counterparts, to a concern for the environmental damage that was being done *to* the land. Many contemporary artists are following this trajectory. As well as pointing out problems (as in the long tradition of photographers, painters, writers, and documentary filmmakers who have engaged in raising awareness and broadening public concern for environmental, social, and human-rights issues); they have made it their job to come up with imaginative yet workable solutions to some of these environmental problems. In doing so, they are rediscovering a role for the artist, one that is in sharp contrast to the solipsistic role set out in the standard story of modernism. A growing number of artists are beginning to reverse the long process by which modern art became formalized and divorced from social and practical considerations. They are returning to and have taken up a central tenet of many nineteenth-century American artists and writers: the radical idea that art can be *useful*. This essay will address art that has come down from the ivory tower, stepped off its pedestal, exited the gallery, left the wall behind the couch, and gone to work!

Art and Work

Many early American writers such as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and John Burroughs put forward the notion that there should be a physiological connection between the soil and culture as well as an organic union between labor and culture. They thought there should be no split between artistic work and the other functions of the community – the artist or the writer was to be «a man in the open air», engaged in “bent labor” or “stoop labor” (the hard labor required to plant, cultivate, and harvest a crop). This idea of the artist with a link to the soil was being articulated at a time when the farmer was still the average American, inasmuch as the end of the agricultural era falls somewhere between 1850 and 1865.

Walt Whitman saw the engagement with nature as a central characteristic of the American writer:

We have had man indoors and under artificial relations – man in war, in love (both the natural, universal elements of human lives) – man in courts, bowers, parlors – man in personal haughtiness and the tussle of war as in Homer – or the

passions, crimes, ambitions, murder, jealousy, love carried to extreme as in Shakespeare. We have been listening to divine ravishing tales, plots inexpressively valuable, hitherto (like the Christian religion) to temper and modify his prevalent perhaps natural ferocity and hoggishness – but never before have we had man in the open air, his attitude adjusted to the seasons and as one might describe it, adjusted to the sun by day and the stars by night⁶.

Again, in *Proud Music of the Storm* from *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman describes the work of the poet as being like that of a day laborer: «The journey done, the journeyman come home, / And man and art with Nature fused again»⁷.

The most well-known passage in *Walden* is Thoreau's declaration of purpose for himself as an artist. The passage begins with his going out into the woods and describes a very physical engagement with nature: «cutting», «shaving», «driving» in order to have an authentic experience. He does not describe himself as an observer contemplating nature; instead he is *engaged* with nature, almost to the point of wrestling with it. The passage ends with energetic plans for another encounter:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could learn what it has to teach, and not, when I come to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion⁸.

It is significant that Thoreau wrote *Walden* in 1845, that Gustave Courbet painted *Les Casseurs de pierres* (*The Stone Breakers*) in 1849, and that Jean-François Millet – who once said, «Art began to decline from the moment that the artist did not lean directly and naively upon na-

ture» – painted *Des glaneuses* (*The Gleaners*) in 1857. These and other works in the same vein were becoming well known in America. The American artist William Morris Hunt bought Millet's *Le semeur* (*The Sower*) in 1851 and exhibited it in Boston along with paintings by Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot and Henri Rousseau.

The naturalist writer and farmer John Burroughs called his 1875 collection of writings *A Year in the Fields*. He saw his role as a writer as having been honed through what he referred to as practical «spade knowledge», «in-depth field work», and «delving» into soil. For him, writing and digging were comparable operations, and, like Thoreau, he used metaphors of physical labor to describe the necessary interactions with nature:

The gold of nature does not look like gold at the first glance. It must be smelted and refined in the mind of the observer. And one must crush mountains of quartz and wash hills of sand to get it. To know the indications is the main matter. People who do not know the secret are eager to take a walk with the observer to find where the mine is that contains such nuggets, little knowing that his ore-bed is but a gravel-heap to them. How insignificant appear most of the facts which one sees in his walks, in the life of the birds, the flowers, the animals, or in the phases of the landscape, or the look of the sky! – insignificant until they are put through some mental or emotional process and their true value appears⁹.

Again and again we encounter the idea that in order *represent* nature, either as a writer or a visual artist, one must go out and *work* with it in some way. Connecting with the land, attempting to emulate the work of the farm laborer, became something of an aesthetic imperative. As a result, the land was not only to be valued in relation to some extractive human enterprise, that is, for whatever raw materials could be taken from it, but there also developed the idea that humans, as part of the natural world, had a moral responsibility *toward* the land. From this germ developed the idea of citizenship in a land community. It was another farmer-writer, Aldo Leopold, who became a central figure in American environmentalism in the twentieth century and who formulated the idea of a «land ethic». Through his work on a small Wisconsin farm, Leopold de-

veloped the tools that led him to understand the connection between human well-being and the well-being of the environment. In the process, he formulated the idea of a holistic ethical relationship with the land that involved the formation of an ecological conscience, tied to an entire cultural and intellectual system. Many of Leopold's writings have come to form the basis of contemporary notions of environmental sustainability.

Early Environmental Activism

While early landscape artists began by celebrating the vast American wilderness in their paintings, there was a growing consciousness of the fact that they were simultaneously recording the loss of that very wilderness. Artists were among the first to sound the alarm about the perils of the agrarian and industrial exploitation that was taking place. At its inception in the nineteenth century, the environmental movement in America was principally concerned with wilderness preservation, but that concern quickly led to political and social activism.

The painter Thomas Cole was an early conservation advocate who found the rapid destruction of the wilderness to be a breach of America's covenant with God. The debate over progress and industrial development versus the cost of the enormous devastation of the land and the hardships caused to indigenous peoples was consuming the nation, and Cole often addressed these issues in public speeches. His *Course of Empire* was a series of paintings that forcefully entered the debate – foretelling the fate of America in iconic metaphors loosely based on the history of the Roman Empire. In *The Savage State* (1836), Cole painted a scene of great natural power: majestic mountains, lush forests, rolling dark storm clouds. The indigenous people inhabiting the land are dwarfed by the landscape; their scale suggests Cole's notion of the proper balance between man and the natural world. Cole's series of paintings traces the transformation of this site of majestic natural beauty into a state of desolation. In the final painting, all that remains of man's grandiose architectural impositions on the land are ruins – ruins that look like scenes from the fall of the Roman Empire.

Cole has his literary counterpart in George Perkins Marsh. In 1864, long before we realized we had entered the Anthropogenic era, Marsh

wrote *Man and Nature*, a book that would launch the conservation movement. It is important to remember that Marsh and Cole were sending out these warnings in the midst of the heyday of the New World's resource optimism. Both Cole and Marsh use the fate of the Roman Empire as a cautionary tale for the New World. Marsh's first chapter links the decay of ancient Rome to deforestation, erosion, imperial tyranny, and land abandonment. Revised in 1874 and entitled *The Earth As Modified by Human Action*, it was the first book to warn that what humans were doing to nature would have irreversible and unforeseen systemic consequences. Next to Darwin's *Origin of the Species*, published just five years earlier, it was the most influential text of its time. Marsh's writings were used to craft Italy's National Forest Acts of 1877 and 1878 as well as the US Forest Reserve Act of 1891, and his warnings had a profound impact on American artists who were going west and seeing what was happening to the land.

Albert Bierstadt had originally celebrated the seemingly limitless bounty of the American landscape, but toward the end of his career he began to document the destruction of the West. *The Last of the Buffalo*, painted in 1889, shows Native Americans hunting buffalo on horseback, but the foreground is strewn with buffalo carcasses that have been left to rot – having been shot, not by indigenous people who depended on the buffalo for subsistence food, but by sportsmen shooting them from the train. Another powerful and disturbing image of Manifest Destiny is represented in John Gast's *American Progress* (1872). From the right settlers, explorers, and trains move across the plains. In the middle of the painting is an allegory of American Progress, represented by a floating woman with a star on her forehead. In her hand she carries telegraph wires, leading the way for the spread of information and communication. On the left, however, storm clouds cover the sky as Native Americans, bears, and buffalo flee from the onslaught of advancing settlers. Significantly, it was a painter, George Catlin, in 1832, who was the first to propose a national park as a reserve for both Native Americans and buffalo.

Paintings continued to serve as distant but clear warning signals throughout the next century. Alexander Hogue's *Drought Stricken Area*, painted in 1934 brought attention to America's worst environmental disaster to date: the drastic results of the massive deforestation and improper farming methods that had turned so much of the Midwest into a

dust bowl. There was, of course, only so much that painting could achieve. Photography and film, on the other hand, with their ability to reach much wider audiences, were more effective media for raising public consciousness, and they played a crucial role in American environmental politics. For example, Pare Lorentz's 1936 film *The Plow That Broke the Plains* documented this same environmental disaster, linking the devastation of the land and the resulting poverty and human hardship with the corporate and government policies that had caused the catastrophe. The film sparked one of the most important art and environmental controversies of its day.

John Muir, one of the original founders of the Sierra Club, was one of the first to grasp the potential effectiveness of photography in environmental campaigns. Muir teamed up with the photographer Herbert W. Gleason in a decade long battle to save the Hetch Hetchy Valley from being dammed and turned into a water reservoir for the city of San Francisco. The battle was lost in 1913 when the Senate approved the dam, but Gleason's photographs continued to be shown widely and came to play an important role, reminding a growing audience of the beautiful valley that was now lost. The camera's technology produced more than an image; it recorded an actual historical moment. With that came a sense of loss, and that sense of loss mobilized public sentiment. Photography was the perfect medium for the preservationist, and the activism of Muir, Gleason, and the Sierra Club directly helped save the Yosemite Valley as well as other wilderness areas.

Over the next century, the Sierra Club became a major advocate for wilderness preservation. It produced a series of exhibit-format coffee-table books featuring photographs by Ansel Adams, Eliot Porter, and others, paired with texts by American naturalist writers. Although these beautifully produced books were large, heavy, and expensive, they were affordable for middle-class Americans, for whom it became possible, through the purchase of the book, to make a financial contribution to the protection of the wilderness. The books became prized both for the artistry of the photographs and writings and for the pride in the vast, magnificent American wilderness that they inculcated.

Ansel Adams traveled extensively in the West and was able to present photographs of areas few had ever seen and most never would see, and his photographs made many people want to preserve such areas. His

operatic images, with their sharp contrasts of light and shadow, became synonymous with wild America. One of Adams's most well known photographs is *Clearing Winter Storm at Yosemite*. This pristine scene embodies the purity and sanctity of wild nature, all shown in breathtaking documentary detail. In 1955 Adams and historian and writer Nancy Newhall organized an exhibition of stunning black-and-white photographs by Adams, Werner Bischof, Margaret Bourke-White, William Garnett, Eliot Porter, and Edward Weston. Five years later, the Sierra Club published these photographs and writings as an exhibit-format book titled *This Is the American Earth*. With the express purpose of influencing a vote about land preservation that had been stalled in the Senate for more than a decade, they sent copies of the book to each member of the House and Senate, to the president and his cabinet, and to the governor of each state. With some urgency, David Brower, the first executive director of the Sierra Club, announced, «What we save in the next few years is all that will ever be saved»¹⁰. The Wilderness Act was finally signed into law in September 1964. The act established a national wilderness system on vast tracts of federal land and defined wilderness as «an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain». Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas claimed, «*This Is the American Earth* is one of the great statements in the history of conservation».

Wilderness Preservation Today

Photography continues today in the forefront of the fight for the wilderness, even as the very concept of wilderness has changed. Subhankar Banerjee's Arctic photographs bring us an understanding of this vast complex of land, water, and ice, replete with life both human and animal. However, what Banerjee found was that the whole notion of wilderness, as «an area where the earth is untrammelled by man», is a dangerous misconception. The Arctic, traditionally thought of as the last great unspoiled territory on earth, now hosts some of the most contaminated fish, animals, and people on the planet. The Arctic has become a minefield of toxic compounds. While most of us may never set foot there, the toxins from our coal-burning power plants and oil refineries are ending up in its

ecology at an alarming rate. Persistent organic pollutants (POPs) bio-accumulate and bio-magnify in polar bears, fish, seals, and whales – as well as in women’s breast milk.

«I have become deeply interested in the topic of our disconnection from nature», Banerjee writes, and he goes on to note that «Edward Steichen, photographer and former Director of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art, once said, ‘The mission of photography is to explain man to man and each man to himself.’ This is a tall order, but I think we also need to explain and establish our relationship to the environment and all other species we share the planet with»¹¹. The scale of Banerjee’s photographs enables an understanding of the complex ecological interconnectedness of these environments. He combines a sparse style with extremely large format prints that evoke the vastness of this serene and luminously beautiful terrain, and he has chosen to shoot in color so as to counter prevailing conceptions of the Arctic as a colorless place of ice and snow. He describes his work as a study of the «representation of fragility and vulnerability of grand landscapes». Photographed from the air, immense animals appear as ants following each other in lines or as schools of tiny fish; in reality, they are pregnant porcupine caribou migrating across a frozen river, or Beluga whales entering a sheltering bay with their young. Seen through Banerjee’s eyes, the Arctic is a teeming ecosystem, a vast «birthing ground», not a barren wasteland.

Each photograph is accompanied by a caption explaining both the history of the site and plans for the area’s future. For example, the photograph *Beluga Whales with Calves* is accompanied by a caption reporting that oil and gas leases are being offered in the area starting in 2008. The caption accompanying *Caribou Crossing* explains: «On July 14, 1958, Edward Teller, the father of the hydrogen bomb, arrived in Alaska to unveil Project Chariot, a plan to carve a new harbor out of the Alaskan coast by detonating six nuclear bombs». Later it goes on to tell of the contemporary fate of this site:

On July 30, 2006, the Artic Slope Regional Corporation signed an agreement with BHP Billiton, a Canadian mining company, to explore and develop the coal outside of the Petroleum Reserve, and exploration started the same year, despite opposition from traditional Inupiat communities¹².

As stated in the first sentence of *Resource Wars*, «Aerial photography is the language of war»¹³, and Banerjee has found himself on the front lines of the battle. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is currently the most debated tract of public land in the United States, and Banerjee's photographs have forcefully entered that debate. In July 2001, when the U.S. Congress was debating whether to open the Refuge to drilling or to preserve it as wilderness, Banerjee was invited by the Alaskan Wilderness League to contribute his photographs to the debate. Senator Barbara Boxer presented his photographs to the Senate as a compelling counter-argument to Senator Ted Stevens's description of the Arctic Refuge coastal plain as «a barren wasteland», claimed Stevens, a proponent of drilling, «It's empty. It's ugly». Fortunately, the Refuge has, by a narrow margin of votes, been saved for the time being, owing in large part to the effect of Banerjee's photographs.

From Earthworks to an Art ad usum

Banerjee is one of many artists who continue the ongoing work of raising public awareness and mobilizing public sentiment, and his work has been instrumental in the preservation movement. In addition to pointing out problems artists have made it their job to come up with imaginative, workable solutions. By collaborating with specialists in other fields – material scientists, botanists, marine biologists, farmers, loggers, miners, industrial engineers, city planners, and so on – artists are now working in a wide variety of nontraditional media, designing recuperative projects for degraded environments, creating solutions that address specific social and environmental needs, and providing prototypes that can be adapted by individuals, communities, city planners, and industry.

Artists began working *with* the land again in the 1960s, when they emerged from their studios and once again went into the open air to make land art and earthworks. The unofficial leader of this group was Robert Smithson. The evolution of Smithson's art, and his ideas about the role of the artist, would come to be emulated by many other artists. Smithson himself became what one might call an accidental environmentalist. Some of his early works – such as *Glue Pour* (1970), done in Vancouver, Canada, and *Asphalt Rundown* (1969), done in Rome – used the

earth as a foil or backdrop to express a formalist approach to artmaking, and gave no hint of a concern for the environment. In fact, one of Smithson's early projects was stopped by a group of environmentalists in Vancouver. In 1970 Smithson bought a hundred tons of broken green-tinted glass in California, had it towed on a barge up the coast, and planned to dump the glass on a small island off the coast of British Columbia. However, an environmental group positioned themselves at the Canadian border, held up the barge carrying the glass, and threatened to camp on the island to prevent the glass from being unloaded. Thwarted in this project, Smithson wrote angry letters to newspapers, denigrating the efforts of the environmentalists. Yet this conflict turned out to be extremely important and eventually caused Smithson to reconsider what it meant to be taking his art practice out of the galleries and museums into the land.

This was the first time Smithson had had significant response from an audience other than artists, art critics, and other art professionals. The outcome – the shift in the balance of interpretive authority and priorities – produced a kind of aesthetic crisis for Smithson, and it is clear from his writings that he began to rethink where and how in the larger field of cultural production he wanted to intervene. During this period he wrote copiously and, in the end, began to propose practical, pragmatic ideas for making the artist an active collaborator between nature and industrial production: «Art can become a resource that mediates between the ecologist and the industrialist. Ecology and industry are not one-way streets, rather they should be crossroads; art can help to provide the needed dialectic between them»¹⁴. Artists, he now thought, needed a more significant social role through which they would be better able to influence the larger social order. These theoretical considerations were to be grounded in real-world activity: «Art would then become a necessary resource, not an isolated luxury . . . Artists should not be cheated out of doing their work, or forced to exist in the isolation of 'art worlds'. There should be artist-consultants in every major industry in America», he urged¹⁵.

Smithson then proceeded to tackle the rehabilitation of land devastated by mining, erosion, and industrial waste, initially by writing to a number of mining companies to offer his services. What he was doing was renegotiating the working relations between artists and their business-class patrons in a wholly new manner by providing a new sort of service. Artists, he

thought, could recycle industrial waste as art and do it on a grand scale. The Bingham Canyon Open Pit Copper Mine in Utah (designated a National Historic Landmark in 1966) accepted his offer and in 1972 he began designing a massive land reclamation project. Smithson's project did not attempt to disguise the wounds that strip mining had made in the landscape; instead, they have a brutally realistic and commemorative character. His design resembled a vast amphitheater with graded terraces and pathways planted with crown vetch, a legume that aids in the prevention of soil erosion. Unfortunately, in 1973, before any of these plans could be realized, Smithson died in a plane crash. Nevertheless, he was among the first of many artists in the early 1970s who came to view their role in a radically new way.

Ironically, it may be Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, a 1,500-foot-long curved construction of rock and earth bulldozed into Utah's Great Salt Lake that will have the most beneficial environmental effects of any of his works. Currently the *Spiral Jetty* is at the center of a fierce debate involving art, environmentalism, and economics that erupted over a plan by the State of Utah to allow oil drilling about five miles across the lake. The presence of *Spiral Jetty* on these desolate, salt-soaked shores has contributed to a new environmental appreciation of the lake's ecological niche and may turn out to be the very thing that preserves this vast wetland and bird habitat.

A number of Smithson's theories about waste, scale, and the reclamation of despoiled landscapes are being realized in the work of artists today. His friend Robert Morris, for instance, took up his plans to reclaim large tracts of damaged land. Morris's reclamation of the Johnson gravel mine near Seattle Washington owes a great deal to Smithson's design and follows Smithson's lead in not attempting to disguise what had earlier been done to the land. Smithson's wife, Nancy Holt, proceeded to undertake several land reclamation projects, the largest being a proposal to the Hackensack Meadowlands Development Commission to help transform a fifty-seven-acre landfill in the New Jersey Meadowlands. The site is one hundred feet high and contains some ten million tons of garbage. Holt described the vast landfills as part of our American heritage: «These heaps of rubbish will be seen as the artifacts of our generation, our legacy to the future. So there is no escaping our responsibility for making these mounds of decaying matter safe by using the latest closure technology,

and eventually reinterpreting and reclaiming them, giving them new social and aesthetic meanings and functions»¹⁶. Mel Chin, too, has taken up the challenge of land remediation. His sculpture *Revival Field* (1990-93), first done at a Superfund site in Minnesota and later repeated at other sites, looks like a large fenced-in garden plot. In fact, it is an experiment in using plants to extract pollutants from soil. Chin teamed up with agronomist Rufus Chaney to work on a toxic site in the Pig's Eye Landfill just outside Saint Paul. They conducted the first of many ongoing experiments growing «hyperaccumulator» plants to cleanse industrial contamination from the soil. The work offers valuable data on the potential of green remediation. Whether viewed as an alchemic, metallurgic, social, scientific, or aesthetic experiment, *Revival Field* is animated by a highly concrete goal: remediation of a contaminated area.

A very different approach to engagement is evident in Mexican artist Pedro Reyes's ongoing project: *Palas por Pistolas* (shovels for guns), which embodies the spirit of a biblical injunction: the beating of swords into ploughshares, or rather, the recycling of firearms into shovels. Reyes is an artist with a strong belief in the possibility of conversion – in this case, extending conversion to the roles of the audience, the art patron, the collector, the museum, the artist, and indeed art itself. Reyes has coined the term *ad usum* to describe what he regards as the new potential role of art:

There is art and there are applied arts, which are functional objects that have a special degree of craftsmanship. But there should be a third category for an art *ad usum*, an art to be used. An art to be used is slightly different from a useful art, since its uses can be an entirely subjective enterprise. But even if they are subjective, the piece or the artwork operates as a tool, a device or a tactic. A resource¹⁷.

Palas por Pistolas began in 2008 when Reyes was invited to make a work of art in the botanical garden in Culiacán, Mexico. Upon visiting the city, he found that incidents of gun violence there were among the most frequent in the country. Both the gun violence and the area's rapid rate of deforestation (the result of clear-cutting in order to plant opium and marijuana) have both resulted from the drug trade with the United States. Rather than making a work of art for the garden, Reyes began

working with members of the community to undertake a large citywide campaign for the voluntary donation of weapons, collaborating with the owner of a local electronics and household appliance store, who was on the board of the botanical garden and had long been a patron of the arts. In exchange for guns, people were given coupons that could be redeemed at the store. Thus Reyes altered the role of the collector or patron, explaining, «I wanted to engage with a collector, not as a client who acquires a finished work of art but as a co-producer of social change. Rather than purchase a work of art, they purchased a social good»¹⁸.

The townspeople were informed of the gun buyback through public-service TV ads that took the form of short stories depicting ordinary people handing in their guns. And the guns poured in – 1,527 of them, 40 percent of which were high-power automatic weapons. At the end of the collection period, the Mexican military publicly crushed the guns with steamrollers, and the metal pieces were then taken to a foundry, melted down, and transformed into shovelheads. For the duration of the exhibition, the shovels were hung on gallery walls. Afterward, the trees and shovels were distributed to art institutions and public schools, where adults and children engaged in planting trees.

Palas por Pistolas has become a do-it-yourself kit, easily adapted to various communities. In the spring of 2014 I brought this project and exhibition to Fordham University, and my students and I undertook tree planting in various communities in the Bronx on Earth Day. In January 2015, Secretary of State John Kerry awarded Pedro Reyes the US State Department's Medal for the Arts for this project.

Conclusion

The preceding are but a few examples of activist artists working today who have extricated themselves from the dominant concerns of modernism and postmodernism and have engaged in feasible, concrete public projects aimed at improving daily life. As curator Nato Thompson says in his introduction to *Living as Form*:

Participation, sociality, and the organization of bodies in space play a key feature in much of this work. Perhaps in reaction to the steady state of mediated two-dimensional

cultural production, or a reaction to the alienating effects of spectacle, artists, activists, citizens, and advertisers alike are rushing headlong into methods of working that allow genuine interpersonal human relationships to develop. The call for art into life at this particular moment implies both an urgency to matter as well as privileging of the lived experience¹⁹.

Perhaps the most radical of art's avant-garde gestures may be that it is becoming *useful*, that artists have a role in reconnecting us with the larger environment of which we are a part. The artists of the avant-garde are becoming the avant guardians.

Notes

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- ¹ F. Jameson, *Introduction*, in F. Jameson and S. Fish, eds, *Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1991, p. ix.
- ² C. Greenberg, *Art and culture. Critical essays*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1969, p. 6.
- ³ H. Haacke, *State of the Union*, press release, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, December, 2005.
- ⁴ C. Aiken, *A letter from Li-Po*, in C. Aiken, *Selected poems*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 254.
- ⁵ W. Whitman, *Man in the open air*, in F. O. Matthiessen, *American renaissance: Art and expression in the age of Emerson and Whitman*, London, Oxford University Press, 1941, p. 598.
- ⁶ Ivi, p. 626.
- ⁷ W. Whitman, *Proud music of the storm*, in W. Whitman, *Leaves of grass*, New York, Grosset & Dunlap, 1936.
- ⁸ H. D. Thoreau, *Where I lived and what I lived for*, in D. Thoreau, *Walden, or, Life in the woods, and On the duty of civil disobedience*, New York, New American Library, 1960, p. 66.
- ⁹ J. Burroughs, *A year in the fields (1875)*, New York, Project Gutenberg, 2010, p. 218.
- ¹⁰ F. Dunaway, *Natural visions: The power of images in American environmental reform*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 133.
- ¹¹ S. Banerjee, *Land as home. A portrait of the circumpolar Arctic in a rapidly changing planet*, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 2007, <http://subhankarbanerjee.org/PDF/LandAsHome.pdf>
- ¹² Kelley E. Wilder, *Resource wars*, in *Subhankar Banerjee: Resource wars*, New York, Sundaram Tagore, 2008, [www.subhankarbanerjee.org/PDF/KelleyWilderEssayBanerjee Catalog.pdf](http://www.subhankarbanerjee.org/PDF/KelleyWilderEssayBanerjeeCatalog.pdf).
- ¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 12.
- ¹⁴ N. Holt, ed., *The writings of Robert Smithson*, New York, New York University Press, 1979, p. 220.
- ¹⁵ R. Smithson, *Proposal (1972)*, in J. Flam, ed., *Robert Smithson. The collected writings*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996, p. 380.
- ¹⁶ N. Holt, in B. Oakes, *Sculpting with the environment. A natural dialogue*, New York, Wiley, 1995, p. 63.
- ¹⁷ T. Cuevas, *Pedro Reyes*, in *Bomb. Artists in conversation* 94, Winter 2006, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2779/pedro-reyes>.
- ¹⁸ *Ibidem*.
- ¹⁹ N. Thompson, ed., *Living as form: Socially engaged art from 1991-2011*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2012, p. 21.