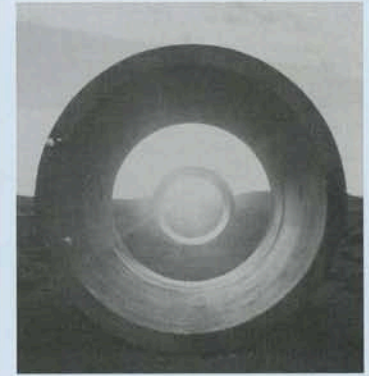
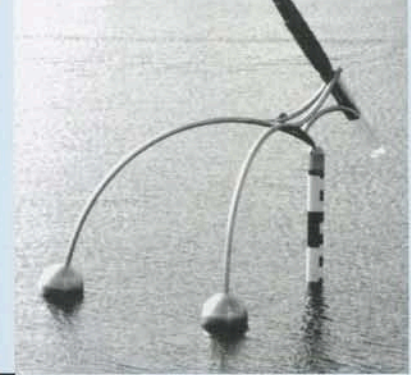
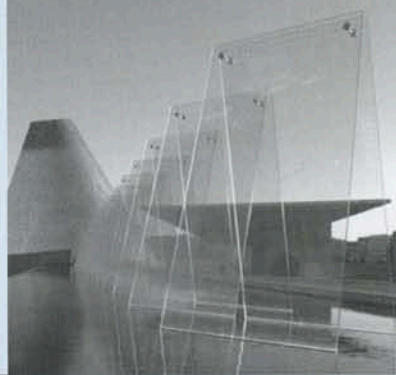
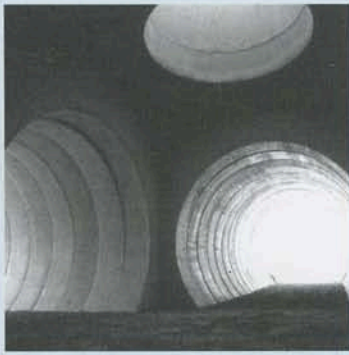
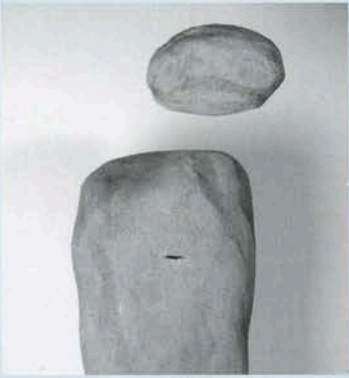


# CONTEMPORARY ARTS

in the public realm



**mass**

VOLUME XIII  
FALL 2004

Journal of the  
School of Architecture and Planning  
The University of New Mexico

# PUBLIC ART AND THE AMERICAN WEST

by  
Bill Gilbert

**Public:** Of or pertaining to the people; relating to, belonging to, or affecting a nation, state, or community at large; opposed to private. Open to common or general use, enjoyment, etc.

**Art:** Human effort to imitate, supplement, alter, or counteract the work of nature. The conscious production or arrangement of sounds, colors, forms, movements or other elements in a manner that affects the sense of beauty; specifically, the production of the beautiful in a graphic or plastic medium.

*In the west, and New Mexico in particular... Our sense of place is dominated less by the urban center or any specific cultural hegemony. Our awareness of the vast expanse of open space provides a balance to urban myopia.*

**W**hy is it necessary to put the word Public in front of the term Art? Is there really any other kind of art? Isn't art an inherently social activity? For the act of any individual to be considered art it must participate in some form of communication and that implies a minimum of two parties, i.e. a public. For our purposes in the world of contemporary art the term "public" gains a specific meaning in its opposition to the term "private." We are adding the qualifier of public to define a specific relationship between creator and audience that specifies the issues of ownership and context. **For art to be labeled as public in our culture it must be owned by the people as a collective group and situated in locations accessible to anyone.**

If the notion of public in art is related to the concept of "nation, state or community" it is natural for the discussion to focus on the places dedicated to the maintenance of these institutions. Indeed, the urban center is the primary context in which most public art is installed and displayed and the content of this work, by and large, is driven by an urban consciousness regarding culture and the environment. This may be appropriate in the eastern half of the United States where the cultural models are closely tied to the city-state of dominant culture's European precursors. In the west, and New Mexico in particular, we operate in a slightly different context. **Our sense of place is dominated less by the urban center or any specific cultural hegemony.** Our awareness of the vast expanse of open space provides a balance to urban myopia. Whether through the extensions of First Nation occupation, the search for Eldorado or visions of Manifest Destiny, in the west we have developed a sense of public ownership of open space. We cherish the idea of open range and wilderness as a public possession, the fact that fences went up long ago and there is no "open," i.e. unclaimed, land left notwithstanding.<sup>1</sup> **This sense of the vast open spaces of the west as being public creates an alternative context for public art and introduces the possibility for a distinctly different conversation.**

*Land Arts of the American West*, a new program shared by the University of New Mexico and University of Texas at Austin, is dedicated to an **exploration of the lines between public and private art through an investigation of the current relationship between culture and nature in the west.** Fourteen students led by two faculty, spend a semester living and working in the southwestern landscape with guest scholars and artists in disciplines

including archeology, art history, architecture, ceramics, criticism, writing, design, and studio art.

In *Land Arts* students become cognizant of human interventions in their region across time and cultures. We investigate the sites through an interdisciplinary lens. We learn from the fact that artist Donald Judd surrounded himself with both contemporary sculpture and Navajo rugs; that *Chaco Canyon* and James Turrell's *Roden Crater* project each function as celestial instruments; and that the *Very Large Array* is a scientific research center with a powerful aesthetic presence on the land. **We ask what is possible and appropriate for an art practice engaged with the environment at this point in time in American culture.**

The current discussion in contemporary art regarding the relationship between culture and the environment is dominated by a concept of opposition that results in a consciousness of disengagement. The thinking seems to be that if culture has dominated the war with the environment the best thing we can do now is enforce a separation and leave the environment to tend to itself. *Land Arts* operates from the position that culture is part of nature, that the two are inherently intertwined and that **the possibility of separate, independent realities is an illusion.**

As such, *Land Arts* is committed to direct physical investigation of sites. We don't just look at sites; we enter into them. We climb into *Double Negative* and enjoy the shelter it provides. We measure the scale of the *Very Large Array* with the size of our own bodies. We lie on the floor of *Roden Crater* to allow changes in the shape and color of the sky to enter our minds and bodies. *Land Arts* connects these experiences with the repetitive actions of our daily life. Hauling water, making food, and cleaning the body; drawing in the smells and sounds of the land; we imprint these activities in our muscles and stiffen our bones sleeping on rocky ground. As one day in the field flows into the next, our physical experience accumulates and boundaries of the mind and body fold together. We become intimate with the particulars of place and the world is transformed by our experience.

In *Land Arts* we cross the lines dividing the urban center from wilderness. We are transported out of the institutional context to create works in remote locations only to return and exhibit our works in the urban center thereby establishing a dialog that exposes the boundary. In this process the line separating the two is clarified and the edge reinforced or dissolved.

We consider our experiences moving along the highways and back roads of the west, exploring the existing site-based works and inhabiting the various eco-niches of the southwestern environment all to be material for our work. For those who participate, *Land Arts* becomes a place in itself—albeit a nomadic one. Our time in the vans is not solely about moving from one site to the next. **One of the major territories of public land is the highway system and it is from the highway that most Americans gain their impression of the west.** We spend a considerable amount of time on the

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Blake Gibson  
*Cliff Hangar* 2002  
Muley Point, UT

# WESTERN ARTS IN THE AMERICAS

move as a nomadic group situated in the public spaces of interstate highways and back roads. We come to see why landscape historian J.B. Jackson wrote "roads no longer merely lead to places, they are places."<sup>2</sup>

Although any map will show vast reaches of public land in the west, access to places we can openly enter and engage poses an immediate challenge. The legend of the open range is just that. Today, every inch of the west has an owner. (*This land is NOT your land.*) We don't even consider visiting the vast tracts of public land allocated to the military. Private and tribal lands are rarely open to us. Public lands come with rules and regulations that predetermine what kind of experiences can be had there. National Parks and Wilderness Areas have very strict policies of use. In Land Arts we gravitate to the territory of the Bureau of Land Management; those bland yellow sections on our maps read as invitations to the true west. Here we may not encounter the most spectacular vista or dramatic geologic feature, but we do experience quiet and open space in which you can feel the power that moves across and through the land itself, free of the heavy hand of the public bureaucracies.

As we make the journey out into the environment of the southwest it becomes obvious that the practice of a public art is not limited to contemporary American culture. The southwest contains traces of diverse cultures that span over 8,000 years. The *Newspaper Rock* petroglyphs and the *Horseshoe Canyon* pictographs clearly served as public art in our terms. (How exactly they functioned in their own social context is a matter of speculation.)

It does appear, however, that in the interim between the *Barrier Reef Pictographs* of the past and the ongoing construction of Michael Heizer's *City*, the ways in which humans experience the natural world have greatly changed. Today lines of gender, ethnicity, religion, and culture accentuate our awareness of difference. It is difficult to see ourselves as connected to each other, let alone those who came before us. And yet, as humans we share a remarkably consistent physiology. Archaic Native Americans living in *Grand Gulch* saw the world through two eyes, smelled through two nostrils, and touched with two hands, just as we do. Our sensory abilities are fundamentally linked. If how we absorb the world is similar, then it seems reasonable to look for connections in human responses across time and cultures. In *Land Arts* we contextualize our interventions in the environment as being part of an 8,000-year-old tradition of art in public spaces.

In our investigation of the range of art works created in the environment of the southwest we visit several of the *Earthworks* created in the 1970s. Many of these works are well known to the culture at large. Images of *Double Negative* and *Spiral Jetty* have achieved iconic status. In fact, these works are known almost exclusively through a set of photographs published 30 years ago and articles written by critics, some of whom never visited the sites. Michael Heizer complains about this tendency of Americans to ignore the art in their own environmental backyard in favor of more exotic sites overseas.<sup>3</sup>



Gloria Haag  
*Cruiser STX*, 2003  
Cebolla Canyon, NM

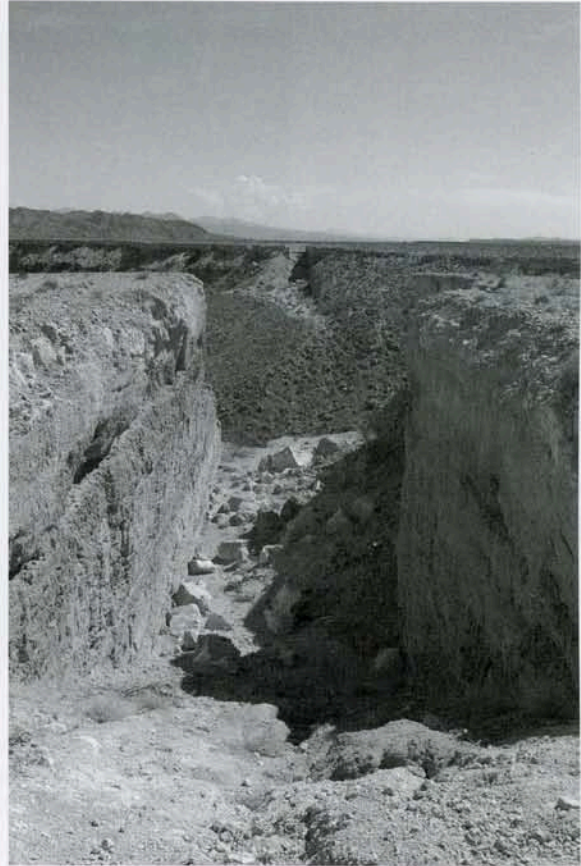
*In Land Arts we contextualize our interventions in the environment as being part of an 8,000-year-old tradition of art in public spaces.*

Heizer's early earthwork, *Double Negative*, poses an interesting question in this discussion of public art. The work was made by a private individual on private property in Nevada to be represented by a private gallery in New York. By first impression it is private in every sense of the word. If you make the effort to go see the work, however, the definition is less clear-cut. *Double Negative* is situated in this vast open space of the west we consider public. It is entirely open and available, 24-7, 365 days a year. There are no fences defining the site, no gates to pass through, no guards, no tickets to purchase and no one attempting to limit or even define your interaction. In our visits it has been obvious that the public has climbed all over the piece, camped on and in it and artists have even used it as a site for their own works. **The level of intimacy between art and public in this context far surpasses that in most urban public art.**

Moreover, *Double Negative* has operated in the public sphere for long enough to qualify as part of the public domain. It is currently part of the permanent collection of the *Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles* and is understood by many to be a signature piece of the *Earthworks* movement. Its place in the public discourse is secure even though very few people have seen the actual work. *Double Negative* exists as a cultural icon, forever exactly as it appeared in its pristine form in *Artforum*, not as it exists in its current eroded state. There is a disjunction (or displacement in Smithson's terms) between the work as an idea in the public sphere and its physical reality in place. The current discussion over whether to restore the work to its original form argues for bringing the physical reality in line with the more important cultural concept of the work.

The same discussion is taking place regarding the *Spiral Jetty*. For years this conversation lay dormant as the Jetty rested quietly below the surface of the Great Salt Lake; out of sight, out of mind. With its reemergence the question has resurfaced as well. During the time since its construction, the *Spiral Jetty* filled its jetty function, acting as a breakwater blocking the waves as they moved towards shore and trapping sediment on its leeward edge. Over the years the spaces between the spirals have filled, blurring the definitions of its lines. The *Dia Center for the Arts* is now faced with the question of whether to add more fill to raise the spiral to both insure its presence in times of high water and to reinforce the original lines.

Ironies abound. Smithson was certainly aware of the possibility that the work would evolve, appear and disappear, in response to the wet and dry cycles of its place. The very configuration of the work is a reference to the cyclical nature of time. It is hard to imagine that the changes the work has experienced do anything but attest to the brilliance of Smithson's conception of the piece. This work that was built on private land in Utah by a private individual, using private funding to be represented by a private gallery in New York is known throughout the art world as a seminal work of its time through the mediated images presented in *Artforum*. Like *Double*



Michael Heizer  
*Double Negative*, 1969-70  
Virgin River Mesa, Nevada  
photo 2003

*Double Negative* has operated in the public sphere for long enough to qualify as part of the public domain.

*Negative*, it has acquired an iconic status in our culture that far exceeds its physical presence. In short, Smithson's original private intentions have been outweighed by the importance of its public stature. The work has moved from the private domain of the artist to the public zone.



Robert Smithson  
*Spiral Jetty*, 1970  
Great Salt Lake, Utah  
photo 2003

*It is in this move to an iconic stature that the Earthworks of the 70s align with the majority of urban public art. Both are involved with notions of immortality and the heroic. They are meant to separate from, be larger than the public they seek to inspire.*

It is in this move to an iconic stature that the *Earthworks* of the 70s align with the majority of urban public art. Both are involved with notions of immortality and the heroic. They are meant to separate from, be larger than the public they seek to inspire. In this sense *Double Negative*, *Spiral Jetty* and *Roden Crater*, statues of Oñate and the giant "coffee filters" proposed for I-40 in Albuquerque, all operate on the same level. The argument between the groups supporting each of these examples in public art is over whose hero will be represented, not over the need for or utility of heroes. In the larger field of post-modern, contemporary art there is an understanding of a role for art in the cultural discourse that is more egalitarian, more attuned to the reality of the daily life experience of the public. This concept transferred to public art would argue for a less centralized, less concentrated expression of the 1% funding.

In *Land Arts* we attempt to bring this consciousness to the possibilities for environmentally based art in 2004+. We acknowledge that the traces of our interventions exist in the context of a vast, multicultural tradition. We understand that each time period in any specific culture has its particular set of definitions for an acceptable public practice. The *Earthworks* produced physical evidence on a particular scale. They operate as monuments, large-scale projects designed to command both physical and symbolic territory over time. As interventions in the desert environment, they are related to *Chaco Canyon* in the sense that they were designed to maximize their symbolic power rather than functional use.

Cultural interventions exist at other scales as well. As a small nomadic band of artists and designers, our model in *Land Arts* is more closely aligned with an Anasazi pictograph or a Richard Long walk. These temporal inter-

ventions have a more subtle or transitory presence whose trace lives on in individual or cultural memory. In pursuing an alternative model to the heroic, capital-intensive approach of *Earthworks* we have decided to live and work with a "no trace" ethic, leaving the land as minimally impacted by our presence as possible. Finished works are created, documented, and then erased from the site. The ideas, however, are mobile. A concept for a project initiated in response to one particular site can travel forward, gain layers, evolve, or mutate with new locations.

**Our focus is on the direct experience of place, not the creation of monuments.** We understand that while the resulting artifact, image, performance, or installation remains essential as the vehicle for communication, (for the qualification as Art), the real value is in the doing. As we shift our focus from the primacy of the object/image to the primacy of the action, the real center becomes the idea.<sup>4</sup> **With this shift comes a change in relationship with the audience in which much more is expected of the public.** In speaking of Richard Long's work Rebecca Solnit writes "his brief texts and uninhabited images leave most of the journey up to the viewer's imagination, and this is one of the things that distinguishes such contemporary art, that it asks the viewer to do a great deal of work, to interpret the ambiguous, imagine the unseen."<sup>5</sup>

**In *Land Arts* we act on the realization that what engages the public is the idea of both Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* and Richard Long's, *White River Black River*, as communicated through mediated images not the physical works.** As our site-specific works are documented by photography, video, drawing or other means, they become transportable. The ideas generated by our practice in the field then travel back to the public through exhibitions, the *Land Arts* web site, and various forms of publication connecting the open spaces of the western environment with the public spaces of the urban center. **mass**

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1. "There are things which can and should be owned and things which cannot...large sections of space are not among the things which out to be owned: and where there are so many people that there is nothing left for general ownership, the situation is disastrous, physically as well as spiritually." Krutch, Joseph W., Tucson, University of Arizona Press 1952, *The Desert Year*, pgs. 180-181.
2. Jackson, J. B., *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1994.
3. "Julia Brown: What do you think about photographs as the means by which many people will see your work—works that are hard to get to?  
Michael Heizer: Many people complain that no one will see these works because they are too far away, but somehow people manage to get to Europe every year. They'll go all the way to Paris, down a street, into a room, down the hallway up some stairs into another room to look at the Mona Lisa. There is no difference. It's an illusion people have that these things can't be seen. You don't complain that you'll never see the Gizeh pyramid because it's half way around the world in the middle of Egypt, you just go and look at it."  
Julia Brown, *Michael Heizer: Sculpture in Reverse*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1984, pg. 42.
4. "Allan Kaprow wrote in 1958 that Pollock shifted the emphasis from the painting as an aesthetic object to a "diaristic gesture". The gesture was primary, the painting secondary, a mere souvenir of that gesture which was now its subject".
5. Solnit, Rebecca, *Wanderlust, A History of Walking*, Penguin Books, NY, 2000, pg. 271.