

Dissertation Proposal

Noleen C Jones
P151033

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Could land art be a valid way to allow us to reconnect to the natural world?

Introduction:

Land art/earth art

According John Wilmoth (2015) More than half the world's population are now living in towns and cities (John Wilmoth, Director of UN DESA'S population division, UN development agenda, 2015) .This modern way of living, and the overwhelming popularity of the technological age could be one of the main reasons some humans are feeling a distinct disconnect with the natural world (Natural History Museum) (Gelthorpe 2017:p1) (Available online).

Land art/earth art would appear to be a strong way of addressing our age old need to feel part of the earth. My intention is to explore the connections that we feel when we engage fully with our natural surroundings, and how this may affect both our style of working and our ability to retune ourselves in this hectic modern society. I will engage with fellow land artists and attempt to establish their motivation to carry out this type of work as well as any perceived benefits to their overall practice.

Reconnection to nature

I wish to extend my understanding of art informed by the natural world, part of the live research I will be undertaking will include time spent with other established land artists, Land art has always been perceived as having strong Political undertones and in our current political circumstances I believe it will be interesting to discover how, or if there is a direct impact on the modern working Land artist.

"I want to get under the surface. When I work with a leaf, rock, stick, it is not just that material in itself, it is an opening into the processes of life within and around it. When I leave it, these processes continue. Andy Goldsworthy.

Here Goldsworthy alludes to the initial connection we may experience when familiarising ourselves with our chosen site, if the artwork is allowed to remain in the landscape, we also begin to tap into the satisfaction of knowing we have made our mark, and with the passing of time nature will be expected to reclaim what we have created and a meaningful collaboration will occur.

Robert
Smithson

Smithson was known for choosing sites in states of disrepair. Beginning in 1964, he produced minimal-like structures that lent away from the systems of minimalism. "Smithson was not strictly a minimalist. He used the vocabulary of minimalism, clean geometric forms, industrially fabricated parts, the look of objectivity as a way of pointing out the weaknesses of systems and networks" (Hobbs, 1981:p1)

This art form was initially intended to evade the clinical setting of the art gallery scene, and a strong statement against the commodification of Art works, this was art for art's sake and both its location and concept spoke volumes on the values he held, however it has successfully broken these bounds in the form of Photography, film and inside land art. With elements of Art Provera, minimalism, and conceptualism, when the movement began in the 1960's the favoured materials for Earthworks were those that could be extracted directly from the immediate area, soil, gravel, twigs, branches and water were utilized to achieve the resulting artwork. Smithson did not allow himself to be restricted in either style or materials used, choosing to incorporate non-traditional art materials, disused quarries, mirrors, even language featured within his creations. Whilst looking at Smithson's spiral jetty ((1970) located at Rozel Point, Great Salt Lake, Utah.) I was interested to note the reflection of his interest in geology and science, it is a man-made, artistic creation but unlike most gallery art, it lies horizontal and dwarfs the human spectator, who feels that sense of smallness he or she experiences when in the presence of nature's beauty, or perhaps contemplating the stars. Outer space was very much on Smithson's mind when he created Spiral Jetty. In 1969, just prior to its creation, Neil Armstrong had become the first human to set foot on the moon, and mankind was reevaluating its relationship with the cosmos. The jetty resembles a galaxy in its shape. However, the spectator walks around it in an anti-clockwise direction, and is thereby prompted not just to consider cosmology but also to move backwards through geological time <http://uk.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2013/november/18/explaining-smithsons-spiral-jetty/> (Accessed on 23/04/2018) (https://www.robertsmithson.com/earthworks/spiral_jetty.htm)(Accessed on 10/05/2018).

Methodology

I am led to ask how the works of Smithson and indeed the many other land artists are still influential in society today? In an attempt to answer this question I intend to arrange some local land art sessions, and have already been granted access permission from Local landowners, I would ideally like to work with multi-generational groups of participants, in conjunction with some exploratory land art I would hope to produce a series of drawings, photographs and film, and employ other valid forms of documentation such as voice recordings. I have also been invited to collaborate with a team of land artists specialising in crop circles, in the Somerset area, this will be a great opportunity to both participate and observe their practice. I believe these activities will be invaluable in ascertaining an overview of the relevance of land art in our Modern society.

The work of Cuban born Artist Ana Mendieta, offers an insight into how land art can be perceived to bring about a deep connection to the earth, she sought to find

connections between displacement and the soul. She would produce over 200 works of art using earth as a sculptural medium. Mendieta often focused on a spiritual and physical connection with the Earth. Mendieta felt that by uniting her body with the earth she could become whole again: "Through my earth/body sculptures, I become one with the earth... I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body. This obsessive act of reasserting my ties with the earth is really the reactivation of primeval beliefs... [In] an omnipresent female force, the after image of being encompassing within the womb, is a manifestation of my thirst for being." www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/ana-mendieta-11167 (Accessed 03/05/2018) Mendieta aimed to be provocative attempting to connect people with each other, and the earth. I can strongly identify with this statement, similar values are prevalent within my own practice, and I am continually exploring ways to make use of and test the limitations when I work within the Natural world. I have come to realise the chosen site can provide many nuances and I aim to include these as fully as possible when completing a piece of work, I recently collaborated with a local Artist in a publicly owned park, spending around two hours to firstly collect our material, we chose to use fallen branches and twigs which we gathered from the surrounding area, accompanied by both fresh and dried flowers which we had brought from our studio, with the remaining time used to arrange the works and observe the public reaction. Through the resulting conversation, I was able to gauge a real sense of people feeling we as humans were experiencing a gradual disconnect from the natural world, with one of the main concerns being how young people could be encouraged to enjoy and interact with the outdoors. Recently there has been several Articles in online newspapers and documents highlighting the decline in the amount of time our children are spending in the outside environment, favouring to spend their free time indoors, with a heavy increase in their use of technology, There has been much concern about the removal of nature related words from the oxford Junior dictionary, and if indeed this is a reflection of what our children know and experience about nature. A number of years ago I undertook a voluntary position in an outdoor education project, which aimed to serve a suburban community in South Wales, the client base consisted of young people who had found themselves on the margins of society, the workshops facilitated there were designed to promote education through creativity, and instil a sense of connectedness, as previous work had identified that the children felt a distinct lack of belonging. I was able to witness how the creative process in a natural setting brought about a significant change in both the behaviour and willingness to participate, through the practices of willow weaving, wood carving, gardening, and land art these young people felt able to make connections. 'The creative process itself arguably has an important role to play in re-engaging disaffected young people in learning' <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/cbse20/current> (Accessed 12/04/2018). As we move further and faster into this technological age alongside the gentrification of our towns and cities we are beginning to feel a growing distance from the land, with the removal of trees and the desolation of our green spaces I feel it is worth noting how this has impacted on the English language, Solastalgia, a neologism coined by Professor Glenn Albrecht in 2003, describes the distress or sadness a person feels when their home environment is desolated in ways they cannot control, When asked why he coined the word, Albrecht, who heads

the Institute for Social Sustainability (ISS) at Murdoch University, explained that there simply hadn't been an appropriate word for it in the English language before that. There is growing evidence of the disappearing links, and in

a. <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/17/to-the-ends-of-the-earth-art-and-environment> (Accessed on 23/04/2018).

In attempt to address this I have now made preliminary inquiries with the park committee about the possibility of setting up workshops throughout the summer months. I envisage these workshops offering both a knowledge of organic materials as well as the opportunity to interact with the site and its contents. Through extensive documentation I hope to form a clearer picture of why a disconnect is occurring, and how we could effectively bring about change. I feel another important site for consideration would be disused land. Artists Lara Almarcegui and Heather and Ivan Morrison participated in the Barbican's *Radical Nature* exhibition and, like the other artists in that show, their work is instrumental in character, designed to promote awareness of the relationship between nature and the urban environment and often involves community participation and affirmative action. Almarcegui has campaigned to preserve empty lots from development and improvement, resisting the strategies of planners in order to let 'natural processes of decay, transition and entropy' take their course. In designating empty spaces and wastelands as artworks her tactics are reminiscent of those of John Latham, but she works within an ecological agenda, seeking to bring about the greening of urban space:

www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/17/to-the-ends-of-the-earth-art-and-environment (accessed on 05/05/2018).

Wastelands are important as places of possibility, because one can only feel free in this

type of land, forgotten by town planners. I imagine that, in a few years' time, those wastelands that were protected by my projects will be the only empty spots within built areas. I have carried out a substantial amount of research concerning voluntary and community groups and how they have made an impact in their local area, I have attended events and meetings through the Eden project and have made connections with the local community and further afield, I feel I am laying strong foundations to make my chosen field of study produce worthwhile results. With the bringing together of people and a sharing of skills, I have observed a desire to retain local craftsmanship and Knowledge, which many fear will be lost, and a need to maintain strong community ties.

Health and wellbeing

A study by the royal society for the protection of birds (RSPB) and university of Essex describes connection to nature as 'enjoyment of nature', empathy for creatures, and 'sense of oneness' and sense of responsibility'. The study also demonstrates that when young people are connected to nature, it has positive impacts on their education, physical health, emotional well-being and personal and social skills. It concludes that 'children connected with nature are more likely to be interested in their environment, will want to enjoy and save it - now and in the future'. (RSPB, 2013; Chen-Hsuan and Monroe, 2012) [MR Crawford](#), [MD Holder...](#) - [Environment and ...](#), 2017 - journals.sagepub.com. (Accessed on 03/05/2018). This is indeed a compelling reason

for me to continue along this line of enquiry and I believe invaluable information will be uncovered, perhaps leading to a better understanding of the human relationship with the natural world.

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