



## Documenta: Land+art?

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## Back in Time

There have been large and monumental things that have been built and time and again continuously puzzle us. Buildings from stone this magnitude that we in the present times never have understood the meaning or significance of it. What mysteries encompass these objects? Are they purely about aesthetics, who are the designers and for what purpose they basically serve and most significantly, how old are these?

Explanations in the academic arena tell us about the sacral, religious, occultism or mystical nature of these objects, which serve rites and ceremonies. But in the long run, these explanations seem to be getting *démodé* and do not satisfy our inquisitive minds. To the world of today, it still is a question that probably would not be answered.

There are naturally many issues arising between nature and art in the most intimate sense of the nature-man relationship. Such history evolved in the relentless domination of humankind towards nature, his passion to domesticate the landscape. Man incessantly using what nature has to offer. As a consequence, man and nature somehow has constantly being alienated from each other. "Man is a singular creature that has a set of gifts which makes him unique among the animals, so that unlike them, he is not a figure in the landscape- he is a shaper of the landscape. In body and mind he is the explorer of nature, the ubiquitous animal who did not find but has made his home in every continent."<sup>1</sup>

Many recent *re*-discoveries proves us that there have been an interminable existence of appreciation of nature, ranging from personal and social interaction between man and man, and man and nature. An upshot that countless of monuments, shrines and various objects that is testimonial to what man has experienced.

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<sup>1</sup> See Kastner, Jeffrey (ed.) Land and Environmental Art, 1998

## Aesthetics and/in nature<sup>2</sup>

In the western world, the tradition of viewing art as the mirror of nature has rooted even since the antiquity. Yet the appreciation of nature aesthetically and in a more formal setting is somehow traced to a less ancient origin. Even if the aesthetic appreciation of nature only dates from the dawn of Renaissance, its development from that time to the present has been uneven and episodic.

However, put formally, many philosophers, scientists and artists alike, have written much on specific subjects on the subjectivity or objectivity of the appreciation of nature. The scientific objectification of nature had earlier origins, the link between aesthetic appreciation of nature and scientific objectivity dates from early in the eighteenth century. At the time where the British aestheticians initiated a tradition that gave way theoretical expression to this connection, the upshot was a mode of aesthetic appreciation that looked upon the natural world with an eye not unlike the distancing, objectifying eye of science. The tradition laid the groundwork for the idea of the sublime, By means of sublime even the most threatening of nature's manifestations, such as mountains and wilderness, or natural phenomena could be distanced and appreciated, rather than feared and despised.

## Art in nature or <sup>3</sup>Nature art

The interaction between Nature and man has always been recorded in time and space through many different forms of aesthetic pursuit. It has become part of the whole essence of many cultures existed on earth and based upon these existence, it thus inspired to create various objects that maybe functional or simply for the eyes to behold. The nature formed part of all undertakings human species have gone through.

During the early part of the 1960's, the idea of viewing the landscape in another guise has started to evolve. This has come out of the traditional representations as in paintings or photography. Many artists are coming more and more into the landscape and eventually make it as an integral part of their artistic expressions.

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<sup>2</sup> See Carlson, Allen, Aesthetics and the Environment, the appreciation of nature, art and architecture, Routledge, London, 2000  
<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ripon.edu/library/support/Art175.htm>

“Environmental works of art does share a common feature that both distinguishes them from the traditional art and makes them examples of the most intimate of relationships between man, nature and art. This is that all such works of art are in or on the land in such a way that a part of nature constitutes a part of the relevant aesthetic object. In other words, not only is the site of an environmental work an environmental site, but the site itself is an aspect of the work.”<sup>4</sup> Formally, land art established its own niche in the art world, which evolved during the 1960’s. “With a number of committed conceptualists disenchanted with the modernist endgame and animated by a desire to measure the power of the artwork isolated from the cosmopolitan co-modifications of the white cube- has grown over the last thirty years to include a widely diverging collection of approaches and theoretical positions.”<sup>5</sup>

“Land Art is a school of arts where the artists work within and with the landscape. In often wide and remote areas, like deserts, they interfere with the nature by markings of different kinds and dimensions.”<sup>6</sup> The development of land art was related to concurrent schools of arts like Minimal Art, Conceptual Art and Process Art. The enlargement of the conception of art as well as the criticism on institution and commercialisation of art were important reasons for the raising interference with nature in a different way. These ideas arose at the same time as the ecological movement. Land art is an expression of intervention on what already in existence, perhaps, recognition of the personal or political power of the individual or group.

“Conceptual art marks a major turning point in late twentieth-century art. An art of ideas - which can be written, published, performed, fabricated, or which can simply remain inside your head - it is also an art of questions. Since its emergence in the mid 1960s, it has challenged our precepts not only about art but society, politics and the media. An international movement, Conceptual art encompasses North America and Western Europe but also South America, Eastern Europe, Russia,

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<sup>4</sup> See <sup>3</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See <sup>2</sup>

<sup>6</sup> <http://mitglied.lycos.de/artnnature/an-frameset.htm>

China and Japan. Its legacy is global, ranging from small local participatory projects to large-scale installations at major museums and biennales.”<sup>7</sup>

“The use of nature as palette and canvas has a long history,”<sup>8</sup> In Europe the interference with nature has a different origin and different possibilities than in America. These differences reveal in a smaller scale and in such smoother treatment of landscape and nature.

### Contemporary?

After the war, the ideas revolutionized as well and multitude of events took place. It provides the ground for unconventional way of thinking and thus enriched as well the practice of many art forms and performances. It affords many practicing artists to be able to present various forms and expressions. It is an expression of intervention of what in existence there is. Perhaps it is recognition of the personal and political power of the individual. “If the appearance of various works in the galleries and museums began to give shape to a movement of sorts and to a growing critical framework, it was still the work executed outside the exhibition spaces that drove the genre’s progress.”<sup>9</sup>

Now, the works referred to as Land Art and/or Environmental Art encompasses a wide variety of post-war movement in art. These projects are fundamentally sculptural in the sense of creating in three-dimensional forms and/or performance in terms of their orientations towards process, site and temporality. They are concerned both natural forces impact on objects and gestures: at once critical of and nostalgic for the notion of the “garden” aggressive and nurturing towards the landscape. *It includes site-specific sculptural projects that utilize the materials of the environment to create new forms, our impression of panorama, programmes that import new, unnatural objects into the natural setting, goals, time-sensitive individual activities in the landscape, collaborative, socially aware interventions.* In many cases as for formal practice in the field of landscape architecture, earthworks create new faces in the landscape. It thus traces of our understanding of the beauty in the landscape.

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<sup>7</sup> Conceptual Art (Themes and Movements) by [Peter Osborne](#) (Editor)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/stores/detail/-/books/0810941899/reviews/002-2960727-1141650#08109418997297>

<sup>9</sup> See 1

The operating principle in the landscape art is basically through its given ground, its aesthetic, and properties that sometimes cannot be readily recognized. The aesthetic reshaping of the landscape is always oriented around ecological relationships, for this is the aesthetic canon.

Artists or landscape artists recreate and reshape the landscapes, which are mostly destroyed. These actually provide a ground for activity and creative remodelling. It is necessary to recreate a preconditions for resource yielding landscapes where energy, raw materials were extracted. The failure to use human energy and creativity toward these goals would throw doubt over the long-term survival of communities. Without an aesthetic and visionary starting point for the reshaping of the destroyed areas, there can be no positive identification. By explaining approaches through examples of artworks and parallel texts, this anthology is intended to expand, rather than describe, traditional definitions of the genre.

Michael Heizer, Robert Smithson, Walter de Maria or Robert Morris makes one of the first works of these kinds. Their works basically distinguishes the presence of the objects in the landscape in a way that is more portable forms of sculpture. But the involvement with landscape goes deeper than that. Most of the works are bound to the sites, which take a greater part of the content on a relationship with the specific surroundings.

### **Greening of the Art, the 7000 Oaks+**

#### Joseph Beuys and his Attempt at Social Sculpture

In 1971, the year after Michael Heizer completed his *Double Negative*, one can remember that the German artist Joseph Beuys waded fully clothed into a marsh at the edge of the Zuider Zee in the Netherlands, until a little more of him was visible than the top of his trademark hat. He called the *Bog Action* and was meant to dramatize his concern for the widespread destruction of wetland ecosystems in the country whereas; shallow seas were being drained to produce new land.

Beuys' life was his art. He was an artist whom the morally and socially engaged act was entirely tantamount with art. His *Bog Action* was just many of his initiatives on behalf of environmental causes, which is part of his broader political life.

Another action later in 1971, for instance, Beuys and a small army of supporters swept with birch brooms a section of Düsseldorf forest, Grafenberger Wald, to protest the planned cutting of trees to accommodate the expansion of a tennis club. He also did numerous solo performances affirming his empathy for animals- notably, *I Like America and America Likes Me (1974)*, in which he lived with a coyote for five days in New York gallery. In 1979, Beuys ran unsuccessfully for the Parliament as a candidate of the Green Party; in 1983- a project anticipating Mel Chin's *Revival Field*- he proposed using special plants to reduce the concentration of toxic chemicals along the Elbe River near Hamburg.

Joseph Beuys was probably one of the most influential artists of post-war Europe. He viewed his works as something like a physical vehicle for the dissemination of his ideas. His works basically incorporates nature's organic and inorganic elements like honey, fat, wax, and copper iron in an effort to reconnect human beings to the natural environment. He had already participated quite actively since 1982 at different works of the **Documenta**. He then wanted to fashion something new outside of the museums contextual area. Then the idea of planting something alive was born out of the desire to afforest the city of Kassel. Predominantly, oaks were opted to be planted but then some areas could not contain the plant since it is not suitable to be planted there. Anyhow, other trees were planted and beside each tree basalt stele was also attached. This is to symbolize or mark the specific period on a trees life to become a living artwork in connection to Beuys idea.

"A well-wooded town seems far better to me than a bad administered one". (*Verwaldung statt Verwaltung*) was the maxim, chosen by Joseph Beuys for his contribution to the Documenta in 1982. It seems to be that the idea was positively accepted from the very beginning by the city of Kassel. This idea of a living art touches strongly the public interest. The individual style, belonging to the characteristics of art at any time, has carried its point and obtained the consent of the town council as well.

## The Project

“And I said, if you agree, that I will appear with my project, which will improve the quality of life in an urban space, I will plant 7000 oaks. I will put a stone, that the historical moment is marked for all times, meaning at least for one epoch for the lifetime of an oak- and it can live up 800 years.” (Joseph Beuys, in Altenburg 1988,67)

The project has enthused the nation especially the people of Kassel. It came to be like a simple idea since the town has lost almost half of its trees through the war and sprawling urban development. It was positively welcomed especially by the council, which immediately agreed on the project. Its impact is overwhelming not only from the people of the city of Kassel but perhaps throughout the (art) community at large. Each tree, which was accompanied by a basalt stele as a marker, has awakened such a rouse. Symbolically, “the basalt stele represents a basic concept in Beuys philosophy, that these two natural and yet oppositional qualities are complementary and coexist harmoniously. Local community councils, associations, and citizens' initiatives determined where the trees would be planted. The organization of this project resulted in a series of conversations among participants concerning a wide range of issues, from its impact on city planning to its meaning for future generations. Completed in 1987 by his son, Wenzel, on the first anniversary of his father's death, *7000 Oaks* truly epitomizes Beuys' ideas about art and its ability to effect change in society.”<sup>10</sup>

## Public Perception and Response

Then a new dimension of this art emerged when the 7000 basalt stele were placed on Friedrichplatz. Obviously it was not just an ecological idea to improve life in the city, but an “*expanded concept*” of his art. It was intended that the basalt stone will become less and less and that, the Friedrichplatz will be free of these stele within five years upon completion of the tree planting.

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<sup>10</sup> See [http://www.walkerart.org/beuys/tree\\_7000.html](http://www.walkerart.org/beuys/tree_7000.html)



There were considerable reactions to the stones being placed on Friedrichplatz, the favourite area of the Kassel people. A group of young people even went as far as spraying the stone pink as a protest to this action. Almost everybody has an opinion and expressed it whenever possible. With the stones, Beuys has succeeded in shocking people and let them open up for ideas and enable them to look upon their ability to act. This has prompted various public reception and discussion. Furthermore, he had succeeded in moving art out of the confines of elitist gallery circles.

### Environmentalism or Pure Art?

Environmentalism or not, this sole action of Beuys paved another way of looking at this piece of art. Unconventional as it seems, it didn't follow the strict tradition of an exhibition in an enclosed spaces of museums and galleries. "The availability of the enlarged idea of art, the urgent need for it, its plasticity and potency created all by itself appear without a precedent in the very beginning already. Where almost everything tends to be petrified and naught moves on anymore, art is the one and only remedy to rescue and renew the balance between life and death, provided it is exercised and carried on to its top as far as Joseph Beuys does it. To enlarge the aims of art it must be forced to extremity, on to its specific development where condensation is brought to light and its entire being is unveiled. ["Modern Art" included] Art no longer is to suffer from separation of all other spheres, nevertheless those can't bear to be separated from art either."<sup>11</sup>

The 7000 Oaks have been planted all over Kassel, and from then on served as a manifest of a time-sculpture that encompasses a wider area of the concept of art. Beuys worked on the "Erweiterte Kunstbegriff" (expanded art concept) and shaped the 7000 Oaks as a model of an art form that moved the social environment in which people live in.

<sup>12</sup>So 7000 Oaks is a time-sculpture. The growing trees show the *energetic-principle, chaos-movement-form*, while the stones symbolize the *stored, cold, crystalline form*. It is *the principle of warmth* that the trees represent, and this is *the principle of thinking* we should become aware of, according to Beuys.

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<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.diacenter.org/1tproj/7000/fiu.html>

<sup>12</sup> See <http://athena.formstreng.net/ep/ep971.html#1>

He derived this from the physics' *thermodynamics*. The crystalline form represents our current exact thinking, our culture of countable material and quantities - a culture of death. It's a kind of "Energy Plan For The Western Man" to demand a principle of warmth, a plan to survive - or to be exact, to rise."

### Duplication of the Project and its Development

This basic principle is too simple to follow. The main aim is to afforest the town or city and to be able to change the quality of air (basically) and the quality of life therein. All over the world one would notice the quality of urban life to be full of exhaust from man-made pollution. Trees balance these strains by taking the polluted air (carbon dioxide in normal condition, carbon monoxide and other pollutants on the other) and giving off oxygen. "Not only do trees absorb rainwater and airborne pollutants, and produce fresh oxygen, but their shade cools nearby buildings and the ground below, preventing the rapid evaporation of water from the soil. Well-planned landscaping can reduce the costs of heating and cooling a home by as much as 30%."<sup>13</sup> The *7000 Oaks* project provided Beuys the opportunity to express his social concerns to improve the ecosystem, to develop positive economic and political voices in urban settings, and to improve human life in general.

"As soon as Kassel has been "furnished" with trees, other towns and places will have to be supplied. All over Germany, followed by Central Europe, the West, East, North, and South of Europe, everywhere. When the action *7000 Oaks* subject to *Documenta 7* has come to seclusion, the process will continue anyhow. It will be maintained over the other places in the world, although the columns can be renounced to. By the time it should have become evident, that a transformation of important extent is going to be introduced, comprising the planet in its entirety, rescuing all life on the way to be ruined nowadays. Any place all over the world, wherever soil is left the need for a tree is apparent. Another fact of still greater importance and priority is the power of imagination, of thought, sustained by itself, followed than by the concrete action to plant trees, a necessity urgently requested, but not satisfactory.

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<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.greenmuseum.org/c/ecovection/oaks2.html>

It must be understood and observed serenely, that by means of this action the fight of art against the system itself has been introduced likewise. In our days it has become evident, that to the natural scenery as well as to the social organism of human society, together with all living beings groaning over the petrified systems which burden and rule them destroying, this kind of acting neither can be prosecuted nor be kept upright anyhow, but must be delivered by the human genius. He must start off, all by himself with the task of his very own which is: *to ponder* on and *think* over his way and the possibilities how to contribute to an alternation and how other circumstances can be developed in order to realize *vital ideas*, wherever *lifelessness* has boasted and filled up all places. Reflecting on this conception he is given the possibility of acting and establishing both at the same time, with regard to the occasion to participate in an entity busy to materialize a wider understanding of the aims of art. "14

"The Project 7000 Oaks functions not just literally, in practical environmental terms, but symbolically, as "inspirational images." It embodied, metonymically, Beuys's utopian and poetic metaphysic of a social sculpture designed to effect a revolution in human consciousness, "the human being as a spiritual being." By means of its permanence and longevity it also sought to render "the world a big forest, making towns and environments forest-like." For Beuys intended the project as realized in Kassel to be only the first stage in an ongoing scheme of tree planting (with or without accompanying markers) to be extended throughout the world. Subsequently, single trees with stones have been placed at strategic sites, including the front of the art academy in Oslo, and at major events, such as the Fifth Biennale of Sydney, Australia."15

### State of Conservation and Preservation

The Beuys' work of art lies within many different conflicting interests. The legal measure is missing and lack or insufficient knowledge of the value of this work of art. Moreover, there is hardly an overview of the real number of stock, which is within the jurisdiction of the city administration and private owners. This leads to uncertainties and quite irresponsible handling of this work of art.

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<sup>14</sup> See 10

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.diabeacon.org/ltproj/7000/essay.html#three>

The political responsibility at large is clearly under the city administration where this project was officially handed over to them. The conflicts over care, preservation and conservation became more apparent after the establishment of the association *7000 Eichen* in 1994. This association saw the work of art endangered on the part of the city administration. Its stock has declined. In 1998, better and more intensive co-operation between the association and the city administration were created through new initiatives. The database over the work of art, which is missing so far, has materialized to support the inventory, collection of data and evaluation of the 7000 trees. Thus a new course of action was undertaken in order to be able to better administer, protect this singular living work of art.

Indeed, a monumental work like this has set its mark on the history of the Documenta and of the arts. *“Perhaps it has always been this way that whenever a work of art is set out, it always produce new proportions and with logical consequences. This point of view qualitatively considered appears at a much higher level today. The Art stands face to face with the question of proportion and its relation to everything, which is not art. More precisely spoken this means, to proportionate everything a new with respect to the core of human liberty. To realize this fact a higher classification of art must be involved in order to make the proportions suitable to art (not possible but by art itself so that everything becomes art which has not been art until now, to hold the balance of proportion the adequate way.)*

*To harmonize the proportions and everything involving process has started yet. It is concentrated upon a small distinct place, visible to everybody- the planting of the 7000 oak trees at Kassel in 1982- provided with true definitions and their energy. For this purpose an entity of favourable size has been founded- the "FIU-BAUMKOORDINATION." Size, development and the promptitude to wind up the planting business depend upon the multitude and the share of all intelligent people willing to credit the operation.”<sup>16</sup>*

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<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.diacenter.org/ltproj/7000/fiu.html>

## PoeTree: Scripted <the art intervention>

A vast expression can start from a single word, a sound or an image. This piece of work like the 7000 Oaks has moved many people not only those who are concerned with the arts. It has moved ideas and linked many people and places together. This has probably expressed more than a simple gesture of planting a tree could confer. I started to listen to the voice of myriad calling and it needs a different voice.

The intercession or artistic interpretation behind the idea of the 7000 Oaks was put in a poetic contextual frame, which was aimed to convey a deeper sense of appreciation and consequential action. It is the poetry that moves. It speaks and it calls to the world over that one can do something for his environment regardless of being singular or collective undertakings.

The tree as a subject is a symbol of life, our growth, and our vulnerability towards many different factors in this macrocosm. It illustrates our own existence and that all things that come to pass. As what a popular German saying states, "*Der Wald lehrt uns den Sinn des Sterbens*". *Eine Tanne kann zwei Menschenalter lang unter dem dichten Kronendach einer alten Buche leben, armdick dann nur und mit Jahrringen dicht an dicht. Erst wenn die Riesin fällt und der Sonne den Weg freimacht, wächst die Tanne los. So verjüngt sich der Wald. Es sterben seine Individuen. Sein Leben ist ewig.*" The forest teaches us the sense of dying." A fir can live two generations under a close-roofed crown of an old beech, thick and only the annual rings are closed to each other. Only when the giant falls and the sun find its way to the tree, so the fir grows freely. Its individuum ceases. Its life is eternal.

Like Theodore Heuss has popularised *„Es braucht der Mensch die Naturerlebnisse als Gegengewicht gegen die Unruhe und Ängste des Herzens, gegen die kalten, harten Glanz laufende Maschine, gegen den Schatten der Atombombe. Die Welt ist unheimlich geworden, aber die Wege, die uns das Gewissen zeigt ~zurück zur Natur~ können uns aus dem Höllenkreis herausführen.“* (Theodor Heuss)

The man needs to experience the nature to balance the unrest and fears of the heart, the cold, the hard gleam of the machines, against the lurking threat of the atomic bomb. The world is becoming uncanny, but our wisdom, our conscience guide us ~back to the nature~ out of the circle of chaos.

A tree is a simple analogue to the life that we have. A *forest* is a home. Just like a bird without a tree to nest on, we, without a place to call home, are not certain of our very life's continuity.

Interwoven in this collective expression, the installation "PoeTree" speaks about the continuity, the flow of creative juices. Poetry is the language of souls. It is such an expression that encompasses myriad of unscripted feelings, emotions that more than written words could ever say. It goes beyond than what we can grasp or too simple to comprehend.

The scripts show the vulnerability of the object, the 7000 oaks and the idea behind. It was taken from an old traditional Filipino way of writing. It is near obsolete or forgotten, as it is not anymore being used at present. It is a part of the culture and tradition, our cultural heritage. This part of culture served as a medium of communication, ideas are being written and it is being transferred, just like the idea of the 7000 Oaks. Literally, the ideas will only be an idea without any action, we cannot hope for it to bear fruits unless we do and continue to create, preserve and propagate our collective artistic and cultural heritage.

**Notes:**

1 Kastner, Jeffrey (ed.) Land and Environmental Art, 1998

2 Carlson, Allen, Aesthetics and the Environment, the appreciation of nature, art and architecture, Routledge, London, 2000

3 see <http://www.ripon.edu/library/support/Art175.htm>

4 see 3

5 see 3

6 <http://mitglied.lycos.de/artnnature/an-frameset.htm>

7 Osborn, Peter (ed.), Conceptual Art (Themes and Movements)

8 <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/stores/detail/-/books/0810941899/reviews/103-1920192-0262223>

9 see 1

10 <http://www.diacenter.org/ltproj/7000/fiu.html>

11 see 10

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