Land Art

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Le Land Art peut être envisagé selon deux points de vue au moins qui, l’un et l’autre, mènent dans des directions franchement différentes. En premier lieu, il s’agit d’un mouvement contemporain né d’une crise très particulière dans l’évolution de la sculpture moderne et qui s’est manifestée aussi bien aux États-Unis qu’en Grande-Bretagne au milieu des années soixante. Marquant sa différence avec le mouvement “minimaliste” qui l’avait immédiatement précédé, mais aussi envers ce que devenait le formalisme des sculptures d’Anthony Caro par exemple, le Land Art se caractérisa par un élargissement soudain et étonnant du champ sculptural. La notion de “site”, essentielle à l’existence de la sculpture dans les splendides traditions classiques et baroques mais que la fusion moderniste des genres avait rendue problématique, allait faire un retour en force. Cette fois cependant, il n’était plus question que des icônes patriarcales viennent dominer l’espace ordonné de la cité du haut de leurs piédestaux, mais d’interventions discrètes dans des déserts ou des lacs gigantesques par leur échelle quoique modestes dans leur concept. Clement Greenberg mit à profit son intervention “Power Lecture”, en 1967, à l’Université de Sydney, pour dénoncer la tendance des peintures américaines récentes à prétendre au “sublime” : pour lui, le plus sublime des spectacles restait

Land Art may be considered from at least two alternative points of view, which lead in significantly different directions. On the one hand, it is a contemporary movement born of a very specific crisis in the development of modernist sculpture, which manifested itself in both the United States and Britain around the middle of the 1960's. Distinguishing itself both from the immediately prior impetus of “minimalism”, and from the evolving formalism of sculptors like Anthony Caro, Land Art marked a sudden, and surprising, expansion of the sculptural field. The notion of the “site”, fundamental to the existence of sculpture in the grand classical and baroque tradition, and rendered problematic by the modernist fusion of the genres, made an emphatic return. This time, however, it was no longer a question of patriarchal icons dominating the ordered space of the city from their elevated podiums, but of discreet interventions in deserts and lakes, gigantic in scale yet modest in concept. Clement Greenberg used the occasion of his 1967 Power Lecture at the University of Sydney to attack the tendency of recent American painting to aim for the “sublime” : in his view, the sublimest of all spectacles was the Milky Way, and like the work of Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, this was a phenomenon inaccessible to aesthetic judgements. How would he have reacted
la Voie Lactée et, à l’instar de l’œuvre de Morris Louis et de Kenneth Noland, c’était là un phénomène inaccessible aux jugements esthétiques. Comment aurait-il réagi si on lui avait dit que, dans les trois années suivantes, Robert Smithson would have enclosed a substantial tract of the purplish water of the Great Salt Lake in Utah, for his Spiral Jetty ; or that, within a decade, Walter de Maria’s Lightning Field would have drawn down the ambient electricity into the scrubland of New Mexico, over a stretch of land one mile by one kilometre in dimensions ? This way of approaching Land Art immediately plunges us into a lively debate, whose protagonists, among artists, are indeed Smithson, De Maria and their colleagues from that period : Dennis Oppenheim, Michael Heizer, Nancy Holt... It is a debate which also passes by way of the most intense critical controversies of the period, touching on Michael Fried’s closely argued attack on the “theatrical” characteristics of minimal art, as well as on Rosalind Krauss’s subtle definitions of sculpture in the “expanded field”. But, with such an important watershed of contemporary art, this version of Land Art risks obscuring the very deep cultural resonance set up by the new works, and their interconnection with the wider renewal of landscape as a “medium” which was taking place simultaneously in various parts of Europe and the United States. Synchronically, Land Art appears as a coherent and identifiable phenomenon in the production of the last quarter century. Diachronically, it becomes merged with the much wider issue of the mythic function of landscape in the modern world, and thus with the conditions for the emergence and development of landscape painting and landscape gardening, among other things.

Gilles Tiberghien has, without any doubt, provided the most comprehensive and well documented introduction to the movement that has yet appeared. He has also got as far as anyone could be expected to get into the distinctions and discriminations which govern discussion of Land Art from the first point of view. It is of the very nature of artistic movements that they attract a nomenclature which is only approximate in its reference. “Minimal art” got its name from the English philosopher, Richard Wollheim. Land Art was, as Tiberghien explains, a much less accurate title for most of the American artists concerned than the prosaic and accurate description of “earthworks” ; Land Art was also, for the English pair Richard Long and Hamish Fulton, a label which denoted not their own approach but the more substantial modification of the wider environment which the “earthwork” movement quite explicitly adopted. Nonetheless, it is Land Art which has remained as an indispensable way of referring to this family of artistic occurrences. Reading Tiberghien’s minutely documented account we get as clear a picture as we could reasonably demand.

But to what extent do we also gain an insight into what I have termed the second point of view ? Inevitably the scrupulous care which is devoted to the major achievements of the movement leaves little space for further speculation. The sumptuous colour plates which document the work of Smithson, De Maria, Heizer, Christo and so many more artists are in themselves a sufficient reason for this publication, and, with true missionary zeal, the author has also inserted convenient and exhaustive maps which indicate where the original sites of many of the works are to be found. It is not therefore in the nature of a complaint that I point out the possibility of another perspective, but as a legitimate continuation of the issues which are so compellingly raised there.

Tiberghien does indeed provoke just such a questioning when he includes,
among a series of useful appendices, two articles by Robert Morris and Robert Smithson. The first, published by Morris in 1975, is in the form of a journal discussing the mysterious lines in the Peruvian mountain landscape which Richard Long (for example) incorporated into his work, *Walking a Line in Peru* (1972). The second, published by Smithson in 1973, is a truly remarkable essay on the American landscape gardener, Frederick Law Olmsted and his “dialectical” approach to his work. While Morris could be accused of using the very imponderability of the lines as a way of reflecting on contemporary sculptural issues, Smithson is passionately interested in the practice of Olmsted, and in the way his American parks reflect and recharge the debate on the sublime and the picturesque launched around such figures as Gilpin and Uvedale Price in 18th-century England. I continue to feel that far-reaching parallels of this kind are necessary to reinvigorate the landscape debate. While I have not visited *Spiral Jetty* (now exquisitely submerged) or *Lightning Field*, I have made several journeys to the garden of the Villa Celle, near Pistoia, where a labyrinth by Robert Morris in “verde di Prato” marble can be seen in conjunction with works by Alan Sonfist, Beverly Pepper, Dennis Oppenheim and a Virgilian olive grove by Ian Hamilton Finlay. The culturally dense superimposition of this diverse range of works, set in a 19th-century “giardino a l’inglese” and around an 18th-century Tuscan villa, provides no less impressive a palimpsest than the Andean wilderness.